The Effects of Gender and Status in Interactional Context*

Steven M. Nelson
Jeff A. Larson
Christine Sheikh
Rachel Starks

University of Arizona

Keywords: gender, status, interaction

Submitted to the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 2006.

* Contact the first author at Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, Social Sciences Bldg., Rm. 400, Tucson, AZ, 85721. E-mail: smnelson@u.arizona.edu.
Abstract:

We take up the issue of gendered behavior in contexts of same- and mixed-sex contexts and test hypotheses derived from four major theoretical perspectives culled from the social psychology literature: socialization, culture, power and structure, and process. The analysis is an experiment using a vignette-style instrument that places subjects in a fictional student club and asks them to write to a fellow member. We manipulate the position of the writer (club president/club member) and the sex of the recipient. The dependent variable is the quantity of *rule-oriented language* subjects use, typically thought to be masculine, in comparison with *relationally-oriented language*, typically feminine. Our results show that gender and social position have little measurable impact on the type of language used, but the sex of the recipient does. In particular, males use significantly more rule-oriented language when addressing females than when they address other men. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and suggesting directions for future research.
The Effects of Gender and Status in Interactional Context

It has often been reported that men and women have characteristic interaction patterns and habits. Women apparently, on average, use more tentative, unassertive, or deferential speech (Johnson, Funk & Warner 1998; Lakoff 1975) and are more likely than men to express agreement or ask for another’s opinion (Eakins & Eakins 1978). Men interrupt more, command more, threaten more, and boast more (Maltz and Borker 1982). Overall, seemingly, men focus on instrumental concerns, while women are more attuned to the socioemotional (Parsons & Bales 1955).

Others studies, however, have found little or no sex difference in interaction behavior. Hall & Veccia (1992) examined Henley’s (1977) belief that men touch women more than vice versa, but found little support for it, not even when men were higher status. Merry (1990) noted that men and women each use rule-oriented and relationally-oriented language, and shifted between them easily. Aries (1996) reviewed the literature on interaction and concluded that the research largely reveals great similarities rather than differences.

The issue is an important one. Part of the imbalance in power that exists between men and women as a whole results from such repeated imbalanced interactions. Some of the most commonly noted differences between the speech and interaction of men and women are thought to be explanations or examples of micro-level male dominance. For example, men and women seem to speak differently in the context of the legal system: women fail to use rule-oriented language as often as men, choosing instead to stress the relational implications and emotional context of their legal dispute. Conley & O’Barr
(1998) tell us that rule language is the language of power, and thus is powerful when used. Relational language, which women more often use, is correspondingly weak. The legal system respects rule-oriented accounts and dismisses relationally-oriented accounts. Since women typically use relationally oriented perspectives, they are disadvantaged and frustrated by the system.

We present here a vignette experiment that tests predictions about the use of rule-oriented and relationally-oriented language drawn from several major perspectives on the issues of gender, status and interaction context. We find that the behavior is influenced more by the gender of the object of the directed behavior than by either the gender of the actor or the status role he or she takes on.

Theoretical Background

Socialization

In examining and explaining these apparent differences in interaction and communication habits, researchers have approached the issue from many perspectives. Some have seen the matter as an expression of individualistic personalities, based on differential nature or differential socialization. Parsons & Bales (1955) believed that women were taught as children to attend to socioemotional needs of others, while men were engaged in more task-specific behaviors. Tannen (1990; 1994a; 1994b) says that men’s goal in interaction is typically to augment status to preserve their self identities through success; women’s is to augment and preserve interdependence so as to protect their self-concepts by avoiding isolation. Conley and O’Barr (1998) claim that primary
socialization predisposes women to relationally-oriented discourse, and men to rule-oriented discourse (though both sexes do use both).

Carol Gilligan (1982) famously suggested that girls, by virtue of their typical developmental paths, were more concerned than boys about emotional connection and maintaining relationships. Boys on the other hand, she surmised, were more concerned with achievement and abstract rules. Though Gilligan did not actually interview men, she noted these differences in adolescents, and she imputed the same focal concerns to adults of each gender. If women are forced by (patriarchal) societies to sublimate these natural concerns (their ‘voice’), says Gilligan, they struggle with the contradiction, and they are particularly vulnerable to stress, depression and other health issues. Other researchers have since had some difficulty in demonstrating Gilligan’s claim of loss of female voice, however. Gratch, et al. (1995) and Harter, et al. (1998), in different contexts, both find no expression of gender differences in “voice” at all. Smolak and Munstertieger (2002) find that loss of voice affects both men and women roughly equivalently.

