Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 12   Article 9

2000

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An Examination of Male and Female Students' Perceptions of Relational Closeness: Does the Basic Course Have an Influence?[1]

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Current research on gender-role socialization suggests that males and females learn at a young age the "appropriate" behaviors for their sex. Furthermore, Social Learning Theory suggests these appropriate behaviors are reinforced verbally and nonverbally (Bandura, 1977; Hildum & Brown, 1956; Insko, 1965; Insko & Butzine, 1967; Insko & Melson, 1969; Krasner, Knowles, & Ullmann, 1965; Singer, 1961; Verplanck, 1955) by parents (Jackson & Henriksen, 1997; Lauer & Lauer, 1994; Witt, 1997), peer groups (Garner, Robertson, Smith, 1997; Hibbard & Buhrmester, 1998; Elkin, 1960), and even teachers (Martin, 1998; Rong, 1996; Serbin, Zelkowitz, Doyle, Gold, & Wheaton, 1990) while inappropriate displays are sanctioned. As a result of the reinforcement, the individual increasingly performs the appropriate gendered behaviors for his/her sex while avoiding the behaviors that invite disapproval and sanction. As instructors in the basic communication course, we may be unwittingly participating in the socialization process. Or, perhaps we may be engaging in an unreal-

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[1] This paper was presented during the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, November 1997, Chicago.

istic fight against the firmly established socialized behaviors of our students.

A primary goal of beginning communication courses is to help students communicate competently in their personal relationships with friends, family, and dating partners. However, ambiguity governs current conceptualizations of the term "competence." For this reason at least two functional definitions of communication competence exist: the rhetorical perspective and the relational model (McCroskey, 1984). While the rhetorical perspective pervades public speaking classes, it is the relational model that tends to underlie hybrid and interpersonal basic courses (Bissett-Zerilli & Heisler, 1997; Carrel, 1997; Heisler, 1996). This relational model of communication competence is closely related to traditional "feminine" relational closeness that emphasizes listening, empathy, self-disclosure and interdependence.

The literature indicates that most of our female students are familiar with and prefer these feminine behaviors (Argyle & Henderson, 1985; Barth & Kinder, 1988; Fox, Gibbs, & Auerbach, 1985; Sherrod, 1989; Statham, 1987). Our male students, however, are socialized to value other behaviors (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Crawford, 1977; Seidler, 1992; Sollie & Leslie, 1994) that are not typically accentuated in basic communication courses (Bissett-Zerilli & Heisler, 1997; Carrell, 1997; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wisemann, 1977; Willmington, Neal, & Steinbrecher, 1994). Although men and women are socialized to establish and maintain relational closeness differently, there has been little discussion regarding the emphasis on feminine relational skills in the basic communication course. Furthermore, there has been no discussion on how these different "masculine" and "feminine" perspectives on relational closeness might affect the students in our basic communication classes. Therefore, this study

sought to examine the effects of the basic course advocating a traditionally feminine perspective of communication competency on male and female university students. In particular, the authors were interested in whether the male students' perceptions of relational closeness would reflect traditional gender roles after sixteen weeks of instruction in the basic communication course.

RELATIONAL CLOSENESS SOCIALIZATION: MASCULINE AND FEMININE

Men and women are socialized to perform and value gender specific behaviors throughout their childhood (Maccoby, 1992). In fact, the socialization process can begin just hours after birth. As a result, men and women often establish and maintain their interpersonal relationships, such as friendships, differently. In addition, societal norms may reinforce the correlational nature of an individuals' biological sex and the gender role he/she will adopt later in life. For this reason, biological sex categories (male/female) will be used to facilitate discussion of those behaviors typically associated with masculine and feminine gender roles. It is important to note that several researchers have argued against significant sex differences, most notably Canary and Hause (1993). While Canary and Hause (1993) criticized researchers utilizing stereotypes to interpret and analyze data, they acknowledged stereotypes can be useful in some instances: "Hypothesizing that sex role stereotypes affect communication behavior should be reserved for those rare episodes where there is little other information available to the communicator…" (p. 136). Given that in the instructional setting a majority

of the information forces students to rely on the hypothetical interpersonal interaction, examining the potential for gender role stereotypes in the basic course seems plausible and relevant. Therefore, the following section will highlight those behaviors typical of men and women when establishing and maintaining their interpersonal relationships[2] according to traditional gender roles.

