

# Intercultural Communication in the Perspective of Gender

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Editorial Article

## **Intercultural Communication in the Perspective of Gender**

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### **Abstract**

Intercultural communication is usually viewed as the communication which takes place between two or more people from different cultural backgrounds. These different cultural backgrounds are commonly understood as different languages and nationalities. However, intercultural communication is not limited to these backgrounds. It can also be viewed as communication across gender. This article aims to provide a conceptual study that reviews some ideas regarding intercultural communication in the view of gender. It discusses the ideas proposed by some scholars in communications concerning how men and women communicate differently because they are considered members of different cultures, that is, the culture of men and the culture of women. The discussion focuses on the differences between men and women in terms of communication styles, communication attitudes, and linguistic strategies. Some potential misunderstandings which occur between men and women are also presented as a result of those differences.

**Keywords:** *Communication, Intercultural, Gender, Men, Women*



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### **INTRODUCTION**

As one aspect of communication, intercultural communication plays an essential role in establishing intercultural understanding. Intercultural communication is defined by Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) as a process that occurs whenever a speaker or a message producer belongs to one particular culture, and a message receiver or hearer belongs to another culture. The literature on intercultural communication frequently includes discussions of subcultures such as race, ethnicity, region, economy, and social community, which describe the behavioral patterns of one culture that are useful in differentiating it from others within an embracing culture or society. (Porter and Samovar in Mulvaney (1994). Gender differences in communication are considered an element of intercultural communication because male and female are believed to belong to different subcultures: man culture and woman culture. As a result, when men and women communicate, they are basically communicating across cultures. This is true that, in reality, a lot of communication problems are related to gender, and these problems exist in both intercultural and monocultural relationships. Thus, all heterosexual relationships are intercultural in the sense that they bring together the different cultural worlds and experiences of men and women.

The idea that men and women belong to or come from different cultures is also supported by Tannen (1990a), who claims that male-female communication is cross-cultural, which implies that although men and women grow up in the same country, society, and culture, they are of different genders and therefore belong to distinct subcultures. In this case, Tannen considers men and women to be coming from different cultures. According to her, the primary distinction between men and women lies in their social interaction. Men have power, whereas women have solidarity. Other differences are related to their attitudes and values. Because of these differences, men and women who intensely communicate may

encounter many misunderstandings, resulting in unhappiness, disappointment, and even hostility toward one another.

In light of the idea that men and women belong to different cultures and that their differences originate from different gender cultures, it is argued that gender communication is intercultural communication. This paper will then analytically examine the differences in the way men and women communicate interculturally since men and women are assumed to be having a different cultures. The discussion will focus on the strategies used by men and women in communication viewed from their communication styles, communication attitudes and linguistic strategies, as well as the problems or misunderstandings which potentially occur between men and women because of these differences. It is expected that by examining these differences, we will gain a better understanding of communication strategies used by different genders because only with this understanding can we be helped to achieve effective cross-gender communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Communication Differences between Men and Women

Because men and women have been regarded as belonging to a different culture, it is assumed that they will bring their own culture as men or women when they are interacting with each other. The question of whether they are really different when they are communicating will be answered through a discussion in this literature study. The discussion will present some aspects of communication between men and women. The aspects include the differences in communication styles, communication attitudes, linguistic strategies and some potential misunderstandings that may occur when men and women are engaging in communication.

### Communication Styles

One of the important aspects that make men and women different in communication is their styles. Tannen (1990a) identifies these different communication styles as Genderlect Styles. Genderlect is an acquired form of speech behavior that people learn at a very young age. Children learn proper behaviors from their parents and, more importantly, from their peers. Genderlect refers to the styles that men and women use when conversing, not *what* they say, but *how* they say it. Tannen believed that there is a gap between males and females or a gender gap because they are in a cross-cultural position. The differences in communication styles, according to Tannen lie on the following points:

- a. **Feminism versus Masculinity.** Tannen, (1990a) states that power and status are essential values in the male community. Every man will struggle to attain and maintain. Men perceive life on a hierarchical basis and are continuously trying to demonstrate or defend their social status and power. It's always one-up or one-down in communication. In addition, men appreciate independence or freedom, and their language generates the distance. Cooperation and networks, on the other hand, are important values in the women's community. In the women community, on the other hand, establishing cooperation and networks are highly valued. That's why women prefer intimacy and will often strive to show similarity. They get involved in each other's' lives and establish close relationships with one another.
- b. **Rapport talk versus report talk.** Tannen believes that women and men have different speech styles, and she defines them as "rapport-talk" and "report-talk," respectively. Today's

women use language for **intimacy**, so their communications are "rapport-talk." In this case, women's conversations take the form of negotiations to show closeness in which people wish to seek and provide confirmation and support, as well as to reach an agreement. Men, in today's conversations, on the other hand, are seeking information, which means that they are "report-talk." Negotiation is performed by men in a conversation to maintain the stronger position and to prevent themselves from perceived attempts to bring them down. A man in this context is an individual in a hierarchical social order who is either one-up or one-down.