**Socialization Hypothesis:** Men, overall and in all interaction contexts, will use more rule-oriented language than women. Women will use more relationally-oriented language than men.

**Culture**

Culture can similarly affect interaction through early socialization. Eleanor Maccoby (1998) sees the development of gendered proclivities in early same-sex interaction. Boys develop a culture of individualistic dominance competition, while girls develop a culture of support and interdependence. When they age, they continue these opposing
habits and expectations, making intersex interaction fraught with confusion, frustration, and difficulty. Maltz and Borker (1982) suggest early cultural socialization of their respective scripts, schemas, and expectations creates gendered differences in use of language type.

**Culture Hypothesis:** People in all-male groups will use more rule-oriented language than others, and those in all-female groups will use more relationally-oriented language than others.

**Power and Structure**

Both these socialization and culture perspectives share a set of predictions about male and female behavior and tend minimize the importance of sociological factors, like context, structure, and group processes. A number of studies have called into question their claims of characteristic gendered behavior, and suggested that these apparent gender differences are really power or status differences in disguise. Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz (1985), for example, found that interruption in conversation was a means of maintaining and expressing power. They studied both heterosexual and homosexual couples and found power to be more important than gender in predicting interruptions. Power imbalance in the couples predicted more interruptions.

Gender differences in this view, are likely to occur only when someone (typically, a man) has a power or status advantage – i.e., interruption behavior and rule-oriented behavior is in actuality induced by the context (Ridgeway & Diekema 1992). Smith-Lovin & Brody (1989), for example, found that gender did not predict interruption behavior well, but that men interrupted more when they were talking with women than with other men.
Drass (1986) found that gender identity (masculinity= bold, strong, hard, assertive, dominant, competitive, ambitious) predicted interruption rate more than sex in same-sex groups, but Fleischer & Chertkhoff (1986) noted this was less the case in mixed groups. We expect that cross-sex interactions will regularly display a power or status imbalance, but that the existence of a legitimating authority can put women in the high-status or high-power role, at which time, they, too, will behave in powerful ways. (Smith-Lovin & Robinson 1992)

Using a mock small claims court context, Morrill, et al. (1998) tested the effects of network ties on the correlation Conley & O’Barr (1998) reported between sex and relational language. They manipulated the strength of their subjects’ ties to their fellow disputants, using theoretical ideas from Granovetter (1973). They demonstrated that the closer one is emotionally to the other disputant, the less rule-oriented (powerful) is the language one uses. In this way, context, is again, more important than gender itself, but since women do typically have stronger ties, they also typically express weaker language.

**Power & Structure Hypothesis:** People in formal authority positions will use more rule-oriented language than those in formal positions.

**Process and Context**

A great deal of work on gender in interaction has been done in the arena of group process, particularly as a part of the merged Expectation States and Status Characteristics Theory research agendas. This program examines the interactions of small, task-oriented groups and theorizes the development of status hierarchies from the seeds of initial
behaviors, known skills, and visible personal characteristics, like gender. (Berger, et al. 1977). From this perspective, much of what is considered female behavior is explained by the constraints of their typically low status positions and their understandable attempts to raise that position. Johnson (1993), however, notes that having a formal status position has a greater influence on behavior than diffuse status characteristics like gender, although, the gender makeup of the group can alter this effect. This finding suggests a process of role adaptation like that described by Kanter (1977), where women act in recognizably female ways not because of their gender per se, but because of the positions in organizations they are asked to fill. Further research supports this explanation of gendered behavior. Van Engen, van der Leeden, and Willemsen (2001), for example, detected no difference in leadership style of men and women given similar formal positions within a department store.

Johnson has since examined the effects of other outside contexts on task behavior. Johnson, Warner & Funk (1996) discussed Ridgeway & Diekema’s (1992) prediction that where there is a patriarchical structure, all-female groups will act more socioemotionally because powerful behavior for women would be less usual in their experience; whereas female groups in female power structures will act more instrumentally. Their findings, contrary to predictions, were that the college context (all female structure or male-dominated) didn’t matter. Johnson, Funk & Warner (1998) revisited this question, but examined the style of speech – directive or tentative (supportive). They find that women in all-female groups were in fact using more tentative speech and supportive speech than men in all-male groups. There was an effect of the context, but it was inconsistent. Co-ed
women are more tentative and less supportive of their (all-female) groups than those at all-
female schools.

We take up this issue of gender and its context, and we present an experimental study testing the predictions of each of these theoretical perspectives as to gendered interaction in varying status roles and in varying interactional contexts.

