THE DIVERSITY EQUIVALENCE: GENDER COMMUNICATION STYLES AND THE CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr Surbhi Kapur
Associate Professor, KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Ms. Anisha Shreya
MBA Scholar, KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Ms. Ruhi
MBA Scholar, KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Ms. Meenakshi Mutreja
MBA Scholar, KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

As an increasing number of women at each organizational level is becoming a reality, sensitization to the differences in communication styles quite like understanding the communication patterns in cross-cultural settings becomes a necessity. This paper attempts to show that beyond the apparent physicality, the MRI scans and research which talk about anatomical and cerebral dissimilarities, there is a cultural coating which envelops individual genders and isolates them to some extent in their own cultural closets. This culture casing develops alongside the growth of the individual from the child to the adolescent to the adult stage picking up lessons on the acceptable conventions, behaviour and rituals of their gender or culture closet. Like two countries or cultures having diverse customs which prompt different reactions to problems and situations, the two genders, despite being a part of the same ethnicity, behave and react according to their own male or female culture closet. Though it does overlap at times and we encounter men exercising feminine style and women the masculine, the common observations remain more or less stereotypical. This study argues that cultural conditioning is a more potent source of communication differences than merely the biological processes and the remedies prescribed to prevent cross-cultural collisions can be equally effective for tackling gender differences. Therefore, cross-cultural jargon like cultural
conditioning and cultural baggage resonate equally in the gender diversity context as reasons for the difference and cultural pluralism may fit the bill for solving the problem.

