Gender, Power, and Miscommunication

Females and males seem to have frequent problems of miscommunication, most notably in adult heterosexual interaction. Many magazines and books, in fact, offer to teach one sex, usually women, how to interpret the other. Women’s reactions to men’s “street talk” is another example that what is ostensibly meant by one sex may not be what is understood by the other. An extreme form of miscommunication is sometimes said to occur in cases of date, acquaintance, and marital rape, when a frequently offered explanation is that a male has interpreted a female’s “no” as part of sexual play. Problematic heterosexual communication takes place not only in verbal, but in nonverbal interaction also, as facial expressions, gestures, and other bodily expressions may be intended as one kind of signal but received as another.

Nonsexual interaction also provides the circumstances of miscommunication. Patterns of sex difference in speech interaction may lead to difficulties in communication, as evidenced in such behaviors as interruption, overlap, and “back-channeling,” or in hedging and apologizing. There are also sex-related differences in lexical usage which may lead to miscommunication: for example, the different meanings in the terms used by women and men to evaluate, or the different understandings they may have of masculine forms used generically (e.g., mankind). . . . All miscommunication does not necessarily lead to immediate disruption and repair of the conversation: It may be unnoted or unacknowledged at the time by the interactants, only to come up, or be discovered, later when the different understandings lead to unexpected different outcomes, such as one voicing support and the other nonsupport for a proposal, or dressing up versus dressing down for a social event.

Female–male miscommunication has been interpreted in a number of ways, most notably as an innocent by-product of different socialization patterns and different gender cultures, occurring in interaction between speakers who are ostensibly social equals. We wish to examine cross-sex miscommunication and the explanations surrounding it with special attention to the context of sexual inequality. This context creates the gender-polarized conditions that give different interpretations and different evaluations of women’s and men’s language usage; suggest that men and women have distinctive languages which demand interpretation to one another, and tend to create denial and reinterpretation of women’s negations in the sexual realm. It is our

belief that, viewed in the context of male power and female subordination, the explanation that miscommunication is the unfortunate but innocent by-product of cultural difference collapses.

This pattern of polarization, differential evaluation, denial, and reinterpretation is the same as that between different ethnic, racial, religious, age, and class groups (for example), when there is social inequality based on these differences: although cultural differences between groups are undeniable and may lead undeniably to miscommunication, that is not the end of the story. Hierarchies determine whose version of the communication situation will prevail; whose speech style will be seen as normal; who will be required to learn the communication style, and interpret the meaning, of the other; whose language style will be seen as deviant, irrational, and inferior; and who will be required to imitate the other’s style in order to fit into the society. Yet the situation of sex difference is not totally parallel: sex status intercuts and sometimes contrasts with other statuses; and no other two social groups are so closely interwoven as men and women.

**Theories of Female/Male Miscommunication**

Explanatory theories of cross-sex miscommunication are based on expositions of gender differences in language usage, so it is to these we must first turn. The most influential theories have been female deficit theory and two cultures theory. We begin with them. . . . Then we look . . . at other explanations that stress social power, psychological difference, language system-based problems, and cross-sex “pseudocommunication.” We have found all of these explanations for miscommunication helpful and all of them limited. We next discuss some broad issues that must be addressed in an adequate theory of cross-sex miscommunication, and in the last section of the chapter propose an alternative theory, which we call a multi-determined social context approach.

**Female Deficit**

Despite women’s supposed bilingualism in knowing both men’s and women’s language forms and often-cited superior female language abilities, women’s communication is often evaluated as handicapped, maladaptive, and needing remediation. To a notion of deviancy from a masculine norm are added assumptions and statements of the inferiority of “women’s language.” . . .

Earlier female deficit theories . . . seem to have been based in an unquestioned biological causation, women having naturally inferior reasoning capacity to that of men, for example, or having essential difference from men in interests, assertiveness, and so on. The more recent socio-biological theory would attribute sex difference in speech to behaviors that display and exaggerate sex difference in order to help select superior mates, as a means to ensure survival of offspring.

