

# Tentative Study of Cross-gender Cultural Communication\*

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**Abstract**—In recent years, the study of gender culture has shifted its focus from the differences in the use of language and in terms of sexism to that in cross-gender communication. As a branch of cross-cultural communication, cross-gender communication has now begun to increasingly draw attention from scholars of different fields. This paper analyzes gender roles and gender differences in China, illustrates the concept of gender culture and takes male and female college students on the campus of Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai as an example to show that Chinese men and women acquire different communication patterns. This difference might lead to misunderstanding when men and women interact. Then, the concepts of cultural gap and communication principles are introduced and several methods are suggested on how cross-gender communication can be effective.

**Keywords**—cross-cultural communication; gender difference; gender culture; cross-gender communication

## I. INTRODUCTION

In China, the old traditional idea of “honorific men and humble women” has a direct influence on gender roles in marriage and family life. The traditional Chinese family was based on Confucian principles that gave complete authority to males, particularly to the oldest males. These principles exaggerated the natural differences between men and women; meanwhile, they further strengthened the biological view of “strong men and weak women” which limited human relation and behavior. Thus, men’s biologically leading position was promoted to be honorable and dominant; while women from assistant to be humble. Then, the real inequality in sense between men and women came into form. In other words, from then on, society began to consciously build up men and belittle women, creating a society and culture in which men were appreciated and women were discriminated. Historically, the traditional housewife role has been associated with a fulfillment of the Chinese dream of women.

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However, the housewife role, which primarily involves housework and child care, is devalued because it is not a paid role.

As the movement of women developed, more and more women have participated in the paid labor force. Naturally, there are some changes in gender roles. The movement has profoundly influenced not only their drive toward greater equality but also impacted the other social institutions, particularly the family. A classic study conducted by Blood and Wolfe concluded that husbands feel obligated to take on an appreciably larger share of the housework when their wives are also working. It is true that the husband does a larger proportion of household tasks, but the husband’s contribution to domestic work remains very small comparing with the wife. Overall, it is the wife who assumes the major responsibility for household tasks, including childcare arrangements. Task sharing in two-earner families is also mediated by several other variables, such as income contribution of each partner, the social class standing of the family, education, number and ages of children, and the couple’s gender role ideology.

Men desire women who can balance career and work, which is what women want as well. How can women successfully split themselves between home and career? It’s so difficult. The impact of the employed wife carrying the load for household and child care responsibilities has tremendous consequences for her career success. Women, who have careers but still take on the bulk of the household labor, find it difficult to achieve beyond a certain level. Numerous studies also suggest that a woman’s career achievement is compromised by the belief that a husband’s career is more important than the wife’s. It is much more likely, for example, that the family will relocate for his career advancement rather than hers.

Employment appears to have beneficial effects for women in a number of realms, such as self-esteem and mental health. Marital satisfaction is another consequence. Women employed full time outside the home have higher

degrees of marital and work satisfaction than full-time housewives, especially if they are more educated and hold higher-paying, interesting jobs or careers.

The results of the differences of gender roles are: men possess stronger tendencies toward dominance, assertiveness and leadership abilities than women do, and women possess stronger tendencies toward interpersonal warmth, emotional expressiveness and concern for others. Reflected in their speeches, each has his or her own features.

In general, women's speech has the following features. First, Communication is a primary way to establish and maintain relationships with others for most women. They engage in conversation to share themselves and to learn about others. Second, equality between people is generally important in women's communication. To achieve symmetry, women often match experiences to indicate "You're not alone in how you feel." Third, showing support for others is also important in women's speech. To demonstrate support, women often express understanding and sympathy with a friend's situation or feelings. Fourth, women's speech style is conversational "maintenance work" (Wood, 1999:124). This involves efforts to sustain conversation by inviting others to speak and by prompting them to elaborate their experiences. Fifth, women's talk is responsive. Women usually respond in some fashion to what others say. Responsiveness reflects learned tendencies to care about others and to make them feel valued and included. Sixth, women's talk is personal, concrete style. Typical women's conversation is details, personal disclosures, anecdotes, and concrete reasoning. These features cultivate a personal tone in women's communication, and they facilitate feelings of closeness by connecting communicators' lives. Seventh, women's speech is tentative. This may be expressed in a number of forms, such as using verbal hedges, tagging a question, etc. Tentative communication opens the door for others to respond and express their opinions.