**Keywords:** Communication Style, Culture Closet, Culture Conditioning, Cultural Pluralism, Gender Differences

**INTRODUCTION**

The benefits of cultural diversity in an organization and the direct link between success quotient and multicultural miscellany have been repeatedly acknowledged. Yet, the most fundamental diversity of gender in our organizations remains consciously or unconsciously ignored. Equipped with equal and maybe better academic and professional credentials, the number of women at the managerial level is increasing. As a result, men and women are sharing equal status, experience, ideas and power more than ever before. But as they are supposedly "from different planets", (Gray,2007) who have different needs, goals, workplace values and communication styles, gender differences could lead to team ineptitude, employee dissatisfaction, lack of trust and plummeting profits. Recent research has extensively discussed gender differences and the how's and why's of their source and effect on behaviour and attitude. Is it Biology or Society, Hormones or Upbringing, "Nature or Nurture"? While the scientists may attribute the difference to X and Y chromosomes, others might point fingers at social conditioning. Again, while the testosterone spurts could be held responsible for male aggressive behaviour and the difference in brain code to stronger language skills in women, the present study focuses on the culture induced habituation which shapes the reactions, attitudes and communication styles at the workplace. It argues that though men and women grow up in the same world, in a sense "they grow up in different worlds" (Tannen, 1995) closeted in their own cultural envelop, imbibing different societal stereotypes through their parents, teachers and the environment. As upbringing and cultural conditioning leaves an indelible imprint on the human psyche they naturally behave, react and talk in a way peculiar to their cultural closet (read gender) which seems normal to them but alien to others. Different reactions to the same problem often become reasons for dispute and repeated differences in responses to concerns important to them leads to frustration. Culture collisions then become gender conflict which at the workplace spoil relationships and stall productivity. Communication being the hub of all activity, the clash or agreement is voiced through language. As "using language is a learned social behaviour" (Tannen, 1995), the nuances are unconsciously picked up from parents, teachers, peers surrounding us and as they delegate particular slots for males and females, we get cloistered within our cultural closets where the members of our own tribe (read gender) understand what we say and why while the outsiders (the other gender) do not. Hence the linguistic styles of these two culture closets or genders become different and the conversational conventions too appear alien. The principal argument could be that the two genders like two different cultures have expected ritualised ways and styles for communicating, problem solving and decision making that would appear normal and reasonable to their native culture closet (gender) but unreasonable and sometimes annoying to the outsider. This cultural conditioning or the unconscious social inculation of the ways of perceiving, talking and conducting oneself and the cultural baggage or the "tendency for one culture to pervade thinking, speech, and behaviour without one being aware of this pervasion" (Wikipedia) bring about visible differences in general and in the workplace in particular.
DEBORAH TANNEN SHOWCASES THE DISSIMILAR COMMUNICATION STYLES WHERE THE GIRLS IMBIBE "CONVERSATIONAL RITUALS" THAT CONCENTRATE ON THE "RAPPORT" ASPECT OF INTERACTION AND BOYS ABSORB "RITUALS" THAT CONGREGATE AT THE "STATUS" COMPONENT. PLAYING IN SMALLER GROUPS IS PREFERRED BY GIRLS AND CONVERSATION BECOMES A TOOL OF ESTABLISHING CLOSER TIES. APPEARING TO BE TOO SURE OR BOSSY MAKES THEM UNPOPULAR IN THEIR GROUP AND HENCE THEY LEARN TO CONSIDER OTHER'S REQUIREMENTS ALONG WITH THEIR OWN IN AN EFFORT TO INSTINCTIVELY "SAVE FACE FOR ONE ANOTHER". PLAYING IN LARGER GROUPS WHERE EQUALITY IS NOT A NECESSITY AND THE LEADER EFFORTLESSLY ORDERS AROUND USING "LANGUAGE TO NEGOTIATE THEIR STATUS IN THE GROUP BY DISPLAYING THEIR ABILITIES AND KNOWLEDGE, AND BY CHALLENGING OTHERS AND RESISTING CHALLENGES" TYPEFIES THE BOY PREDILECTION (TANNEN, 1995). THESE GAMES PRACTISED IN CHILDHOOD CONTINUE IN THE NEW PLAYGROUND CALLED THE WORKPLACE BUT THIS TIME THE GROUP MEMBERS ARE MIXED AND DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE HINTS AND CUES IN THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE LEADING TO COMMUNICATION AND OTHER ROADBLOCKS. MEN FOLLOW A HIERARCHICAL SOCIAL PROTOTYPE WHERE THEIR CONVERSATIONS WOULD LEAD THEM TO BE IN A "ONE UP OR ONE DOWN" POSITION VIS A VIS OTHERS. THEIR COMMUNICATION PATTERNS UNDERLINE THE NEED TO "PRESERVE INDEPENDENCE AND AVOID FAILURE". BUT FOR WOMEN THE WORLD IS A "NETWORK OF CONNECTIONS", AND THEIR COMMUNICATIVE EFFORTS STRIVE TO MAINTAIN CLOSE RELATIONSHIP AND ESCAPE ISOLATION. MANY WOMEN POSSESS CERTAIN ATTRIBUTES WHICH ARE DESCRIBED AS MASCULINE BY THEIR COLLEAGUES AND MANY MEN POSSESS ATTRIBUTES DESCRIBED FEMININE BY THEIR WORKMATES (HAHN AND LITWIN, 1995) OR SOME COULD EVEN BE A BLENDED TYPE (JOHNSON) BUT THE GENERAL OBSERVATIONS TILT MORE TOWARDS THE CICHLÉD OR CONVENTIONAL. IN THE WORKPLACE MEN COMMUNICATE TO SHARE INFORMATION BUT A WOMAN WOULD SHARE INFORMATION AND ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIP. ABILITY TO READ BODY LANGUAGE, PICK UP NONVERBAL CUES AND GOOD LISTENING SKILLS ARE FEMALE STRENGTHS WHEREAS PHYSICAL PRESENCE AND DIRECT INTERACTIONS ARE STRENGTHS OF MALES (MOHINDRA ET AL, 2013). THE DIFFERENT WORKPLACE VALUES INCLUDE MEN'S EMPHASIS ON ACHIEVEMENT AND SUCCESS, PAY AND BENEFITS, STATUS AND AUTHORITY WHEREAS WOMEN TRY TO CREATE CONGRUENCE, STABILITY, NURTURANCE, VISUALIZATION, TEAMWORK, COOPERATION AND FOCUS ON DETAILS. THE POWER AND POSITION ORIENTED MEN EXERCISING THE REPORT STYLE ARE MORE DIRECT, TAKE DECISIONS INDEPENDENTLY, SOLVE PROBLEMS WHEN SOMETHING IS WRONG AND THE RELATIONSHIP ORIENTED WOMEN EXERCISING RAPPORT STYLE ARE LESS DIRECT, TAKE DECISION IN COLLABORATIVE MODE AND PRAISE WHEN SOMETHING IS RIGHT (SHEELER, 2008). MEN AND WOMEN BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT SUCCESS AND FAILURE TOO. WHEN MEN TASTE SUCCESS THEY GIVE CREDIT TO THEIR ABILITIES WHEREAS WHEN WOMEN SUCCEED THEY GIVE THE CREDIT TO OTHERS. IN CASE OF FAILURE MEN BLAME OTHERS FOR IT BUT WOMEN BLAME THEMSELVES. THEIR LEADERSHIP STYLES TOO FALL IN TWO DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF TRANSACTIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL (ANDREWS). THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN THE GENDERS CAN BE FELT WHEN MEN "OFFER SOLUTIONS AND INVALIDATE FEELINGS WHILE WOMEN OFFER UNSOLICITED ADVICE AND DIRECTIONS". VARIANCE IS ALSO OBSERVED IN THEIR STYLE OF HANDLING STRESS. WHILE MEN WITHDRAW AND QUIETLY CONTEMPLATE ABOUT "WHAT'S BOtherING THEM", WOMEN "NEED TO TALK ABOUT WHAT'S BOtherING THEM". (GRAY, 2010). THE LIST OF DIFFERENCES CONTINUES TO THE EXTENT THAT GENDER DIVERSITY BECOMES ALMOST SYNONYMOUS WITH CROSS CULTURAL DIVERSITY. THE MULTIPLE REASONS CITED BY BIOLoGISTS AND SCIENTISTS NOTWITHSTANDING, THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS ATTEMPT TO CREDIT THE DISSIMILARITIES TO CLOSET SPECIFIC PARENTING AND CULTURAL CONDITIONING AND TO DEMONSTRATE THE PARALLELISM PRESENT IN INTERCULTURAL AND GENDER COMMUNICATION.