Feminine Relational Closeness

Since the 1970s, women have been considered to be "better" communicators. In fact, communication research once emphasized the feminine perspective to the point of labeling men as incompetent (Griffen, 1981; Lewis, 1978; MacInnis, 1991; Wellman, 1992). This feminine perspective of relational closeness can be characterized by self-disclosure, empathy, active listening, and interdependence.

For women, self-disclosure builds relationships and relational closeness (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Rubin, 1983). When women disclose to one another, their topics are most likely sensitive and/or personal information (Sherrod, 1989). For instance, women often share information about their fears and feelings (Sollie & Leslie, 1994), family matters (Stewart, Cooper, & Friedley, 1986), and problems (Fox, Gibbs, & Auerbach, 1985). In addition, these disclosures may include verbal declarations of affection. Women seek to give (and receive) specific verbal messages conveying feelings about the receiver(s) and their relationship. Messages such as "I

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[2] Our conceptualization of "interpersonal relationship" is borrowed from Miller and Steinberg (1975), including those relationships in which psychological information is known and shared between individuals.

love you," "I care about you," and "this relationship is important to me" may serve to strengthen the relationship (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974). These disclosures, congruent with women's desire to self-disclose about feelings and emotions, allow senders and receivers to intensify relationships. Self-disclosure provides the opportunity for emotional closeness, showing caring and concern through listening and empathy, a critical component for relationships (Argyle & Henderson, 1985; Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Therefore, self-disclosure not only becomes a characteristic of relational closeness, it also leads to other communication behaviors such as validation, trust, and caring that are typically associated with the female model (Clark & Reis, 1988; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Furthermore, disclosure and sharing among women is typically reciprocal. Reciprocal disclosure and listening among friends builds trust and creates a network of support for women (Behk, 1993). This network extends to feelings of interdependence (Barth & Kinder, 1988) which may extend into the workplace. In contrast to male supervisors, who stress autonomy for themselves and their subordinates, Statham (1987) found that female supervisors use management styles that emphasize mentor-mentee relationships which include "role-modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling and friendship" (p. 155).

Since communication research indicates that women look for relationships with others characterized by high levels of reciprocal self-disclosure, emotional closeness (including empathy and listening), and interdependence, a female or feminine model of communication (or communication competence) must include such skills. However, this is not the case for men. While women spend time talking, men are likely to develop relation-

ships and establish relational closeness utilizing different skills.

When asked about their relationships, most men describe behaviors that include playing sports, watching television, and perhaps fixing the car. Thus, the communication represented by more masculine behaviors include nonpersonal self-disclosure (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Marks, 1994; Sollie & Leslie, 1994; Stewart, Cooper, & Friedley, 1986), shared activity and reciprocal helping behaviors (Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Nardi, 1882; Seidler, 1992; Sherrod, 1989), and problem-solving and advice-giving (Farrell, 1991; Seidler, 1992; Wellman, 1992).

Men do engage in some self-disclosure. However, these masculine disclosures lack the expressive and personal nature of their female counterparts (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Crawford, 1977; Haas & Sherman, 1982). The content of male disclosure centers around politics, sports, and business (Fox, Gibbs, & Auerbach, 1985). Men are most comfortable conversing about current events, sports, money, and music (Sherman & Haas, 1982). Different purposes for disclosure may influence the ways men use this skill. If men view sharing information as task-related, they will disclose about "task or goal oriented topics for the purpose of serving instrumental needs" (Stewart, Cooper, & Friedley, 1986, p. 114). The topics which will attract men "reflect images of power, competition, and status" (Stewart, Cooper, & Friedley, 1986, p. 100).

Overall, however, men are more comfortable "doing things" to show caring than expressing that same emotion verbally (Bahk, 1993; Farrell, 1991). Often, simply spending time in the same place creates closeness among men (Reid & Fine, 1992). However, spending time together requires some type of interaction. Since talking about personal topics creates discomfort

(Bell, 1981; Levison, 1978; McGill, 1985; Stein, 1986) and discussing topics on only nonpersonal levels would drastically shorten the interactions, joint activities present an ideal way for men to spend time together without personal disclosure. These side-by-side encounters allow participants proxemic closeness without demanding emotional closeness (Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Crawford, 1977; Nardi, 1992; Rubin, 1985; Sherrod, 1987; Wright, 1982). In addition, these activities often involve competition among friends as a means of "cementing" relational closeness (Reid & Fine, 1992). On the occasions when men do share their problems and concerns with others, the responses from other men will resemble advice and problem-solving (Blieszner, 1994; Farrell, 1991; Seidler, 1992). When men are asked to comment on friends' problems, rarely do they offer the emotional support and empathy given by women. Instead, sharing a problem is an invitation to problem-solve or give advice (Farrell, 1991; Seidler, 1992).