Men's speech has features as follows. First, men often use talk to establish and defend their personal status and their ideas, by asserting themselves and by challenging others. Equally typical is the tendency to avoid disclosing personal information that might make a man appear weak or vulnerable. On the relationship level of communication, giving advice does two things. First, it focuses on instrumental activity — what another should do or be — and does not acknowledge feelings. Second, it expresses superiority and maintains control. Second, men's talk is instrumentality — the use of speech to accomplish instrumental objectives. In conversation, this is often expressed through problem-solving efforts that focus on getting information, discovering facts, and suggesting solutions. Third, men's communication is conversational command. Men engage in other verbal behaviors that sustain prominence in interaction. They may reroute conversations by using what another said as a jump-off point for their own topic, or they may interrupt more frequently. Fourth, men tend to express themselves in fairly absolute, assertive ways. Compared with women, their language is typically more forceful, direct, and authoritative. Fifth, men communicate more abstractly. They frequently speak in general terms that

are removed from concrete experiences and distanced from personal feelings. Sixth, men's speech tends not to be highly responsive, especially not on the relationship level of communication. Men's conversation also often lacks expressed sympathy, understanding, and self-disclosures.

## II. GENDER CULTURE

Living in society, people consciously or unconsciously are all trained to be productive and to carry out required roles, so a person more or less mirrors the society he grows up in, from his actions, talking and thinking patterns. Actually, from the moment people were born, this socialization process began. Its influence is reflected through family backgrounds, sex, socioeconomic organization and cultural values. Among these factors, sex is a relatively important one. In fact, gender is preferred here since sex is just a biological concept. The simplest idea about gender is the way that distinctive behaviors result from society's expectancies about men and women. Because cultures vary and each one changes over time, the meaning of gender is neither universal nor stable. Instead, femininity and masculinity reflect the beliefs and values of particular cultures at certain points.

How are different gender cultures created and maintained? At the core of the process is human communication. It is through interaction with others that people learn what masculine and feminine cultures mean in the society, and consciously or unconsciously infuse people into what people are supposed to be. In another word, it is a complex and long process of socialization. Social construction cultivates masculinity and femininity, and in turn, people who acquire these gender cultures reflect and reproduce social views about men's and women's quality, roles and identities in society.

The process of this socialization begins from the moment people were born, affected by various factors such as family, society and time. Researchers have identified two primary influences on gender socialization: family communication, particularly between mothers and children, and recreational interaction among children. In each of these areas, communication reflects and reproduces gender culture.

There is a well-known saying that everyone has to be someplace. Communication is not devoid of external influence: all human interaction is influenced to some degree by the social, physical, and cultural settings in which it occurs. This is known as the communication context.

Generally, when people communicate with members of our own culture, people have internalized the cultural rules that govern the behavior within the context, and people are able to communicate without giving much thought to those rules. But when people are engaged in cross-cultural communication, people must be aware of how their culture influences the communication context; otherwise, people may encounter a variety of surprises.

To see the importance of context to cross-cultural communication, it is needed to review three basic assumptions about human communication. First,

communication is rule governed. People expect culturally determined patterns of behavior or rules to govern their interactions. In communication, rules prescribe behavior by establishing appropriate and acceptable responses to communication stimuli for various social contexts within the larger culture. Social settings usually stipulate which rules are appropriate for a particular situation, but it is culture that constructs the rules. Communication rules cover both nonverbal and verbal behaviors and determine not only what should be said but also how it should be said. Nonverbal rules apply to touch, facial expressions, eye contact, and paralanguage. Verbal rules specify such things as turn taking, voice volume, and formality of language. Obviously, the rules differ depending on the context.

The second assumption about communication is that contexts specify the appropriate rules. Think for a moment about how such contexts as a classroom, bank, church, hospital, courtroom, wedding, or funeral determine which communication rules apply. Also, imagine the responses of others if your behavior departs from accepted norms. Extreme deviations can lead to such social sanctions as being ignored, being asked to leave a theater, or even being cited for contempt of court.

The third assumption is that rules are culturally diverse. Although cultures have many of the same social settings or contexts, they may employ different rules. Consequently, concepts of dress, time, language, manners, nonverbal behavior, and control of the communication flow can differ significantly among cultures. Different cultures, different rules.

According to what we've discussed above, men and women belong to different social subcultures. Men and women have different rules in their communication. Of course, context is one of the most important factors when people study cross-gender communication. The context discussed here does not refer to the specific context or setting. The context refers to the major social contexts, like workplace, marriage and family, and educational settings. Since these contexts have become institutionalized, there is a whole set of norms and expectations of communication behavior considered appropriate for different genders in these contexts. The relationship between communication and context is reciprocal. On the one hand, context designates communication behavior; on the other hand, communication behavior is constantly building and defining the appropriate norm of a certain context.