Other recent deficit theories, . . . stress environmental rather than biological causation, either through women’s socialization to speak “women’s language” or through women’s isolation from the cultural mainstream, leading to
different life experiences from men's, and therefore deviant perceptions and values.

**Consequences and Implications of Female Deficit Theory**

Theories of female deficit, along with those of cultural difference (see below), have probably had the most consequence in our daily lives. A primary consequence of female deficit theory is the expansion of notions of male normativeness. By this we mean a view that sees female/male difference as female deviation from what is often called "the" norm, but is actually the male cultural form. The male normativeness is manifested in several ways.

1. **There is a focus on female forms and female "difference."** . . . Although most writing about language and speech is tacitly based on men's actions, very little is written on men's language and speech forms per se, which should merit as much attention as female ones, as distinctive cultural forms. . . . The focus on female difference of course emphasizes the underlying assumption that the female is a deviant while the male is "normal" and speaks "the language." . . .

2. **There is pressure on women to use "men's" language.** . . . In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the general problem with communication between women and men was presented as women's hesitancy in stating their interests and wishes. The basic solution presented by many "experts" was (especially in the U.S.) assertiveness training, which was to help women change their behavior and be more assertive. That is, both the blame and the potential solution were located within the woman experiencing trouble in making others understand her.

3. **There is an expectation that females should (re-) interpret male expressions.** Girls and women have to be bilingual, to speak both women's and men's languages. But there is no suggestion that boys or men have to be bilingual, even though . . . young boys learn women's language as their first language, and have to unlearn it by around the age of 10. Why are not men already bilingual, or why are they not too required to become bilingual?

**Evaluation of Female Deficit Theory**

This requirement of bilingualism, or bidialectalism, if it is true (we know of no empirical research directly on the question), would be more invidious than it might at first appear. We believe there is an implicit deficit theory underlying dominant U.S. culture, which requires (and teaches, through popular magazines) females, not males, to learn to read the silence, lack of emotional expression, or brutality of the other sex as not only other than, but more benign than, it appears. From a young girl's re-framing of a boy's insults and hits as signs that he likes her, to a woman's re-framing of her husband's battering as a perverse demonstration of caring, females are encouraged to use their greater knowledge of males' communication to interpret men's assultive behavior, to make it in an almost magical way "not so."
Women, on the other hand, are not reinterpreted by men. They are in fact often characterized as uninterpretable and unfathomable by men. Yet many theorists and researchers have written about the ways that dominant groups of a social hierarchy (e.g., men) largely determine the dominant communication system of the society, and about the ways subordinate groups (e.g., women) are silenced and made inarticulate in the language. This muted group theory argues that women’s voices are less heard than men’s in part because they are trying to express women’s experiences that are rarely given attention and they are trying to express them in a language system not designed for their interests and concerns; hence their language may at times seem unfathomable to men.

We reject much in the theories of female deficit because of their biased evaluation of female and male speech styles, and we reject biologically based theories as ignoring the large and complex contributions of culture and psychology to speech differences. However, the point . . . that society differentially evaluates women’s and men’s speech is largely true and must be taken into account in any theory of difference and miscommunication.

Two Cultures

. . . Rejecting social power-based and psychological explanations of female/male difference (explained below), [one two cultures theory prefers] to think of both cross-sex and cross-ethnic communication problems as examples of the larger phenomenon of cultural difference and miscommunication. They put forward what they consider a preferable alternative explanation, that American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures which have different conceptions of friendly conversation, different rules for engaging in it, and different rules for interpreting it. Even when women and men are attempting to interact as equals, the cultural differences lead to miscommunication.

[This theory] compare[s] the situation in cross-sex communication with that in interethnic communication, in which communication problems are understood as personality clashes or interpreted through ethnic stereotypes.

[It] see[s] the sources of the different cultures to lie in the peer groups of middle childhood: The rules for friendly interaction and conversation are being learned at a time when peer groups are primarily of a single sex, and the two styles are quite different. The world of girls, they assert (based on their own experience and on published studies of child play), is one of cooperation and equality of power; but because of heavy emotional investment in pair friendships, girls must learn to read relationships and situations sensitively. The world of boys, on the other hand, is said to be hierarchical; dominance is primary, and words are used to attain and maintain it, also to gain and keep an audience and to assert identity. The adult extension of these group differences in speech situations is that women’s speech is interactional: It engages the other and explicitly builds on the other’s contributions, and there is a progressive development to the overall conversation;
while men’s speech is characterized by storytelling, arguing, and verbal posturing (verbal aggressiveness). [There are] six areas “in which men and women probably possess different conversational rules, so that miscommunication is likely to occur.”