**c. Public speaking versus private speaking.** In this category, Tannen argued that women are found to talk more in a private speaking setting than men do. On the contrary, in public speaking, men engage more in conversation compared to women, and they use their speech to give orders, provide information, and ask for approval. This indicates that men avoid talking in a private speaking setting because they rarely discuss secret or sensitive topics. They commonly talk about politics, sports, new gadgets and other general topics. If men wish to talk about a sensitive issue, they usually talk about it in public without hesitation. On the contrary, it is also true that women usually talk privately in order to establish closeness. Women consider that by talking in a private setting, they can express their feelings freely. This is also because the topic they are talking about is usually sensitive issues or secrets, both referring to themselves and other people so that women prefer talking in a place where their privacy can be maintained such as at home, café, or in other places where they can freely talk and express themselves.

**d. Telling a story versus listening.** The differences in communication style between men and women are also found in the issue of whether they are telling or listening to stories. In this category, men are noticed to tell more stories than women, particularly telling jokes. Joking is regarded as a masculine way of negotiating a status. According to Tannen, men more frequently give silent attention. As a result, women who are accustomed to having a stream of listener noise as an indication of attention may interpret silence as a lack of interest and no attention at all. In addition, switching topics gives women the impression that men aren't listening, especially if they switch to a topic about themselves. Women, on the other hand, tend to listen by making more listener-noise, such as "mhm," "uhuh," and "yeah," to indicate "I'm with you."

**e. Interruptions.** The next aspect of the communication style that Tannen raises is an interruption in conversations. She states that when a woman wants to interrupt the conversation, she asks for approval. Tannen calls this situation as Cooperative, an indication that the woman shows her sympathy rapport, not competition. For men, interruptions are viewed as a power to control the conversation. Men, according to Tannen, interrupt women more frequently. Women who engage in cooperative overlapping talk experience more interruptions. When men interrupt women, they are more likely to overlap in an uncooperative manner, which can change the subject.

Meng, Li & Wang (2007) state that interrupting the speech of others may have negative effects, that is, disrupting other's turns and restricting their contribution. Some of the gender differences in patterns of interruption are exemplified by Meng, Li & Wang, as we can see in the following conversation between the male teacher and female student.



*S: Professor, recently I've been very interested in American and British Literature, and I have written several papers on ...*

*T: But you slept in my class, you did not prepare my lessons well.*

*S: Professor, I'm also very confused about why I'm sleepy...*

*T: If you know it earlier, you'll get successful.*

Based on the example above, it appears that perhaps men and women are operating with different rules of interaction. What is regarded as rude, disruptive and impolite by women may be acceptable and normal in male interaction. Meng, Li & Wang (2007) furthermore stated that when women politely avoid interrupting others, this avoidance may be interpreted as their reluctance to get engaged in the interaction or they do have something to say. This statement was also supported by Sherwood in Travers (2012), who said that women interrupt if they want to show their concern while men interrupt to try to control the existing conversation.

**f. Conflict.** Tannen furthermore explains that for most women, conflict should be avoided if it is possible because it potentially harms the connection. On the contrary, a lot of men find conflict as a necessary way to establish status. Men's friendships frequently include an element of friendly aggression, while the presence of the female community may cover their power struggles. Tannen said that "women do want to get their way, but not at the cost of conflict. Gossip too can be competitive". She exemplifies that a girl will say "Let's do something" while a boy will say "do this." This proves that the power of men comes from individual action, while the power of a woman comes from the community. Women's inclination to seek agreement may make them better managers as they are more inclined to consult others.

Viewing the five points above: feminism versus masculinity, private speaking versus public speaking, telling stories versus listening, interruptions and conflicts, it is obvious that men and women are different in communicating. It is shown that it is women who talk more than men do. Men talk less but act more. Women prefer talking privately in a small place, while men prefer talking in public places. In addition, women like to establish relations and closeness, while men like to negotiate status and avoid failure. In short, the sharp distinction to the communication style between men and women is that men seek to establish and maintain status and dominance, while women's communication style is more democratic and egalitarian. When women get together, they seek the input of the other women present and make decisions based on the wishes of all. This proves that there are gender differences in ways of speaking, and we need to identify and understand them. Tannen (1990a) suggests that both genders could benefit from the flexibility and understanding the other's style so that misunderstanding can be prevented.