There are many socialized differences between the sexes that manifest in the development of close, interpersonal relationships. As a result, it may not be enough to have one, widely-used definition or single set of communication behaviors used to evaluate competency across all interactions. In the past, explanations of communication competence were rooted rhetoric (Clark & Delia, 1979; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Individuals who were knowledgeable of persuasive rhetorical techniques and strategies and able to form effective persuasive arguments were considered "competent communicators" (Branham & Pearce, 1996; Fleming, 1998). However, within the last twenty years, a distinction between public speaking and communication in relationships opened the gateway to new research on communication competence within relationships

(McCroskey, 1984). This new "relational" model of competence was redefined to include knowledge and demonstration of empathy, self-disclosure, encouraging the expressing of feelings, active listening, collaboration, and interdependence (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Carrell, 1997; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wisemann, 1977; Willmington, Neal, & Steinbrecher, 1994). It is this relational model of communication competence that is taught in both the interpersonal and hybrid basic communication courses as a means to encourage students to practice effective communication (Bissett-Zerilli & Heisler, 1997; Heisler, 1996; Wood & Inman, 1993). However, perhaps this current communication competency conceptualization should be challenged.

By using the traditional relational model of communication competence in the basic course we may be teaching students only those skills that are linked to the feminine model of relational closeness. Furthermore, a one-sided perspective of closeness may ignore values and behaviors male students have been socialized to advocate in relationships. Gender roles are often enacted unconsciously (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1996; Zvonkovic, Greaver, Schmiege, & Hall, 1996) and are presumed difficult to alter within the constraints of a sixteen week communication course. Therefore, a disregard for masculine closeness by presenting only feminine closeness behaviors may disconfirm those who value masculine skills. And, while skill acquisition is an essential element in any communication course, perhaps the standard by which these skills are measured deserves closer examination. If a bias against the masculine closeness skills men are socialized to value exists in current interpersonal competency literature, instructors may be no longer teaching communication competency but a series of behaviors that may be left behind at the end of the course.

Social Learning Theory approaches to socialization would suggest that engrained gender roles are difficult to change during a brief encounter, even with direct communication (Bandura, 1977; Maccoby, 1992; Santrock, 1994). Although male students are "reinforced" through better grades and/or instructor approval, it remains to be seen whether this reinforcement (during a single semester) would influence men's perceptions of relational closeness. With this in mind, the authors sought to determine if, after having completed a basic communication course that focuses on feminine communication skills, male students would prefer traditionally masculine relational closeness skills. In addition, the researchers sought to determine whether males would indicate dissatisfaction with sections of the course that advocated feminine skills and/or if they would object to the material presented as running counter to what they believe.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were 373 undergraduate students (127 males and 243 females) enrolled in a required beginning communication course at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Students participating in the research study were compensated for their time through extra credit in their communication class. The average age of participants was 18 years and most were in their first term of college. Recognizing that the nature of this study required students to evaluate a course in which they had not received their final grade, the researchers assured all participants of their anonymity. Because this course is the one most frequently chosen by

students to achieve the "Oral English Competency" requirement mandated by the university, it was believed that the sample contained a variety of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The Course Format. The participants for this study were drawn from the university-wide beginning communication course. The format of this basic course required students to complete three speeches, six exams, as well as several in-class activities focusing on interpersonal skills. While this basic course had several sections with different instructors (typically graduate teaching assistants), the syllabus, exams, and many of the activities in the course are standardized to ensure equity. In addition, instructors of this basic course are required to attend a term-long training session designed to promote consistency in instructor style and presentation. For these reasons, it was assumed that participants in the study had received the same course material in a similar format across sections and instructors.

Instruments

Each participant completed a course evaluation form designed to measure participant perceptions of relational closeness as demonstrated through masculine and feminine behaviors. Because no current measure exists for this purpose, the utilized scale was created expressly for this study. To develop the Relational Behavior Scale (RBS), a detailed review of relevant gender literature was performed. Scale validity was created by compiling numerous interpersonal behaviors identified in the previous gender and relationship closeness literature. To ensure content validity (Ghiselli, Campbell, & Zedeck, 1981), special care was given to include a wide variety of behaviors representing traditionally masculine, femi-

nine, and neutral behaviors. These behaviors were then used as individual scale items, each representing a potential means for creating relational closeness. For purposes of clarity, identified behaviors were grouped according to topic area on the RBS questionnaire. However, these item-groupings were not utilized to facilitate statistical analysis. As a result, individual item reliabilities were assumed to be perfect.