1. **Minimal response.** ... A minimal response is something like “uh-huh” or “mm-hmm,” given in response to another’s talk. Women’s meaning by the positive minimal response (PMR) is said to be something like “continue, I’m listening,” while men’s is said to be something like “I agree, I follow you.” These two different meanings of the expression and interpretation of PMRs can explain . . . several of the sex-related differences and miscommunication findings: (a) women’s more frequent use of PMRs than men’s; (b) men’s confusion when women give PMRs to their (men’s) speech, then later are found not to agree; and (c) women’s complaint that men are not listening enough when they (women) talk. . . .

2. **The meaning of questions.** Women use questions for conversational maintenance; men tend to use them as requests for information.

3. **The linking of one’s utterance to the previous utterance.** Women tend to make this link explicitly, but for men no such rule seems to exist, or they explicitly ignore it.

4. **The interpretation of verbal aggressiveness.** Women see verbal aggressiveness as personally directed and as negative. For men, it helps to organize conversational flow.

5. **Topic flow and shift.** In women’s conversations, topics are developed and expanded, and topic shifts are gradual. But men tend to stay on a topic as narrowly defined, and then to make an abrupt topic shift.

6. **Problem sharing and advice giving.** Women tend to discuss and share their problems, to reassure one another and listen mutually. Men, however, interpret the introduction of a problem as a request for a solution, and they tend to act as experts and offer advice rather than sympathize or share their own problems. . . .

**Consequences and Implications of Two Cultures Theory**

Although earlier “women’s” problem with language was seen as non-assertiveness, more recently the basic problem has been named *miscommunication*, and the general solution advocated by many lay and professional researchers is to help everyone recognize that women and men have different cultures, different needs and experiences, which lead to different ways of understanding and relating to one another . . .

One consequence of the cultural difference approach is this explanation of date and marital rape and other such forms of sexual aggression as extreme examples of miscommunication, in which males and females had different interpretations of their own and each others’ behavior, and communication breakdown resulted. Sexual communication is an often difficult matter in western societies, complex in its layers of subtlety, indecision, game-playing, sex-specific prescription, and choices to understand or not understand. . . . To the extent that women communicate imprecisely the distinction between
determined and token resistance, and/or men fail to understand the distinction, sexual miscommunication may result. Accuracy in encoding and decoding may be quite consequential here... men's understanding is part of the legal definition of rape. A man must both understand a woman does not want intercourse and force her to engage in it anyway, to be convicted of rape.

But is rape in such a circumstance truly a matter only of "missed" communication? No; in actuality, power tracks its dirty feet across this stage. Greater social power gives men the right to pay less attention to, or discount, women's protests, the right to be less adept at interpreting their communications than women are of men's, the right to believe women are inscrutable. Greater social power gives men the privilege of defining the situation—at the time, telling women that they "really wanted it," or later, in a court.

And greater social power gives men the ability to turn definitions of the situation into physical violation. If the problem really were cultural difference alone, would we have such scenarios? In purely cultural difference, the male's and the female's understanding of the situation would each prevail about equally. The outcome might be arguments in which either party's definition would prevail and the "losing" party would go home angry; or the couple might have sullen evenings of unexpressed expectations and disappointments; or when a man's definition of the situation won out, the woman would only be forced to agree that her interpretation of their interaction was wrong—but she would not be raped as a consequence.

Evaluation of Two Cultures Theory

... The first point to be made about the claim of cultural difference is that there is truth in it: Clearly there are differences in communication style between men and women, exacerbated by sex segregation in different situations, which surely are implicated in misunderstandings. As we have been among those cataloguing these differences, we would be among the last to deny them and their potential effect. Our point here is that cultural difference alone cannot adequately explain the full pattern of language difference and miscommunication; and that in fact such an explanation badly misrepresents these phenomena.