### **Communication Attitudes**

The next difference between men and women is their attitudes towards communication. Wood in Mulvaney (1994) suggests that the differences in communication attitudes are result from the different games that children play at a young age. The types of games that girls and boys play Girls' and boys' games have taught them about the rules of communication, and these rules contribute to shaping their attitudes. The following points are taken from Wood and contain the rules that boys learn while playing games with more formal structures, as well as how those attitudes develop and are reflected in their adult lives.

- Men value autonomy and are therefore less likely to ask for assistance in achieving a goal.

- Compared to women, men are much less likely to ask for directions when they get lost.
- Men want to stay independent, and they do not want to look weak or incompetent.

The assumptions above are in line with Tannen's arguments (1990a), which stated that children learn how to behave from parents and, more notably, from their peers. Children's Interaction which occurs in groups with same-sex groups, can describe or hint at the psychological behavior that members of each sex develop. In relation to the women world, Tannen said that they are different from men in terms of attitudes and values. Women life is communal, and this condition makes women prefer collaborating and establishing networks than seeing life as a hierarchical order. Because they live in a communal world, women appreciate intimacy and will usually attempt to show similarity. Forming close relationships and getting involved in each other's life are two important characteristics in women world. Tannen (1990b) added, "for women, as for girls, intimacy is the fabric of relationships, and talk is the thread from which it is woven. Little girls create and maintain friendships by exchanging secrets; similarly, women regard conversation as the basis of friendship".

The above statement also becomes a basis for a woman to expect that her husband will be a best friend to whom she can share everything. Since sharing is an indication of closeness for women, individual subjects may not be seen as an important thing. What is important for them is the sense of closeness, friendship, and familiarity, which in turn lead to intimacy. Women really expect that they can share their ideas, thoughts, feelings and impressions with others. Let's consider the examples of exchange given by Tannen (1990b) as follows:

*Woman1: Oh, I'm so stressed, there is so much work I have to do. There is always an essay to write, and as soon as you get done with one of them, you have to start working on another one right away.*

*Woman2: Yeah, I know just how you feel. I'm totally stressed as well!*

In the example above, it is demonstrated how women attempt to connect with one another. They give support and try to make them feel better by demonstrating that they have the same feelings and they understand how they feel in this situation. Furthermore, the reaction of the interlocutor help to continue the conversation without a need to change the topic of the conversation. By having a continuous discussion on the same topic, that is, the topic initiated by the first woman in this example, will make the woman feel much better and will maintain the relationship, as well as make them closer and more intimate and caring with one to another.

Now, imagine how a man would react to the same situation. The following example is also provided by Tannen.

*Woman: Oh I'm so stressed; there is so much work I have to do. There is always an essay to write, and as soon as you get done with one of them, you have to start working on another one right away.*

*Man: Don't worry, you'll be alright. I'm sure you'll get it done in time.*

It can be seen that women and men respond differently to the same problem. If the woman's response tries to show the same feeling and this will make the woman feel better, the response from the man, on the other hand, might not satisfy the woman. This response seems to make the woman feel that her

problem is just being ignored. What a woman actually expects is support and understanding from the man. This type of response, according to Tannen, (1990b), demonstrate superiority since he does not give the impression that he admits that he has or had the problem himself and tell her how to overcome the problem. This example shows that the man does not show solidarity even he tends to stress his difference and to keep his distance from the woman's problem.

Communication Attitudes between men and women is also discussed by Sherwood in Travers (2012). He proposed that the ways men and women communicate can be differentiated in terms of ten aspects as follows:

**Table. 1 Different Aspect of Communication between Men and Women**

Aspects	Explanation
Nonverbal behaviors	Women are regarded as being more demonstrative, while men are more conservative.
Body orientation	Women seem to be more physically engaged, but appearances can be deceiving
Arguments	Men are more direct and less concerned about feelings, while women often approach issues in a more indirect fashion.
Apologies	Women apologize more, hoping to create or sustain connections. Men view apologies as a loss of face.
Compliments	Women use these as a way of connecting with others, while men are more likely to offer evaluations and advice.
Problem-solving	Men prefer action and desire immediate results; women discuss problems and feelings and look for common experiences to share with others.
Negotiation	Women prefer discussion, their goal being agreement. Men feel that this is manipulation. They are more direct and want speedy results.
Chatterbox	Surprisingly, in the long run, men and women talk about the same amount. The differences are in the subject and goals of the discussions. Women talk more to family and close friends, exchanging support and experiences, while men's goal is to exchange information whether at work or in formal or social situations.
Interrupting	Women interrupt to demonstrate concern. Men interrupt to try to control the conversation.
E-mail	Women send e-mail regarding relationships; men may be seeking information, influence and respect.