### III. A SURVEY

A survey was conducted in December 2018 on campus of Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai) with the purpose of identifying gender differences in communication in college. Questionnaires were distributed among first-year college students. Their ages range from 18 to 21 years old. Most of them are between the ages of 18-19. Girls make up 47% (94 in 200) while boys 53% (106 in 200). The questions are mainly about communication strategies including forms of communication, conversation management, response and feedback, which fall into four groups in terms of the aspect

they cover: communication features and strategies, purposes of communication and topics, behavior pattern related to gender culture, and gender identity and gender-related stereotypes. During the process of designing the questionnaires, the characteristics of college life were taken into consideration. In the communication situations described in questions, the participants are assumed to be classmates. They belong to the same age group, have similar daily life experience, and have common understanding of their behavior to some extent. This survey will nevertheless serve the purpose of revealing the existing gender differences in communication in the setting of college.

Here is the analysis of the survey: The first is interrupting or turn-taking. When other people are talking, 14% of the boys and 3% of the girls choose to interrupt the speaker in order to express their own opinion immediately. As can be seen, there is only a slight difference between the choice of male and female students on this aspect. The second is listening and asking questions. When discussing on unfamiliar topics, 61% of the boys against 36% of the girls say they will listen to others. This proves the claim that men are more interested in information than women. The third is the directness or indirectness. When asking for help, borrowing something, etc., 67% of the boys and 45% of the girls say they will ask directly. However, 55% of the girls and 33% of the boys choose to use indirect way to express. This result supports the view that men tend to be more direct than women. The fourth is purposes of communication. Most boys (72%) and girls (81%) put their emphasis on information exchange in communication. Girls (92%) are more likely to focus on establishing or improving relationship with others than boys in conversation. More girls try to express and assert their own ideas. And more boys (38%) want to attract others' attention in communication. The fifth is topics. In general, more girls than boys (more than double the percentage) usually talk about personal feelings and more boys talk about their interests. Boys usually talk about girls, computer, sports and political affairs, while girls would like to talk about life experience, study, future career and feelings. The topics of girls are more practical. The sixth is attitudes toward difficulty. When boys and girls meet difficulty, most of them (93% of the girls and 97% of the boys) tend to solve the problem independently before asking for help. The seventh is relationship with other students. More than half of the students regard interpersonal relationship as friendly, one-third as helping each other and only about one-tenth as competitive. In my opinion, this can be illustrated in the special context of college life which is quite different from the workplace. The eighth is the focuses in life. When it comes to focuses in life, 65% of the boys and 84% of the girls try to keep equal and friendly relationship with others. Only 10% of the boys and 8% of the girls tend to be better than others. The rest of the students lay their focuses on how to improve their potential abilities, how to make themselves popular and how to make a greater progress in learning. Most of the students think the harmonious atmosphere in their dormitory and class; even on campus is still important. The ninth is the response to problems. What's your response when your friends or our classmates are talking about their

problems with you? The answers to this question from boys and girls are a bit different. 63% of the boys and 67% of the girls will offer solutions to the problems while 37% of the boys and 33% of the girls will comfort the person in trouble by talking about their own similar experience. This result is just opposite to what is expected according to the regular behavior rules: men would like to offer solutions while women tend to talk about their own experiences. This can be explained by the special context of college campus. The tenth is attitudes to others' opinions. By comparison, girls (39%) pay more attention to other people's opinions on them. The eleventh is gender identity and stereotypes. Boy's identification with the characteristics, from the highest to the lowest degree, is independence, humor, judgment, competitiveness, activeness, confidence and the wish to show off. There are big differences between boys and girls on confidence and independence. The girls think they are emotional, more understanding, sympathetic, more polite, and easier to show anxiety, indirect. The features that the boys agree most with the girls are being emotional, indirect, sympathetic and showing anxiety.

College campus is a special context. The males and females on college campus have similar life experience, education and age. Therefore, the differences in communication between genders are not as great as people usually think. In summary, the gender culture model on college campus, the particular context, is both similar to and different from the gender culture model in people's mind. Male students and female students have their own distinctive communication features. Female students tend to ask more questions, express indirectly and pay more attention to behave in a more polite way. Male students are likely to express directly and less politely. At the same time, there is something special on male students that they consider interpersonal relationship as friendly and helping each other, rather than competitive. This particular college model in communication between genders is the product of the interrelated influences of gender, environment, and age in college campus context.

#### IV. CULTURAL GAP

The final purpose of the studies on gender cultures is to help male and female communicate effectively. Jia Yuxin (贾玉新, 1997) argues that effective communication requires communicators to use the same language, and to understand other related factors, such as cultural, social factors, especially the rules of interaction. These form the basis for the communicators to make predictions about the outcome of communication.

