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## **Gender, Conversation Style, Schemas and Policy**

Dr Alexandra L. Uitdenbogerd  
RMIT University

School of Computer Science and Information Technology  
RMIT University  
Melbourne, Victoria  
Email: sandrau@rmit.edu.au

### **Abstract**

*Since the discovery that both gender conversation styles and gender schemas influence perceptions of competence in the workplace, little has changed with respect to the glass ceiling. Differences in communication style often lead to women being thought of as less competent, with consequences including slower progression through the workplace hierarchy than their male colleagues. Gender schemas have strong effects where women are a minority. On examining the policies of several Australian employers, no explicit recognition of schemas or communication differences was found. To address these known problems of perception, training is required, and policy should reflect this.*

### **Keywords**

interactional sociolinguistics, gender schemas, policy

### **INTRODUCTION**

It has been 20 years since Deborah Tannen's book on interactional sociolinguistics and 16 years since the publication of her bestselling book "You just don't understand: Women and Men in Conversation" (Tannen 1990) – a book that explained the different conversation styles of western men and women as well as the miscommunication that occurs when men and women interact. In the workplace these differences often lead to women being thought of as less competent and less powerful, with consequences including slower progression through the workplace hierarchy than their male colleagues. Tannen states that neither style of communication is better than the other, and that training is required for people in the workforce to better understand each other. She also explains that adopting communication styles of the other gender is not a solution, as social expectations lead to further misinterpretation (Tannen 1994b).

Somewhat later, Valian (1998) discussed the concept of gender schemas. These strongly influence how we perceive women and men, despite our conscious beliefs of equity and fairness. Both the interpretation of communication styles and the negation of gender schemas in judgement require training.

Today we still have an extreme gender imbalance in executive positions, as well as a salary differential between graduates with the same qualifications (GCCA 2006). The IT field currently has approximately 25% female employees, which places it on the border of being considered a male occupation or a "human" occupation (Valian 1998). Current policies and practice have not had a great impact on these trends. Perhaps the policies practices need to be updated in line with more recent knowledge about gender.

I examined the policies of some employers considered to be woman-friendly by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA), as well as an on-line training module used by seventeen higher education institutions to train their staff about equal opportunity. Despite policies for Equal Opportunity and cultural rights, training does not occur regarding conversational style differences or gender schemas.

### **BACKGROUND**

Lakoff, in her book "Language and Woman's Place" (1975), claimed that a woman is "damned if she does, damned if she doesn't" speak in a typically female style. Through childhood women are strongly discouraged from characteristically male speech such as rough language and forceful opinions. Later they are not treated seriously due to their linguistic behaviour.

While Lakoff's initial work was largely anecdotal, and based on generalisations that were not backed up by research, Tannen (1990) looked at gender and language more systematically, as did her contemporaries. The methodology involved recording conversations, identifying trouble spots, interviewing the participants to elicit their interpretation of the conversation, and obtaining further interpretations by members of each gender

(Tannen 1994a). Many misinterpretations occur due to the different uses of language by each gender. For example, women often engage in “troubles talk”, in which they may state a personal problem. They expect to use this disclosure to build closeness, and for this to be responded to with statements reflecting similar experiences. However, a typical men’s misinterpretation of a woman’s statement of a problem, is that the woman is asking for help, when really she is just talking to establish rapport.

In the workplace, women are less likely to be aware of the status effects of conversation. Men are usually careful to not put themselves in a “one-down” position, and will take opportunities to become “one-up”. Thus, a traditional female pattern of interaction in which the woman puts herself into a “one-down” position and expects to be pulled up by the other participant of the conversation, can lead to problems when the other participant is male. Similarly negotiations may end up being unfavourable due to the different patterns used by men and women in such circumstances. For example, a male opening statement may be “We’ll do this”, whereas a woman may start with “What do you think we should do?”. The man is unlikely to recognise the woman’s statement as a commencement of negotiation, and the woman will also not recognise the man’s as having the same purpose. I personally recall such a misunderstanding between a male mature-age student and myself in a class. He stated some conjecture emphatically, but only meant that he believed that it was true. I interpreted his statement as a fact, since it had been stated so confidently. The effect of these conversational style differences is that a woman may be misinterpreted as being less confident and competent than she is.

Valian provided a comprehensive study of gender effects in her book “Why so slow: the advancement of women” (1998). All the work cited is based on statistical studies or laboratory experiments. People are said to build up gender schemas that affect how they perceive others abilities. These gender schemas are learnt over a lifetime, with children as young as two years of age having learnt to associate certain activities, items and attributes with gender.

To be truly fair requires awareness of our schemas, so we can judge others more accurately. People who believe they are judging purely on merit probably are not, until they have had awareness training. Gender schemas are so powerful that they even affect our ability to judge something as objective as a person’s height.