The final RBS questionnaire was utilized to collect students' perceptions of relational closeness. The RBS consists of 39 items divided into four sections:

1) good listening,
2) good relationships,
3) good interpersonal relationships, and
4) good intimate relationships.

Directions included the following statements: "This is not a test. Please give us your own opinion not those in the book. There are no wrong answers." These items were designed to assess the extent to which students, particularly males, have integrated the feminine interpersonal behaviors taught in basic courses into their socialized gender roles.

The first section of the RBS consisted of eight items describing various characteristics of good listeners. Those items containing behaviors that would be typical of the masculine model of communicating relational closeness included "good listeners should give advice," and "good listeners should try to solve the speaker's problem(s) for him or her." Items from a feminine model of relational closeness included "good listeners should share his or her feelings with the speaker," "good listeners need to paraphrase what the speakers says," and

"good listeners should reflect the speaker's feelings." Those items considered 'neutral,' or not typical of either the male or female model, included "good listeners tend to be women not men," and "good listeners probably are just waiting for their turn to 'talk' and be heard." Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed that each behavior described their perceptions of a good listener using a 5-point Likert-type scale (5 = strongly agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 1 = strongly agree).

The second section of the RBS consisted of 22 items identifying student perceptions of good relationships. Participants were instructed to think about their "own close, personal relationships (either with friends or spouses/significant others)" while evaluating the items on the same Likert-type scale used for the previous section. This section contained seven items that described feminine behaviors: "good relationships require disclosure of personal information (fears and feelings)," "good relationships require verbal statements of caring and commitment (I love you, I miss you)," "good relationships require cooperation rather than competition," "good relationships require empathy and emotional closeness, good relationships require nonverbal signs of affection (e.g., hugging, kissing)," and "good relationships require time spent talking about the relationship." Those items that described masculine behaviors included "good relationships require competition," "good relationships require solving each other's problems," "good relationships require spending time doing things together," and "good relationships require helping each other with tasks or chores." Neutral items were also included, such as "good relationships require time spent helping each other communicate better," "good relationships are easier for women to develop than men," "good relationships are more important for men

than women," "good relationships are easier to establish with one's father," and "good relationships are easier to establish with one's mother."

The third section of the RBS asked participants to identity characteristics of a good interpersonal relationship. Again respondents were told to agree or disagree (using the same Likert-type scale) based upon their experiences with friends and significant others. Of the seven items in this section, four of the items described feminine closeness behaviors. These items included "good interpersonal relationships require honest, personal self- disclosure from both parties," "a good interpersonal relationship is based on the amount of time two people spend together talking," "a good interpersonal relationship requires empathy and emotional closeness," and "a good interpersonal relationship requires active listening." Those items using masculine behaviors as characteristic of relationships included "a good interpersonal relationship is based on the amount of time two people spend doing tasks/chores together," and "a good interpersonal relationship is based on the amount of time two people spend doing activities together (playing golf, bowling)." A final masculine item ("a good interpersonal relationship can be harmed if partners compete with each other") was reverse coded during statistical analyses (i.e., 5=1, 4=2, 3=3, 2=4, 1=5) to reflect agreement with previous items.

The final section of the RBS contained three items related to intimate relationships. These items attempted to identity participants' perceptions and definitions of intimate relationships. The same Likert-type scale was used for participant responses. The first item, while not identified as a masculine behavior in the review of literature, was expected to be consistent with a masculine definition of intimacy ("a good intimate relationship must involve sexual activity"). The

remaining items were designed to help researchers understand if traditional perceptions of female-female relationships as "better" or more intimate than male-male relationships existed in this sample ("a good intimate relationship is rarely achieved between two heterosexual men," "a good intimate relationship is rarely achieved between two heterosexual women").

Procedures

Data were collected at the end of the term in the basic communication course. Potential subjects from these basic courses attended any one of the three nights scheduled for data collection, in a classroom of an academic building on campus. As they arrived, participants were given the questionnaire with a reminder to keep all responses confidential. After participants had completed the questionnaire, they deposited it in a box inside the classroom and then proceeded to a separate classroom to receive extra credit.