THE CULTURE CLOSET SPECIFIC PARENTING AND CULTURAL CONDITIONING

PARENTS HAVE A MAJOR ROLE TO PLAY IN CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY INSTILLING STEREOTYPICAL DO'S AND DON'TS WHICH GO A LONG WAY IN SHAPING THEIR CHILDREN'S COMMUNICATION PATTERNS, REACTIONS TO SITUATIONS AND BEHAVIOUR. EXERCISEING PARENTAL STEREOTYPES WITH THE COLOUR OF CLOTHES, ROOM DECOR AND TOYS (GUNS AND CARS VERSUS DOLLS) THEY DEMARCATE THE MASCULINE AND FEMININE PREFERENCES VERY EARLY IN LIFE. THOUGH "LOUD" AND "BOISTEROUS" COULD BE ACCEPTABLE AS TYPICAL BOY BEHAVIOUR, GIRLS OFTEN GET
admonished for being too noisy and unruly as cultured girls are not expected to talk and behave that way. Similarly, 'boastful and assertive behaviours are typically no-nos for girls, who are generally raised to be polite, modest and cooperative. On the flip side, bragging is tolerated - in fact, often encouraged - among boys, who are typically raised to be strong, confident, unemotional and competitive" (Glaser, 2007). The seeds of difference are sown and with a little manure and water added by teachers, peers and the environment these blossom and bloom into major communication differences most visible in the workplace. When little girls are encouraged to be "seen but not heard", their "communication skills as adults, tend to be more tentative than men's". Therefore, they are "interrupted more and are often viewed by men as invisible" (Glaser and Smalley, 1995). It has been repeatedly observed and also corroborated by similar research that men interrupt much more in meetings. The guns cannot be aimed at the men alone for this most common event as cultural and parental conditioning comes into play and women almost permit these interruptions. To pick up the threads and restart from where they had been abruptly interrupted becomes a difficult act for them as that would amount to committing the same sin-indecorous, undignified interruption. Apart from parents and teachers, the environment and culture conditioning has a strong influence on an individual. Teachers at times "fuel the stereotype that girls lack the so-called 'math and science gene'. " Peer pressure also adds to notions like "brainy girls can't be popular". In classroom discussions "boys dissent directly and noisily, skipping the protocol of hand raising to holler out answers right or wrong". Boys probably look for acknowledgement and credit for their opinions and hence "yell them out. Girls sit there until the bell rings with their hands up"(Glaser, 2007). Behaviour has roots in childhood and it surfaces at the wrong times like this might during business meetings. Another disturbing observation is that when a woman presents an idea in a meeting, it is ignored but when her male colleague rephrases and "presents the same point", it is "discussed, taken seriously, and ultimately attributed to him"(Galser and Smalley, 1995). This stealing of credit generates resentment which could be detrimental to employee and organizational health. Deborah Tannen opines that a "part of the reason may be that the woman presented her point in a stereotypically feminine way - she spoke briefly, phrased it as a question, spoke at a low volume, and a high pitch. If the man who followed her used a stereotypically masculine style of speaking-he spoke at length in a loud, declamatory voice-his message was the same, but the metamessage was different: 'This is important'"(Tannen, 1990). The lessons learnt for women from this unpleasant scenario could be speaking confidently,giving the signal of being self assured and maybe hitting the nail on the head by using shorter solution oriented sentences. The lesson for the loud males here could be to understand that phrasing the point as a question was her native cultural closet style where the question prevents the statement from appearing to be a diktat thereby sounding bossy and impolite both of which were never appreciated in childhood. This cultural baggage prevents women in being as direct and boastful as men. Boasting was always the male thing, modesty and humility were the words learnt by girls, blowing your horn was a sure way of being disliked. So while the men effortlessly sing the song of their skills and achievements, bask in the limelight so that they appear to be the best in the crowd and the best possible candidate for the upcoming promotion, the women feel uncomfortable taking credit, downplay their success, laugh off the compliments and avoid self-promotionin the fear of disapproval and unpopularity. They would prefer to work harder and presume that it would be noticed and hence they would get the promotion they rightly deserve. The other gender would misunderstand all this as a sign of weakness, lack of confidence without realising that it is not lack of self-assurance or capability, it is the social conditioning and cultural baggage which they carry to their office every morning that holds them back. Exceptions might be there but too few and far between. There are women who take part enthusiastically in one to one discussions but are rarely heard in meetings with a majority of men and there are women who exhibit male communication style at the workplace. But as they would not like to be seen or known as too aggressive, quite a few of them retract to their native cultural closet style.
THE CULTURE COATING: PARALLELISM IN CROSS CULTURAL AND GENDER COMMUNICATION