An important point that Valian also makes is that small disadvantages build up over time leading to slower progress. For example, she cites a simulation in which equal numbers of men and women commence at the bottom level of an organisation and that a 1% bias in favour of men exists. The result is that 65% of those at the top (eighth) level were male. This simulation only considered a bias occurring at the time of promotion. In reality judgements are made at many other times in the workplace, which could mean much greater effects. Therefore, she believes that even small biases must be dealt with to make the workplace fairer.

## **CURRENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF AUSTRALIA**

The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) provides employers with a range of documents, including guidelines for reporting for compliance with the various pieces of legislation related to equal opportunity. The “Employment Matter Guidelines: Recruitment and Selection” states:

“By recognising and valuing women’s differences (such as age, religion, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and building consideration for differences into your recruitment and selection processes, your organisation stands to benefit from the diversity of women’s contributions.”

The explicit mention of “cultural and linguistic backgrounds” suggests the inclusion of the conversational styles mentioned by Tannen. However, this statement could be interpreted to mean the more commonly understood potential differences such as having a different first language, and being from a non-typical ethnic group.

EOWA publishes a list of organisations that are considered to be employers of choice for women. Amongst the range of employers, the list contains several universities, a few banks, and one IT company.

The University of Melbourne is one of the universities in the list of employers of choice. As required by legislation, they have an equal opportunity policy. Their website states that their equal opportunity plan “seeks to address factors which may inhibit the career progression of women employees.” Staff members are required to “respect cultural and social diversity among your colleagues and students”. The cultural policy states:

“The meanings, values, traditions and practices that constitute different cultures also arise from, and express, a range of social relations, including those based on gender, class, region of origin and religion.”

The policies recognise gender-based cultural differences. However, it is unclear from information available via the Web whether staff are trained in matters regarding the effect of conversational styles or gender schemas, and how to combat any deleterious effects resulting from them.

Seventeen universities currently use a set of training modules that were developed by universities in New South Wales, led by the University of Wollongong. The first of these modules covers definitions of discrimination and harassment, providing examples. It also describes the various pieces of legislation that are relevant to equal opportunity issues, as well as the options open to victims of discrimination and harassment. The second module is targeted at those who supervise others. While many important issues are discussed, neither module covers gender cultural differences that lead to misinterpretation of women's competence. Neither module trains employees about the gender schemas.

## **DISCUSSION**

The EOWA 2004 census of women in leadership shows that the gender balance in executive positions is very slowly improving. For example, the percentage of women executive managers changed from 8.4% in 2002, to 10.2% in 2004. However, ratio of women in leadership is much lower in Australia than for the USA and Canada. For example, Canada had 14% women executive managers in 2002, and the USA 15.7% (EOWA 2004).

There may be several reasons for the difference in each country, but one possibility is the date of first creating equal opportunity legislation. Australia's Equal Opportunity Act commenced in 1984, whereas the USA addressed discrimination in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Canada created its Canadian Human Rights Act in 1976-1977. It may take a certain amount of time for percentages to increase.

Given that a glass ceiling appears to still exist, and that research suggests its causes may be based on unconscious misinterpretations of women's skill, it is time to consider further reasonable action that can be taken to remedy the situation. We have three choices:

1. Continue with the status quo;
2. Implement more aggressive affirmative action and positive discrimination;
3. Provide more comprehensive training to staff that includes conversation styles and gender schemas.

Continuing with the status quo is not in the spirit of the equal opportunity legislation itself, which requires that any discrimination be addressed.

Affirmative action and positive discrimination programs are never popular. Studies show that they can have a negative impact on a woman's future ambition if she perceives that selection was based on gender instead of merit (discussed in Valian 1998 Chapter 13). Many people don't believe that affirmative action is justified due to misperceptions about the fairness of hiring procedures, as well as gender schema effects.

In my opinion there is really only one viable option and that is more comprehensive training. Studies cited by Valian (1998 Chapter 14) show that training reduced "the likelihood that people will draw the wrong conclusions about differences between social groups". Unfortunately, research into the impact of gender schema awareness training within an organisation would be problematic due to the number of variables that can't be controlled. I'm unaware of any studies that have attempted it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Current policy and practice within Australia doesn't make use of important results from research into gender. Studies cited by Valian clearly show that gender schemas affect us so strongly that we can't even judge something as objective as a person's height without distortion. Both Valian and Tannen advocate training in order to counteract the effects of inbuilt unconscious assumptions, and training has been shown in experimental situations to change people's interpretations of data. I conclude that this is a crucial adjunct to current policy to combat the "accumulation of advantage" to men and the corresponding "accumulation of disadvantage" to women.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## APPENDIX 1

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