RESULTS

Current research reflects the continued segregation of men and women into distinct gender roles. The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not male students, socialized to value more masculine interpersonal behaviors, would acknowledge more feminine behaviors as essential for "good" relationships after the basic communication course. T-tests were run for each questionnaire item to determine if men and women had different perceptions about the behaviors used to communicate relational closeness. Table 1 presents these results.

Table 1
Results of T-tests for Communication Competence and
Beliefs about Interpersonal and Intimate Relationships

Good Listening	XM(en)	XW(omen)	t	p
advice-giving	3.71	3.64	.57	ns
paraphrase	3.21	3.45	-2.05	.02*
share feelings	3.43	3.45	-1.25	ns
reflect feelings	3.38	3.59	-1.86	.03*
solve problems	2.50	2.25	2.17	.02*
share information	3.51	3.66	-1.22	ns
turn-taking	2.15	2.08	.59	ns
good listeners ~W	2.33	2.73	-2.75	.003*
Good Relationship				
self-disclosure	3.81	3.83	-.14	ns
time together	4.02	4.08	-.45	ns
tasks and chores	3.66	3.84	-1.51	ns
verbal commitment	3.71	3.98	-2.03	.02*
cooperation	3.88	4.06	-1.44	ns
empathy	3.66	4.03	-2.86	.002*
advice	3.85	4.02	-1.40	ns
solving problems	3.07	2.85	1.97	.02*
shared activity	3.48	3.49	-.06	ns
competition	2.66	2.43	1.95	.03*
nonverbal affection	3.60	3.81	-1.66	.05*
criticism	3.50	3.58	-.77	ns
lying	2.79	2.58	1.17	ns

relationship talk	3.65	3.91	-2.12	.002*
comm. comp.	3.59	3.75	-1.40	ns
sharing personal info.	3.51	3.77	-2.16	.02*
easier for women	2.65	2.91	-2.13	.03
more important for (M)	2.50	2.34	1.43	ns
rarely achieved	2.39	2.21	1.47	ns
easy with dad	3.24	3.22	1.17	ns
easy with mom	3.32	3.42	-.84	ns
requires self-disclosure	3.55	3.70	-1.26	ns
time talking	3.35	3.43	-.64	ns
Good Interpersonal Relationship				
time with chores	3.31	3.18	1.20	ns
time with activity	3.53	3.36	1.48	.05*
empathy	3.53	3.61	.75	ns
active listening	3.80	3.90	-.90	ns
harmful if competitive	3.31	3.47	-1.36	ns
Good Intimate Relationship				
heterosexual men	2.83	2.51	2.41	.02*
heterosexual women	2.80	2.26	4.15	.000*
sexual activity	2.77	2.23	3.75	.000*

The first section of the questionnaire addressed the characteristics of a good listener. The items showing significance included the skills paraphrasing (t = -2.05; p <.02), reflecting feelings (t = -1.86; p <.03), and solving problems (t = 2.17; p <.02). For those items, the behaviors associated with the female model of relational closeness (paraphrasing and reflecting feelings) had higher agreement from the females in the sample. Solving problems, a behavior which builds relational closeness in the male model, was viewed more positively by male participants (XM = 2.50; XW = 2.25). The last significant item in the first section of the questionnaire was "good listeners tend to be women not men." While neither group indicated strong agreement with this item, women indicated significantly higher agreement than men (t = -2.75; p <.003).

The second section of the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their degree of agreement with descriptors of "good" relationships. Of those behaviors previously identified as feminine, verbal commitment (t = -2.03; p <.02), empathy and emotional closeness (t = -2.86; p <.002), nonverbal affection (t = -1.66; p <.05), relationship talk (t = -2.12; p <.02), and sharing personal information (t = -2.16; p <.02) were all significant. Women found these skills more important for a good relationship than their male counterparts. Conversely, solving each other's problems (t = 1.97; p <.02) and competition (t = 1.95; p <.03), both skills from the male model, were perceived as being significantly more important by men than women. The only other significant result was a neutral item asking participants to agree/disagree with the statement "good relationships are easier for women to develop than for men" (t = -2.13; p <.03). While neither group strongly agreed with the statement, women (XM = 2.91) were more likely to agree than men (XM =2.65).