Communication experts and global writing stresses on the "direct approach" for organizing most of the business messages which states that you begin with a clear statement of the main idea, include necessary details (preferably in bulleted points) in the body and close cordially with a repetition of the main idea in the conclusion. The "indirect approach" would begin with a buffer or neutral statement in the introduction followed by reasons for request or regret in the body and the main idea. It would end on a positive note which aims at maintaining relationship (Bovee, Thill and Schatzman, 2007). The first approach is appropriate for clear, crisp instructions aimed at quick action and results meant for routine business communication and the second is mostly meant for conveying bad news messages positively and to soften the blow so that relationships continue and do not snap midway. Similarly cross cultural experts divided cultures into low context cultures which prefer direct styles of communication and high context which prefer indirect styles of communication. While Americans, being low context, would endorse direct approach for business writing and communicating, Chinese and Latin Americans, being high context may not. Likewise, within genders, the common observation reveals a preference for direct style in men which suits their status dynamic and the indirect in women with their relationship orientation. Hence while giving feedbacks women may buffer with praise in the beginning as direct criticism would put the receiver "in a one-down position". It might be her face saving ritual for the person. Similarly, positive words at the end would be exercising her relationship dynamic or preventing heartburn and resentment. Women tend to use more words in an effort to maintain cordial relations as they are more sensitive to the receiver's feelings. The man could interpret this as an unnecessary conversational maze deviating attention from the main issue as feelings have no place at the workstations. Similarly, women give feedback indirectly with diplomacy, hesitation and understanding towards the other person whereas men use lesser words and are straightforward while giving feedback expecting the receiver to not take it personally (Gray, 2004). Both are right, just that they are different. Once we understand the difference, we would realize that the intentions in both cases are good. Indirectness is what the culture coating did to the female gender and to the high context cultures. Both try to avoid confrontation. The low context Americans would not mind confrontation and debate but the high context Japanese may avoid open conflict. Similarly, men find it easier to work with people even after having heated work related arguments with them. Women find it tougher to forget and tend to harbour resentment. In low context cultures like U.S. and Germany, "people rely on verbal communication and less on circumstances and cues to convey meaning" and in high context cultures like South Korea or China, "people rely less on verbal communication and more on the context of nonverbal actions and environmental settings to convey meaning" (Bovee, Thill and Schatzman, 2007). Similarly, the members of the female gender closet "have a tendency to drop subtle suggestions or hint at what they want" in an effort to "preserve harmony and avoid conflict and confrontation" like high context cultures. This can intuitively be understood by other women but these strategies don't register with men" like they don't with low context cultures. Their method demands clear instruction and the message is simple: "If you don't tell a guy exactly what you mean or what you want-you're bound to be misunderstood and/or disappointed" (Glaser, 2007). The message for women is clear that if they don't tell their male counterparts about their achievements and silently work in the hope of actions speaking louder than words, fair play and due credit, chances are that they might miss the bus and then hold a grudge against the opponent for his so called misdeeds. Similarly men have to understand that saying sorry is not necessary an apology. It might just be a "ritualized means of expressing concern", to avoid confrontation or to placate others. This does not make the women "weaker, less confident, and literally more blameworthy than people who don't" (Tannen, 1995). Decision making also could be a different process for different cultures. Low
context cultures want to decide quickly and efficiently and so they agree on main points leaving the details to be worked out later by others. High context may feel ignoring details would lead to mistakes and prefer 'lengthy decision making, concentrating on every detail'. Likewise in the gender context, men might behave like the former and women might not delegate and complete the process including the details themselves like the latter. Both are acceptable styles in their own way and need to be respected. Interestingly, Alan Wolfe writes in his review article on *She Just Doesn't Understand: Deborah Tannen (and linguists, and feminists, and Bill Clinton) and the cult of consenseus*, that one of the things he learnt from Deborah Tannen is "that meaning depends on context, on the local circumstances in which speech takes place" (Wolfe, 1994). This emphasises the importance of local situations or cultural context and also sounds quite like the definition of a high context culture. If we agree with Alan Wolfe on this, we could say that Deborah probably talks about the way familiar or natural to her own gender or cultural closet which also runs parallel to high context culture description. Understanding this diversity equivalence and the cultural perspective in gender communication could lead to tolerance towards differences. Therefore, the solution that could work both for intercultural and gender harmony as well as for effectiveness at the workplace lies in the acceptance of the 'other' with his or her differences. The remedies prescribed to overcome cross cultural issues at workplace like "acknowledging distinctions" which means recognizing the disparity between the other person's culture and your own and cultural pluralism which refers to "acceptance of multiple cultures on their own terms" (Bovee, Thill and Chaterjee, 2011) would work perfectly for the little culture closets called gender.

**FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

As gender based communication styles of the employees can create, interpret and influence workplace conflict, it may produce dissimilar difficulties for employees than same-sex conflict which could be theoretically studied or empirically showcased to extend and elaborate on the necessity of understanding and tackling the differences with the same tolerance and patience which is expected while dealing with cross cultural communication. This paper has tried to correlate the genders with the two broad categorizations of the cultures of the world, that is, the low context and high context cultures and the endeavour has been to bring out the correspondence of the female communication style with the high context and the male communication style with the low context cultures. Future research could attempt cross gender similarities in communication patterns between high context Italian, Chinese or Japanese men with low context American and German women.

**CONCLUSION**

Different communication styles in mixed-gender groups tend to restrict the fruitfulness of discussion and hamper the productivity of the group. Moreover, small differences, if left unattended, might have the potential of becoming major points of discord leading to hindered outputs. The fundamental confrontational and result-oriented male approach and the relationship oriented female style often lead to gender friction which can be damaging at the workplace. The adversarial male style earns respect from their own gender, the collaborative prompts rapport and the combination of both could either be an ideal blend or a gnawing gulf. As organizations become global and women an equal partner in all work processes, managers need to become aware of the differences and more tolerant towards a dissimilar style. Further, with only clones in a group, limited results can be expected. If cross-cultural communication requires training, understanding and cultural pluralism, gender diversity too demands attention. Appreciating the differences of the culture closets called gender and scratching the outer casing or culture coating of social conditioning will reveal related needs of acknowledgement, appreciation and due credit. The 'Marsian' might demand it, the
'Venusian' might downplay it. If the expectation of the two genders to behave similarly can be curbed, and the understanding that different is not bad or inferior can be augmented, cross cultural and gender differences could be, to a large extent, taken care of.

REFERENCES

13. Wolfe, A. (1994) She just doesn't understand: Deborah Tannen (and linguists, and feminists, and Bill Clinton) and the cult of consensus. New Republic. 211 (24), p26-34.