Reinterpreting Differences—Culture or Power?
We begin with the six female–male differences that Maltz and Borker cite as innocently underlying miscommunication, and argue that those differences may be interpreted in another light when the context of cultural dominance as well as that of cultural difference is taken into account.

1. Positive minimal response... [M]en respond to women's—and to other men's—PMRs as reinforcement—that is, they keep talking. PMRs are the basis of what is called verbal reinforcement; there is an extensive psychological literature showing that people tend to speak more, and more of any particular speech form, when reinforced with PMRs. ...

But beyond this, [is] the political use of minimal responses. [M]en... use delayed minimal response (leaving a silence before giving a minimal
response) with women more than vice versa. . . . Such behavior can discourage interaction and lead to the failure of topics initiated by women to become joint topics of the conversation, or even extinguish a speaker’s conversation. This seemingly innocent cultural difference, then, has the effect of supporting male dominance of conversation.

2. The meaning of questions. Males’ understanding of questions as requests for information rather than as conversational maintenance devices may alternatively be heard as taking to themselves the voice of authority.

3. The linking of one’s utterance to the previous utterance. Men’s not having, or ignoring, a rule that demands that their utterance link to and thus recognize another’s contribution may be seen as exercising a common prerogative of power. Those with lesser power do not have the option to ignore the other’s rules, or common rules.

4. The interpretation of verbal aggressiveness. Men’s overt use of aggressiveness against an interlocutor in organizing conversational flow may also be seen as a prerogative of power. In situations of inequality, the one of lesser power dare not show aggressiveness to the other, especially unilaterally.

5. Topic flow and shift. Men’s tendency to make abrupt topic shifts, that is, to ignore basic conversational rules, like their tendency not to link to the previous utterance (even when on the same topic) may likewise be seen as a prerogative of power, the power to define and control a situation.

6. Problem sharing and advice giving. Men’s tendency to take the mention of a problem as an opportunity to act as experts and offer advice rather than sympathize or share their own problems is, like the tendency to treat questions solely as requests for information, again the prerogative of authority.

In sum, the characteristics [associated with] females’ speech are the ones appropriate to “friendly conversation,” while the ones cited for males’ speech are not neutral but indicate very uncooperative, disruptive sorts of conversational interaction. In addition, they tend to be self-centered, also consistent with the stance of the powerful.

If gender speech differences were simply cultural differences, there would be no pattern to them implicating dominance and power. . . . Indeed, two indications point to the predominance of power/dominance factors in female–male miscommunication:

a. First, as illustrated above, there is a clear pattern for language style associated with men to be that of power and dominance, and that associated with women to be that of powerlessness and submissiveness.

b. [I]n systematic study of couples, “certain types of communications were particularly given to misinterpretation—requests, excuses, explanation; in short, verbalizations associated with getting one’s way.” “Getting one’s way” is a denatured term for “exercising power.”

Thus the overall pattern of miscommunication is not random, but rather founded in, and we would add, expressive of, the inequality of women and
men. If power differentials simply provided an overlay . . ., they would not be the predominant context factor in miscommunication, but a minor one among many. Clearly, the place of power must be recognized in miscommunication problems between women and men, as it must between any two cultural groups differing in power . . .

Some Considerations for a Better Theory of Female–Male Miscommunication

In working toward a more comprehensive theory of cross-sex miscommunication, we suggest the following broad considerations:

- Theories of female–male miscommunication have been put forward primarily by white theorists (which we are too) and are based largely on explanations of the actions of whites; to this extent their generalizability within the English-speaking, or any broader, community may be limited.
- As with all interactions, we need to recognize talk as an active process in a context that often involves speakers who may have different and changing concerns and who do not always have the conveying of information, politeness, rapport, clarity, agreement, understanding, and accommodation as primary goals. Discussions of miscommunication seldom, for example, talk about anger and frustration as emotions and expressions present during the conversation, not only as results of miscommunication. Women’s anger in particular has frequently been denied or interpreted in terms of misunderstanding, inarticulation, and confusion.
- We might usefully consider the contemporary focus on miscommunication between women and men as a device that has encouraged thinking about oppositional spheres, as if women and men have innately quite separate interests and concerns. Attention to miscommunication is often a way to stress difference while ignoring hierarchy. Usually these discussions of miscommunication ignore the links between problems heard in female–male conversations and the inequities women experience through family policies, property laws, salary scales, and other repressive/discriminatory practices.
- We can recognize that boys and girls, women and men, belong, or are assigned by others, to particular age, sexual orientation, class, and race groups. Media attention to miscommunication pays little attention to this fact, assuming that only gender variants are involved. This is probably due in part to the fact that talk about “the battle of the sexes” is still often done flippantly, and casually. . . . One way to trivialize the topic of female–male interaction is to simplify it, ignoring the interaction of race, class, age, sexual orientation, and sex group.
- Women and men need to be asked about what they experience as communication problems. The popular media have found it easy to talk about “miscommunication” which seems to mean primarily women and men talking past each other by unwittingly using terms or concepts not understood by the other. Blame is often equally assigned
to women and men in this (popular for the mass media) battle of the sexes.
- We need to consider further the definition of miscommunication. Is it an interpretive error experienced by at least one of the interactants? A mismatch between the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s interpretation? A response by one that indicates that she or he hasn’t understood? How do we know when “misunderstandings” are intentional?
- We can recognize that all confusing talk does not involve “confusion” on the part of one or both interactants. For example, a speaker might deliberately obfuscate. Further, a speaker who says something unintelligible to another may be little interested in hearing a clarifying question; repair of misunderstandings or confusions usually requires work on the part of both speakers. Not acknowledging communication problems is a common strategy for speakers who try to avoid confrontation in order to avoid another’s anger and laws.

The Interaction of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Miscommunication

The types of problematic talk experienced might be quite different for white/Anglo women and women of color; and for women of different classes. In the case of race/ethnicity, for example, many black women in English-speaking countries have not grown up in patriarchal, nuclear families but in matrifocal or extended families; the same is true for many Native American women. They may experience less sexist female/male interaction. They may also experience a lot of interracial “miscommunication” in talks with both white women and white men. . . .

A basic question we need to pursue here is: Do studies of interracial/interethnic miscommunication apply equally to women and men? Is there an interaction of race/ethnicity and gender such that different races/ethnic groups have different gender differences and different gender power relations, and consequently different loci of misunderstanding? Future studies need to account for the interrelated influences of culture, class, age, and gender—and of racism, classism, ageism, sexism, and so on. . . .

Same-Sex and Gay-Straight Issues in Miscommunication

Left untouched in this discussion, built as it is on a literature focused on cross-sex communication, is the question of how same-sex communication might be detrimentally affected by issues of male dominance. . . .

Same-sex miscommunication may also originate from gay-straight differences and stereotypes. Many gay males and lesbians, for example, report the experience of a straight same-sex friend or acquaintance reacting oversensitively to a touch or other expression of warmth, obviously misunderstanding it as a sexual advance. . . . Here, too is the potential for miscommunication based on cultural difference and dominance—that between homosexual and heterosexual cultures. This topic certainly deserves further exploration.
Polarizing and Reifying Gender Notions

A prominent danger in examining sex differences is that of exaggerating them and ignoring sex similarity. A more insidious danger is that of accepting sex as an unproblematic category. Similarities between the sexes are downplayed and differences exaggerated, as a general rule in Western societies, as is well evidenced by the elaboration of his-and-hers products, from pink and blue baby outfits and gender-typed children’s toys to sex-customized razors, deodorants, and household tools for adults. Added to the cultural tendency to exaggerate difference is that contributed by the scholarly literature on sex difference, which has often focused uncritically on difference rather than on its underpinnings.

The exaggeration of sex difference gets much impetus from school settings, where the assumption of essential differences seems virtually institutionalized. Here children are treated as separate social categories by their teachers. . . . Despite the cultural emphasis on group difference, similarities of behavior between females and males, in language as in other areas, are far greater than differences, as many feminist scholars have pointed out. . . . A subtler, and therefore worse, problem is the simplistic and unthinking conception of sex and gender to be found in most writing, scholarly and popular. . . .