For those items addressing good interpersonal relationships, only a single masculine behavior item was significant: "a good interpersonal relationship is based on the amount of time two people spend doing tasks and chores together" (t = 1.48; p <.05). As predicted, men's perceptions of a good interpersonal relationships included this masculine behavior more often than women (XM =3.53; XW =3.36).

The last section of the questionnaire included those behaviors characteristic of good intimate relationships. All three items in this section was significant, with male mean scores exceeding those of female mean scores. The first item in this section asked if sexual activity was essential for an intimate relationship. Neither males nor females strongly agreed with this statement. However, men were significantly more likely to see sexual activity as important for any intimate relationship (t = 2.41; p <.000). This result was consistent with those preferences predicted by the researchers for the male model. The final two items on the questionnaire asked about the likelihood intimate relationships could be established between two heterosexual men or two heterosexual women. While neither men nor women strongly agreed that intimate relationships were impossible between two same-sex heterosexual individuals, there was a significant difference in the perceptions of men and women (t = 2.41; p <.02, t = 2.26; p <.000). Women indicated that men are capable of developing intimate relationships (XW = 2.51), but the results suggest that they believe women more capable of relational closeness (t = 2.26).

DISCUSSION

From an early age, individuals are socialized to embrace masculine or feminine gender roles. These gendered roles are ubiquitous; they can influence the establishment and development of interpersonal relationships. While one's biological sex does not mandate one's gender role, often there is a strong relationship between sex and gender. According to communication scholars studying relational closeness, men and women acquire gender roles which, in turn, influence their relationship behaviors. Men, it seems, prefer more instrumental behaviors. When building their relationships, many males prefer doing things together and participating in shared activities. In addition, competition may be valued among male friendships. Women, however, prefer talking to activity and emotional closeness to competition. These gendered differences in the communication of relational closeness may pose a potential problem for individuals involved in the basic communication course.

Typically, the basic communication course provides a method of measuring and teaching university/college students' communication competence. While individual classes may have majority of one sex, many classes contain students of both sex and gender. Most instructors of these communication courses share goals of helping students achieve communication competence. However, policy, time, and resource constraints require instructors to label students' ability or competency level with grades. The competency standards used to assign these grades may be an unfair measure for some students, especially if feminine relational skills are emphasized in the course. And, if feminine skills like empathy and active listening are used to evaluate

communication competence, individuals who prefer (or are socialized to value) more masculine behaviors may fall short. This shortfall may not reflect desire or ability on the student's part, but a potential "feminine" bias in the content of the basic communication course.

This potential inequity attracts our attention when the results from this research study are considered. After experiencing approximately 16 weeks of class emphasizing feminine relational skills, the men in this study perceived masculine relational closeness skills to be more effective communication for close interpersonal relationships. While a quick dismissal may blame poor instructors for limited change, this explanation may overlook a potential problem in the basic communication course. If the "socialized" masculine model for relational closeness is stronger than feminine competency requirements in some classes, there are potential difficulties for all students, both male and female.

Men/Masculinity and the Basic Course

There are two interesting conclusions about the men in these classes and their experiences with communication competence. First, the results of this study indicated that men and women do have different perceptions about relational closeness. These differences in perceptions seem to mirror gender role research that suggests men and women are socialized to value different relational maintenance behaviors (Allan, 1989; Argyle & Henderson, 1985; Barth & Kinder, 1988; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Hammond & Jablow, 1987; Sollie & Leslie, 1994). For those items with significant differences between males and females, female means were higher for all items listing traditional feminine behaviors. Likewise, male means were higher than

female means for all those items reflecting traditionally masculine gender roles. Even items without significant differences followed this pattern with masculine behaviors indicating a higher (albeit nonsignificant) mean. Likewise, feminine behaviors resulted in higher feminine means.

These findings, consistent with other socialization literature, have several implications for basic course instructors. First, we must recognize that students may be entering our classrooms with a set of values and preferences that influence communication behaviors. Some of these preferences are the result of social learning and reinforcement and could be difficult (if not impossible) to alter in a typical semester. Secondly, it may be necessary for instructors to understand, if not appreciate, these gendered communication differences. Those individuals who advocate masculine relational closeness in place of the more traditional feminine competence still experience healthy, rewarding interpersonal relationships. For instance, men, typically socialized to value these masculine beliefs, report that they feel closeness and satisfaction in their relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Sherrod, 1989) in spite of preferences for other, more masculine behaviors.