The attitudes shown above are reflected in men's and women's behavior as well as in their language. Therefore, when communicating with members of their own sex, expectations of the interlocutor's

expressions and reactions are met, but when communicating with members of different sexes, such expectations are frequently not fulfilled, resulting in conflicts, problems, or misunderstandings.

### **Linguistic Strategies**

The differences in communication between men and women can also be found in their linguistic strategies. There are certainly plenty evidences related to the differences between women and men in the area of language. One example is their ways of being polite which often obviously differ. Meng, Li & Wang (2007) stated that women are often perceived as a subordinate or less powerful group than men in many communities, which is reflected in the various politeness devices used by and addressed to women. They also suggest that women receive more compliments than men. Receiving more compliments may indicate that women have a subordinate position because men usually use compliments to demonstrate that they are superior in their socialization strategies. Moreover, superiors can treat subordinates impolitely. They can interrupt, talk over, ignore and even subtly insult the subordinates.

In relation to linguistic strategies, Meng, Li & Wang (2007) said that conversational strategies between men and women could be analyzed in terms of topic, amount of talk and purpose of talking.

#### **a. Topics of conversation**

According to Meng, Li & Wang (2007), the topics of conversation that men and women talk about are different. When men talk to other men, the content of conversation focuses on such issues as competitions, sports, politics, aggression, and doing things. In contrast to men, a lot of women consider exchanging personal matters as an important aspect of intimacy. For most women, exchanging personal details is essential in a friendship. Personal details are not commonly shared by men. Men are more likely to talk about the general details such as politics, news, and sports. Men acknowledge that telling people secrets may show signs of friendship, but it can also put people in danger. Men are not usually willing to take such a risk. When men do discuss personal matters, the details are frequently brief and hazy. Gossip is considered to have a bad reputation because most of the time, it usually focuses on the weaknesses and failures of other people in order to that the participants feel superior.

Another matter that men usually exchange among them is information about current events. Different from men, when women converse with other women, they talk about themselves, their feelings, relationships with others, home and family. This idea is in line with what Tannen (1990a) argues that men's interest in politics, news, and sports are comparable with women's interest in the details of their personal lives. The qualities that people value in sports may explain why sports continue to be one of the men's favorite topics. This is because, historically, sports have shaped male identities by extolling the virtues of aggression, determination, control, and leadership, as well as teamwork and physical fitness. Emotion and personal feelings are two sensitive topics that most men avoid discussing. If men do mention their wives and families, it is likely to be a brief mention. Relationships are prioritized in feminine culture. Relationships are a constant source of interest and communication for them.

#### **b. Amount of talk**

Besides the topic of conversation, the amount of talk also differs between men and women. Meng, Li & Wang (2007) argued that in public, formal contexts, men and women contribute different amounts



of talk than in private, intimate contexts. As previously stated, men prefer to speak in public, so men tend to dominate public speaking, while women frequently have to work hard to get them to speak in the privacy of their own homes. Similarly, women may find formal public situations more face-threatening than men do, whereas men may feel that private and intimate situations are less comfortable. This opposite feeling shows that each gender will participate less in the situation they feel most uncomfortable. In addition, men seem to consider formal public situations as opportunities for display, while in private and intimate conversations, they are more reserved. On the contrary, women seem to prefer taking more account of what their interlocutors conventionally need. In short, men seem to assess the situation in terms of its potentials, while women appear to prioritize the needs of others and try to adjust their talk in a number of ways accordingly.

### **c. Purpose of Talking**

Another linguistic strategy that differentiates men and women is the purpose of their talking. Meng, Li & Wang (2007) furthermore mention that men take part in a conversation with the intention of informing rather than conveying relationship cues. Women, on the other hand, see conversation as more of a sign of a relationship. Therefore, it can be seen that male friendship usually develops because of doing rather than talking. In contrast, women usually find that talking is a better way to maintain a relationship with other women than doing things together. The evidence shows that men's styles are mostly referential or information oriented rather than focused on social or affective meaning. They are often competitive or adversarial rather than supportive and facilitative, and they are often concerned with status enhancement rather than establishing an interpersonal relationship.