*Process Hypothesis:* Males will use more rule-oriented language in interaction with females, and females will use more relationally-oriented language in interaction with males.

**Data and Methods**

To test our hypotheses about the use of rule- and relationally-oriented discourse we developed an experimental research design closely modeled on the work of Morrill and colleagues (1998), which itself builds on Conley and O’Barr (1998). The subjects in this study were recruited from undergraduate social science courses and told that they would be participating in a study of “e-mail communication.” The instrument uses a vignette that asks subjects to imagine that they are members of a fictional student organization and to draft an e-mail to a fellow member who is not complying with the organization’s rules. We manipulated 1) the position of subject and 2) the sex of the e-mail recipient, making this a 2 x 2 factorial design. Sixty-two subjects were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: formal authority figures speaking to a male, formal authority figures speaking to a female, informal rank-and-file figures speaking to a male, and informal rank-and-file figures speaking to a female. Each subject received a packet that included instructions, a vignette, and a series of questions to test the manipulations and check the
randomness of group assignment. They returned to us the questionnaire and draft e-mail which we then parsed into rule- and relationally-oriented words and phrases. Some portions of the responses did not clearly fit into either category. These we ignored. The dependent variable, \textit{quantity of rule-oriented words}, is measured as the percent of rule-oriented words used in the response.

\textit{Random Assignment.} To insure that participants were randomly assigned to group we included several basic demographic items in the questionnaire. Descriptives for all four groups are presented in Table 1. Across sex, age, year in school, race, parents’ income, experience as a club officer, employment status, and grade point average no significant differences between the groups emerge. Only two differences approach significance: those in the formal authority condition are slightly older and less likely to be white. Because the differences are so minimal we do not believe that they significantly influence our findings, but the reader is encouraged to keep them in mind when interpreting the results.

\textit{Experimental Manipulation.} We also included several items designed to test the experimental manipulation of social position of the writer. After drafting their letter, subjects indicated on a 7-point differential scale how 1) official/unofficial and 2) formal/informal their role was in writing the letter. Comparing the formal authority group (i.e., “presidents”) and the informal rank-and-file group (“club members”), mean differences were in the expected direction and statistically significant (p < .05) for both the “official” (4.6 vs. 3.4) and “formal” (3.7 vs. 2.8) designations. That is, presidents perceived themselves to be both more official and more formal than rank-and-file club members. This gives us confidence that the manipulation of writer’s position was successful. The
second manipulation, sex of the e-mail recipient, was much more apparent as half of the subjects wrote an e-mail to “John” and the other half wrote to “Sarah.” When these names were included in the salutations and bodies of their responses it was obvious that this manipulation was indeed salient and effective.

Vignettes. We wrote four vignettes, differing only minimally. The text of the vignettes is presented here with the manipulations indicated in brackets and underlined:

You are a [member/president] of a university-sponsored club, called the “Shovel and Ladle Club”. It is a service organization founded “to provide service and aid to the local community.” It also hosts social events for its members so that they can get to know each other better. The rules of the club state that, in order for someone to remain a member, it is necessary that they attend at least 6 service activities over the course of a school year.

It is now late March, and a member of the organization (and a friend of yours), [John/Sarah], has attended 5 social events this year, but no service events. [At a recent meeting of the executive board, you were/You were recently contacted by a member of the executive board and] asked to write an email to [John/Sarah], warning [him/her] of the possibility that [he/she] may be removed from the club if [he/she] does not begin attending service events. Usually the secretary would write such a letter, but because you are [John’s/Sarah’s] friend, it was decided that you should email [him/her].
Reading Comprehension. In their packets subjects were given a blank page on which to write an “e-mail.” Responses typically were one page or less and were completed within 15-20 minutes. Next they responded to the random assignment and manipulation questions (discussed above) as well as four reading comprehension items. Respondents could answer true, false, or don’t know to the following reading comprehension items: 1) You are the president of your club; 2) [John/Sarah] is your friend; 3) Members of the club are required to attend 6 service events; 4) [John/Sarah] attends service events regularly. Greater than 95% of respondents answered correctly on questions 2-4, but question 1 proved to be more difficult. 10 of the 62 subjects incorrectly identified their position in the study (i.e., presidents thought they were members [8] or members thought they were presidents [2]). This raises important concerns that this manipulation did not work. Consequently, we omit these 10 cases in all analyses that include the writer’s position.