Yet, if instructors evaluate and grade students based on their level of competence are using a strongly feminine-based definition of relational closeness, the feminine competency bias could be disadvantaging more masculine students. Feminine students may find empathy and paraphrasing a more natural response, but masculine students, who may see advice-giving or problem-solving as the more natural response, may respond differently. As a result, students' grades may be affected by a clash between the socialized masculine perceptions of relational closeness and unexamined use of a feminine-biased conceptualization of competency.

Secondly, even if male students receive high or above average grades, the results of this study suggest these they may be "playing the game" in order to pass this required class. Since the perceptions of male students at the end of the term indicated they preferred more masculine behaviors, male students in feminine competency courses may be merely memorizing the necessary feminine competency behaviors, not integrating these skills into their lives. If our male students are simply memorizing a set of skills they do not see as valuable, these students may become frustrated with both instructor and course. Imagine a business course with an instructor who demanded students to be ruthless and cut-throat. Perhaps this instructor tells students that they will never succeed if they do not use manipulative tactics. Maybe he or she tells the class that anyone who refuses to use these skills will fail the class. While this example is extreme, it may not be much different from the experience some masculine students have in the basic communication course. Many of us in this business class would take one of two options: 1) drop the class (and perhaps never enroll in another business class), or 2) act as the instructor expects in class while silently perceiving the instructor and the class to be wrong, foolish, and a waste of time. As instructors in a beginning communication course advocating only feminine competency skills, we could see more masculine students take these two options in our classes. Some students may withdraw or drop our course. Those who choose to "play the game," may just memorize the necessary responses for quizzes, activities, and tests in order to appear "competent" while internally valuing the more masculine, socialized behaviors. Neither option appears particularly desirable for students or instructors.

Women/Femininity in the Basic Course

While there are two potential disadvantages for the masculine communicators in some classes, there is perhaps another disadvantage. This time however, the students who embrace more feminine closeness, typically females, may be disadvantaged by feminine competency classes. Of those variables asking students for their perceptions on which sex is better at relationships, all four of the items were significant. Item 8 asked for perceptions about good listeners. Women overwhelmingly indicated that females are better listeners than males (t = -2.75, p <.003, XM = 2.33, XW = 2.75). And, while neither group strongly agreed that women are better at interpersonal relationships, the significant difference between the two groups indicated that women believe interpersonal relationships are easier for females (t = -2.13, p <.03; XM = 2.65; XW = 2.91). Additionally, both males and females believed that intimate relationships were possible between heterosexual individuals. However, the differing means between male and female groups are interesting. Women were more likely to believe that heterosexual same-sex individuals could be intimate. However, women were more likely to believe that two women (XW = 2.26) could be intimate than two men (XW = 2.51)[3].

These results suggest that females in the course perceive themselves as better listeners, better at relationships, and more capable of developing close relationships than men. Perhaps these responses are the result

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[3] Low scores indicate disagreement with the statements a good intimate relationship is rarely achieved between two heterosexual men and a good intimate relationship is rarely achieved between two heterosexual women.

of class content and socialization toward feminine skills. Although this perception mirrors beliefs of earlier relationship research in the 1970s, current research trends indicate males are also capable of developing close relationships. The ability of males to achieve close, interpersonal relationships is echoed in male participants' responses to several items on the questionnaire. In particular, the low mean score of males for items 38 (XM = 2.83) and 39 (XW= 2.80) indicated males believe intimate relationships can be established between two males. Below average mean scores for item 25 also suggest that males believe good interpersonal relationships are important. And, while item 26 was not significant, the mean scores (XM = 2.50, XW = 2.34) show greater agreement among males that good relationships are important. Thus, it appears the males in this sample both desire and participate in close relationships. The perceptions of female participants, however, differ greatly. Females in this sample view females as inherently better at relationships than their male counterparts.

Unfortunately, basic courses that emphasize solely a feminine model of relational closeness may be encouraging female students to discount equally valid, yet different, masculine relational closeness behaviors. For instance, most females in our "feminine standard" courses are affirmed and encouraged to continue to communicate in ways that come naturally to them. These females may be encouraged to view feminine relational closeness behaviors as the right way to communicate in order to have close and healthy relationships (demonstrated through the competency skills taught in the courses). Perhaps we have done these females a disservice. If the males in our female students' lives are similar to the males in this sample, and thus prefer the masculine model even when offered the feminine model

of relational closeness, we may be causing communication problems for our female students. A female, affirmed that using empathy and self-disclosure is the best or right way to establish a close relationship, may not understand why her father, brother, boyfriend, and/or husband chooses to solve her problems when she discloses. She may try to change his behaviors, instructing him in the competency skills she has learned in her communication class. He may reject this, viewing her help as insulting or disconfirming. His rejection of her supposedly competent communication only confirms her thoughts that men are incapable of close relationships.