### **Potential Misunderstandings in Gender Intercultural Communication**

Because of the different ways of communication between men and women, misunderstandings are potentially to occur. Lindström (2008) in the context of intercultural communication, in which people with different cultural backgrounds are involved, prejudice and misunderstanding might occur due to participants' lack of awareness of differences in cultural background. The following discussion will observe some potential misunderstandings that are encountered by men and women when they are communicating. These misunderstandings may create unhappiness, discomfort, irritation and the like among men and women.

Lahbabi et al. (2006) state that the difference between genders in communication causes misunderstanding and leads to conflicts. For example, women may express their feelings and problems, but men believe that in this situation, the women ask for help, so they begin giving advice and attempting to help. However, what the women actually need is not advice or help. Women act in this way because they want to get closer to others, not to get advice or solutions. In this case, men fail to meet women's expectations, so that the women may feel disappointed and unhappy.

Another example of misunderstanding that may occur because of the different gender was given by Tannen (1990b). She exemplifies the misunderstanding that she observed from her own research. She found that when women complained about their husbands, they did not actually focus their complaints on tangible inequities such as the share of daily life-support work like cleaning, cooking, social arrangements, and errands but their complaints focused on communication. Wives felt that their husbands did not pay attention and did not listen to them. In this case, most wives expect their husbands to be conversational partners first and foremost, but few husbands share this expectation of their wives.

This condition causes problems and misunderstandings, which lead to conflicts between the wife and husband.

Furthermore, Tannen (1990b) observed that men use conversation as the way in which they negotiate their status in the group and prevent people from pushing them around. Men use talking to preserve their independence. Women, on the other hand, participate in a conversation to negotiate closeness and intimacy. Women believe that talking is important to maintain intimacy, so sitting and talking is the essence of being best friends. For men, activities and doing things together are important. Friendship does not require simply sitting and talking. They're friends with the boys; they do things together.

In light of Tannen's observation above, it can be seen that potential problems may occur when men and women communicate. Women express feelings of closeness by talking or conversing with their friends and followers. Men don't communicate in this way, so they sometimes don't understand why women or their wives are always and continually talking, talking, and talking. In the end, many men simply cannot adjust to their women. Having this situation, we can usually find a view in which a husband covers his face with a newspaper when a wife at the breakfast table is talking to him.

Men, according to Tannen, are perplexed by the various ways in which women use conversation to be intimate with others. Tannen identifies this strategy as "troubles talk." She says, "For women, talking about troubles is the essence of connection. A woman will say, "I tell you my troubles, you tell me your troubles, and we're close". Men, however, hear troubles talk as a request for advice, so they respond with a solution. When a man offers this kind of information, the woman often feels as if he is trying to diminish her problem. Again, a conflict may occur in this situation. In the men's thought, he's being supportive because men don't talk to each other about their troubles unless they really do want a solution. The man is unaware that his woman was simply attempting to establish a level of intimacy with him by inviting him to communicate and share with her. Tannen says that because of these fundamental differences in approach, the most common complaint she hears from men about women is that women complain all the time and don't want to do anything about it. Men, in this case, misunderstand the ritualistic nature of women's complaints.

The potential misunderstandings described above show that gender has an impact on communication because both men and women approach conversations with very different expectations and with the aim of achieving different results, and when these expectations are not fulfilled, misinterpretations can occur. Conversational differences are frequently to blame for these misinterpretations. Women, for example, see questions as a way to keep a conversation going, whereas men see them as a way to get information. Men perceive aggressiveness as a form of communication, whereas women perceive it as an attack. Women discuss their problems to get support and reassurance, whereas men are looking for a solution. When women speak to men, they expect that the men will listen, which is indicated by the response, but the women feel that the men are not listening.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, we may all acknowledge and realize that there are gender differences in ways of speaking or communicating, and we need to identify and understand them. Otherwise, we will be blamed by others or ourselves for the negative effects of the misunderstanding. These misunderstandings seem to always occur even though both genders have good intentions. Now, how can we bridge communication gap between men and women in order to achieve cross-gender understandings? To

improve our communication competence with people of the other gender, we should be aware that there is a difference between men and women's polite behavior. We need to make efforts to increase our knowledge of the other gender and develop gender sensitivity. However, the prerequisite is that we must adopt positive attitudes towards people of different gender cultures. In other words, we should acknowledge the validity of different cultures and respect them.

When we understand that there are different gender cultures and respect the logic of each one, we will be able to empower ourselves to communicate in ways that enhance our good relationships. As we know that interrelationship has become more important now than ever before because of the advance in communication technology. Knowing the differences between men and women can be very helpful to achieve effective communication to enhance the relationship. Finally, if we recognize and understand the differences, we can take them into account, adjust to, and learn from each other's styles. This will allow us to deal with real conflicts and problems in communication.

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