Coding Rule- and Relationally Oriented Discourse. We are indebted to Morrill et al. (1998) for constructing a detailed coding mechanism that we have adapted here. We have followed their lead in identifying “units” – words or phrases – within the responses that constitute “the smallest piece of information that can stand alone as an independent expression of a rule or relational orientation” (650). Next we took up the fourteen categories they developed for use in a courtroom context and modified them as we saw appropriate for our purposes. We ended up with fifteen categories (see Table 2), some of which are only slightly reworded from the original and others that are wholly new. For instance, we found several instances of students using “emoticons” in their responses –
symbols intended to convey emotion (e.g., a smiley face) – that would not have turned up
in the courtroom context but which clearly represent a relational discourse and are
therefore worth coding.

The coding procedure began by identifying units of text that represented either
rule-oriented language, relationally-oriented language, or neither. For the purposes of this
analysis we discarded those portions that were neither rule- nor relationally-oriented. The
responses were divided among four coders, with each response being coded by two people.
When two coders disagreed about how to code a unit, all four of us came to an agreement
about how best to code it. Thus, intercoder reliability checks were not computed and,
instead, we found complete agreement on all coding decisions. Once everything was coded
we counted the number of rule-oriented words relative to the sum of all rule- and
relationally-oriented words (the sum of which ranged from 13 words to 167). This is our
dependent variable, the percent of rule-oriented words used by a subject.

Results

On the whole, our subjects used rule- and relationally-oriented discourse in roughly
equal parts (mean=.543, s.d.=.196). Some used rule-oriented language less than one-fifth of
the time (min.=0.17) while others used it exclusively (max.=1.0). We begin by examining
the first-order effects of sex, position of the writer, and sex of the recipient.

Sex. First we compared the mean percent of rule-oriented words used by male and
female subjects. Males averaged 55.5% (s.d.=.206) compared to females’ 53.7% (s.d.=.193).
This is not a statistically significant difference (d.f.=60, t=0.34). Contrary to the
socialization hypothesis, the sex of the writer has no affect on the use of rule- or relationally-oriented discourse.

**Writer’s Position.** Next we ask whether being the president of the organization influences one’s language differently than it does for a rank-and-file members. Again the effect is not significant.¹ Those in the formal authority position averaged 58.3% compared to informal club members’ 49.9% (d.f.=60, t=-1.54).²

**Sex of Recipient.** The last first-order correlation that we tested was between rule/relational language and the sex of the recipient of the e-mail. Here we find the strongest effect yet. Respondents tend to use more rule-oriented language when they address women (58.9%) in comparison to when they address men (49.4%), a difference that approaches statistical significance (p=.057). This stands in stark contrast to the expectations of the cultural perspective which predicts just the opposite, that men invite more rule-oriented discourse than do women.

---

¹ The 10 cases for which the manipulation of this variable did not appear to work are excluded from this calculation. N=52.

² In exploratory analysis not presented here we examined the 10 cases that were mistaken about their position in the organization (president or club member). Because we do know the position they believe they held, we reasoned that this subjective position might influence their use of rule- and relationally-oriented language in predictable ways. We found some confirmation of this hunch in our manipulation check variables. Among these 10 cases, those who (mistakenly) thought they were club presidents reported being much more “official” and “formal” than those who thought they were club members. Next we created a variable for the subjective position of the writer and compared the formal and informal groups. What we find is that the difference borders on statistical significance at the p < .10 level (d.f.=60, t=-1.65). We suspect that with more cases this effect might appear more robust.
We explore this effect further to see if women address women differently than do men, and whether men address men differently than do women. The results are depicted in Figure 1. As we have already seen both men and women address women more often in a rule-oriented voice. However, this effect appears to be much stronger for men than for women, i.e., in comparison to women, men are more rule-oriented when talking to women and more relationally-oriented when talking to other men. The slope of the line for female subjects is not statistically distinguishable from zero (d.f.=39, t=-0.95), whereas the slope for male subjects borders on significance (p=.055). Thus, the effect of sex of the recipient is really due to the adjustments that males make when they engage in same- and mixed-sex interactions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our theoretically-derived hypotheses did not fair well. The socialization hypothesis, that men and women are socialized into behavior personalities and habits is disconfirmed by our data. Men and women in these data both used rule-oriented and relationally-oriented language with nearly the same frequency. The culture hypotheses faired poorly as well. If gendered culture had been active in inducing gendered behavior, we would have expected same-gender dyads to most illustrate this cultural proclivity. Instead, female-female dyads, overall, used more rule-oriented language than either female-male or male-male dyads.

The structural hypothesis suggested that the formal role taken on would most dominate the behaviors of subjects of either sex. We found the formal position to have a
small, marginally significant effect on the interaction in the expected direction: those writing as club presidents used slightly more rule-oriented language than those writing as club-members.