Suggestions for the Basic Course

After examining the findings of this and other, similar studies, it appears that instructors of the basic communication course should give attention to the potential impact of socialized gender differences in their classrooms. We offer three practical steps concerned instructors could initiate.

First, examine the current text and course requirements for any evidence of feminine relational closeness bias. Identify what masculine/feminine skills are necessary for communication competency and determine the extent that both the masculine and feminine relational skills are represented.

Second, as an instructor, ask the following questions: "Am I willing to believe that the masculine model of relational closeness offers as much to students as the traditional feminine model? If not, what about this masculine model seems incompetent?" Understanding that our students enter our classrooms with a history of socialized and reinforced behaviors can be beneficial for

both student and instructor. Since many of the beliefs acquired during the socialization process endure throughout an individual's lifetime we, as instructors, should be sensitive about altering a student's socialized value system, including communication preferences. This warning does not imply the basic course must embrace an "its all relative" or "everyone is a good communicator" philosophy. Rather, this warning is an encouragement for instructors to become more sensitized to these socialized differences.

This awareness leads to the third suggestion for course instructors: altering course material. Instructors interested in presenting both masculine and feminine relational closeness must include a variety of skills and behaviors. Since many of the current communication and interpersonal textbooks utilize only the feminine relational closeness (Bissett-Zerilli & Heisler, 1997), this may require extra time and effort to search out and add readings to already established syllabi. Once an instructor has included both masculine and feminine relational closeness skills, he or she may be implicitly advocating the final suggestion: Instructors should consider replacing current conceptualizations of competence with a more "adaptation-based" competency. Instead of providing our feminine students with implicit permission to disapprove of the closeness masculine individuals value, perhaps instructors need to provide feminine students with adaptation skills. If we require our masculine students to learn separate, feminine methods of relational closeness, perhaps we need to begin to require our feminine students to not only enhance their own feminine behaviors but understand those behaviors typical of masculine closeness as well. This dual model approach in our classrooms may benefit all students. A classroom where gender differences are discussed openly without assigning values (or evalua-

tion through feminine competency requirements) may serve as the outlet our masculine students need to express themselves in the classroom.

Limitations

Although the implications of these data and results are interesting, there are several limitations to this study. First, it would have been helpful to have identified the sex of instructor on the questionnaire. Assuming male and female instructors have the same gender influenced biases in relational closeness, one can assume these preferences for a particular model surfaced in daily class activities and discussions. Although the textbook, syllabus, and several in-class activities were standardized for the basic course, the lack of information regarding students' perceptions of their instructors limits the internal validity of this study. Future research may avoid this complication by indicating instructors' sex as well as students' perceptions of the instructor.

Other limitations include the lack of a pretest to accompany the end of the semester study. Future studies should include a pretest of the same sample taken in the first week of classes. Without this pretest, the true effect of the communication course cannot be assessed. In addition, several statistical assumptions were made about the reliabilities of the current study's measures of students' perceptions of relational closeness. Future studies are encouraged to use more stringent tests of validity and reliability.

CONCLUSION

The basic course is required by many universities to introduce students to oral communication competence. Our job as instructors is to provide those students with a model of communication competence to be used not only in public speaking but interpersonal contexts as well. However, by mandating one model of relational closeness and virtually ignoring all others, we are perhaps limiting the education of our students. By asking only masculine students to learn the rules to the feminine 'game' of relational closeness we invalidate masculine behaviors. In turn, feminine students are validated for their skills, but may be limited when they take these communication standards into their other relationships.

In light of this research, it seems a more comprehensive approach may be necessary. By teaching both masculine and feminine models of relational closeness, we are not only leveling the playing field, but we are providing our students with the skills necessary to communicate in an increasingly diverse world. Thus, we strongly urge the instructors of basic communication courses to incorporate both models of relational closeness/communication competence into their classrooms to promote cross-gender understanding and to remind both sexes that communication is a process of receiver adaptation. Additionally, we believe it would be valuable for textbook authors to examine their treatment of communication competence and the gender biases inherent therein. A utopian goal for communication might be to achieve androgyny. In the real world however, it might be more realistic to settle for true understanding and tolerance between men and women.

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