A Multi-Determined Social Context Approach to Female–Male Miscommunication

We envision a comprehensive approach that does not have to choose between the different explanations offered, but rather that recognizes the important factors of each of these as forces. The difference in feminine and masculine cultures is real, but it is not the only fact of existence for men and women in our society; differences due to race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual preference, and so on may compound and interact with gender differences; and cultural commonality exists too. Most importantly, cultural difference does not exist within a political vacuum; rather, the strength of difference, the types of difference, the values applied to different forms, the dominance of certain forms—all are shaped by the context of male supremacy and female subordination.

Furthermore, cultural segregation and hierarchy may combine to produce psychological effects in both women and men that independently engender and consolidate language forms which express superior and subordinate status. Both macrolevel power (a), based on structural male dominance, and microlevel power (b), based on individual socialization, exist and influence language use and therefore miscommunication. Structural male dominance favors the growth of faulty linguistic systems, including dominant metaphors, which express primarily male experience and further add to making women a muted group—leading to further problems in communication. At the same time, the general assumption that men’s and women’s words and behaviors mean the same leads to the problem of pseudocommunication, the false belief that we have understood each other, and misunderstandings may compound.
The differences and misunderstandings created by these factors are not equally engaged in all contexts: gender (like dominance) varies in meaning and prominence in different contexts. And this may be so for the different explanatory factors as well. For example, it may be that different speech cultures, to the extent that they exist, come primarily into play with marital/partner communication, as when wives/women say they want husbands/partners to engage in more emotionally sharing communication. Cross-sex pseudocommunication may occur especially in (hetero)sexual or potentially sexual situations. Social power may be said to enter broadly with all these factors, but may most specifically structure conversational interaction patterns. Rather than debating the merits of one factor over another, we would do well to turn our attention to ascertaining the contexts in which different factors enter to make cross-sex communication problematic.

In addition, this social context model assumes that men's as well as women's communicative behaviors are to be explained, to be studied as "caused"; that neither's speech is understood as either norm [or] deviant; that not only women's, but also men's psychology is seen as developing from their situation in the social structure, and as affecting their language style; that patterns of cross-sex misunderstanding may differ between racial, ethnic, age, and sexual preference groups, and the pattern in the dominant white/Anglo and straight culture cannot be taken as indicative of all. The model sees communication within the context of gender hierarchy as well as of gender segregation and socialization and assumes that not only the more noticeable (and often superficial) gender differences in speech are seen as underlying cross-sex miscommunication, but that also to be considered are deeper concerns of women's exclusion from the linguistic structuring of experience.

Conclusion

The patterns of miscommunication we have discussed occur within the cultural context of male power and female subordination: The accepted interpretation of an interaction (e.g., refusal versus teasing, seduction versus rape, difference versus inequality) is generally that of the more powerful person, therefore that of the male tends to prevail. The metastructure of interpretation—not what the interpretation is, but whose interpretation is accepted—is one of inequality. Females are required to develop special sensitivity to interpret males' silence, lack of emotional expression, or brutality, and to help men express themselves, while men often seem to be trained deliberately to misinterpret much of women's meaning. Yet it is women's communication style that is often labeled as inadequate and maladaptive, requiring remediation in which white-collar masculine norms are generally imposed.

As we have seen, miscommunication may be used to stigmatize: less powerful individuals (because of their ethnicity, class, sex, etc.) may be defined as deviant communicators, incapable of expressing themselves adequately. "Problems of communication" are often diagnosed in difficult interaction to obscure problems that arise from unequal power rather than from communication. The explanation of "separate but equal cultures" has been a means of
avoiding reference to power and to racial and ethnic domination, and should be recognized for its implicit denial of sex domination as well. The complex patterns described above fit into the larger structure of female–male myths and power relations. One may in fact ask how well male dominance could be maintained if we had open and equally-valued communication between women and men. The construction of miscommunication between the sexes emerges as a powerful tool, maybe even a necessity, to maintain the structure of male supremacy.