The more dramatic findings, however, came in the area of interaction context: specifically, the object of the interaction had the largest effect on the behavior of the subjects. In short, people used more rule-oriented language when writing to a female friend than when writing to a male friend, irrespective of their formal position. Although this relationship was apparent for both male and female subjects, it was only statistically significant for males. That is, men dramatically adjust their language depending on the sex of the person they are addressing.

We conclude that there is an interaction between the processual effects described in the expectation states literature and the context of the interaction. Though the power and structure (status position) theoretical viewpoint – that gendered behavior can be eliminated by formal status positions, though most likely the case in publicly witnessed groups – may not be in effect in private dyads.
Table 1. Assessment of the random assignment.

<p>|                               | Sex of Recipient | Position of Writer |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.633</td>
<td>0.688</td>
<td>0.750</td>
<td>0.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18.800</td>
<td>19.000</td>
<td>18.688</td>
<td>19.133*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in School</td>
<td>1.333</td>
<td>1.438</td>
<td>1.313</td>
<td>1.467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (minority/white)</td>
<td>1.600</td>
<td>1.719</td>
<td>1.969</td>
<td>1.333*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R was a Club Officer (never/once/more)</td>
<td>1.800</td>
<td>1.844</td>
<td>1.875</td>
<td>1.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed (no/yes)</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.281</td>
<td>0.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.P.A.</td>
<td>2.933</td>
<td>2.548</td>
<td>2.935</td>
<td>2.533</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Difference is significant at the p < .10 level.
Table 2. Coding categories and examples of rule- and relationally-oriented discourse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Type and Coding Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rule-oriented discourse</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (1) References to primary factors of the dispute | “you have not made any service events this year”  
“you have very little time to attend those six events”  
“the semester is almost over and...”  
“So far, you have attended the social events...” |
| (2) References to practical rules, requirements, contracts, agreements, or specific responsibilities | “You are to attend 6 events”  
“one of the goals of the club is to be of service to the community” |
| (3) Reference to moral authority or social contract | “This is for a good cause.”  
“But a rule is a rule” |
| (4) References to instrumental consequences | “…to maintain your membership in the Shovel and Ladle Club”  
“the only way to get scholarships is through service”  
“...so you don’t get kicked out”  
“that you will be deactivated from the Shovel and Ladle Club” |
| (5) Instrumental remedies suggested | “you have to call and set up times when you’re free to do some form of service.”  
“either begin going to service activities or leave the club completely” |
| (6) Formal labels for people | “President, Shovel & Ladle”  
“a member of the executive board...”  
“the secretary...” |
| (7) Language showing writer’s affiliation with club | “The executive board and me...”  
“[we] value you as a member” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Type and Coding Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationally-oriented discourse</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (1) References to friendship or emotional closeness or psychological motivations of writer | “I really hope that you plan on coming back next year”  
“I’m sorry I had to be the one to bring this to your attention”  
“Thank you for understanding the situation”  
“I don’t normally write to you over email”  
“Because I enjoy your participation in these events…”  
“...and we have so much fun at the club”  
“But I wanted to let you know…” |
| (2) References to possible or real personal/emotional consequences of the dispute | “It would be a personal loss to me to lose a friend from this club…”  
“I do not want this to jeopardize our friendship” |
| (3) References to psychological motivations of reader’s actions or inaction; excuses | “Sometimes we get very busy with various projects, school work, and social commitments…”  
“I know it’s sometimes hard to make it to all the functions…”  
“Any particular reason why?” |
| (4) Chit-chat and personalized patter | “Hey, Johnny, how’s it going?”  
“Hi.”  
“Always diggin’ in the dirt”  
“Maybe we can go get coffee this week or something”  
“Thank you for understanding the situation” |
| (5) Language showing writer’s affiliation with the reader or disaffiliation with the club | “The Shovel & Ladle Club asked me to talk to you”  
“[Let’s] attend the rest of the service events”  
“[They] told me…” |
| (6) Encouragement, offers of help, and other relational remedies suggested | “I hope to see you there”  
“You better start showing up…”  
“If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to call me”  
“Please let me know if you need any ideas.” |
| (7) References to reader’s value to the club | “We value you as a member”  
“We appreciate you attendance at the social events” |
| (8) Emoticons and pictures | “: )”  
“❤️” |
Figure 1. Comparison of rule- and relationally-oriented discourse by sex of the writer and sex of the recipient.
Works Cited


Tannen, Deborah. 1994. Talking from 9 to 5: how women’s and men’s conversational styles affect who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done at work. New York: W. Morrow.