As people learn the rules of different cultures, they embody them in their personal identities, and this leads to misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. To be specific, these misunderstandings usually are the results of differences in system of conversational inference and the cues for signaling speech act and speaker's intent. For example, men and women typically rely on distinctive communication rules, and they have different ways of showing support, interest and caring. This implies they may perceive the same communication in dissimilar ways and

miscommunication might occur. Actually, most problems in cross-cultural communication result from wrong translations: men interpret women according to masculine communication rules and women interpret men according to feminine rules, for example, men may perceive a woman who defers as less confident in her own point of view than a man who advocates his position assertively; similarly, a woman can easily judge a man to be insensitive and dominating if he offers little responses to her talk.

In reality, rules of one culture could not be imposed on the other, nor can it be available to reconcile this difference, but recognize the existence of cultural gap and understand the misunderstandings. In other words, the most effective approach is to respect each other's culture in order to establish harmonious interaction relationship between male and female. Instead of debating whose styles of communication are better, it is necessary to learn to see differences as merely differences. In order to explain this point more clearly, the following five principles for effective cross-cultural communication are given.

- Suspending judgment. This is first and foremost, because "as long as we are judging differences, we are not respecting them" (Wood, 1994: 162). When you find yourself confused in cross-culture conversations, resist the tendency to judge. Instead, explore constructively what is happening and how you and your partner might understand each other. Yet, judgment is so thoroughly woven into our daily life that it is difficult not to evaluate others and not to defend our own positions. People often consider what is different from our wrong or bad, and the result of misunderstanding might appear. So, suspending judgment is the most important principle of effective cross-cultural communication.
- Recognizing the validity of different communication styles. In cross-cultural communication, it is needed to remind ourselves there is a logic and validity to both cultural communication rules. For example, women and men have different topics and contents in conversation, they recognize the conversation differently and they also hold different purposes of talking and interaction. Therefore, it is inappropriate to apply a single criterion, either masculine or feminine, to both gender cultures' communication. Instead, it is needed to recognize different goals, priorities, and standards typical of each.
- Providing translation cues. Now that people realize men and women tend to learn different rules for interaction, it makes sense to think about helping the others translate your communication. For instance, when a woman merely wants to share experience and feeling with a man, while the man keeps giving advice and is irritated because his kind advice is not accepted, the woman might patch up this unhappiness by explaining, "I appreciate your advice, but what I need first is for you to deal with my feelings." Such a comment helps the man interpret the woman's motives and needs correctly and also helps them feel



closer. After all, there is no reason for a man to understand rules that are not a part of his gender culture.

- Seeking translation cues. People can also improve their interactions by seeking translation cues from others. Take the same situation in the last section. If the woman did not tell the man how to understand her, instead of being irritated, the man could ask, "What would be helpful to you? I don't know whether you want to talk about how you are feeling or ways to help you. Which would be better?" This message communicates clearly that the man cares about her and he wants to help her if she will just tell him how. Similarly, when a man is confused with women's disagreed with him in the end and assuming that she deliberately misled him, he might have taken a more active approach and said, "I thought your feedback during my talking indicated that you agreed with me. What did it really mean?" This kind of response would allow both men and women to learn something new.
- Enlarging your own communication style. Studying other cultural communication teaches us not only about other cultures but also about ourselves. If people are open to learning and growing, they can enlarge their own communication rules by incorporating skills more emphasized in other cultures. Individuals socialized into masculinity could learn a great deal from feminine culture about how to support friends. Likewise, people from feminine cultures could expand the ways they experience intimacy by appreciating "closeness in the doing" that is a masculine specialty. There's little to risk and much to gain by incorporating additional skills into our personal communication culture.

To sum up, due to the different cultures people have grown up in and hold on to, the cross-cultural miscommunication is likely to occur. However, as long as people come to see this difference and the trouble this difference may result in, it is available to consciously avoid misunderstanding in interaction by respecting the opposite culture, actively providing and asking for cues for easier and more suitable translation of each other.

## V. CONCLUSION

As the study of cross-cultural communication develops further, cross-gender communication is becoming to draw more and more attention since it is one important aspect of cross-cultural communication. If people don't know of the other gender's culture, some serious cultural conflicts will be produced. Sometimes the results might be worse than what people often prepare for such things. People usually take it for granted that people in the same country, no matter the gender, should have no difficulty in understanding each other for they live in the same environment and speak the same language. However, it turns out not to be the case.

As always, there is a great deal to be done in the area of gender differences and cross-cultural communication. Particularly in China, gender culture is a comparatively new concept. So, gender culture and cross-gender communication under the Chinese background are potential sources for further research.

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