Interpersonal Communication

THE WHOLE STORY

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Culture and Gender

What is culture?

How does culture influence interpersonal communication?

In what ways is interpersonal communication affected by sex and gender?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

1 Understanding Culture and Communication
2 How Culture Affects Communication
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Hyun and Myong-sik

Hyun was raised in South Korea, but she attended law school in San Francisco. After she graduated she accepted a position with a firm in Chicago. During her first month on the job, several of Hyun’s colleagues noticed that she would bow whenever she spoke to Myong-sik, a male Korean partner assigned to be her mentor. Hyun’s colleagues interpreted this behavior as a sign of sexism, and they considered it unfair that Hyun’s culture forced her to bow to Myong-sik just because he is a man. “I would never bow to a man!” one of her female colleagues insisted. In response to those criticisms, Hyun explained to her colleagues that her behavior was, indeed, guided by her cultural beliefs. She didn't bow to Myong-sik because he is a man, however. Rather, she bowed to him because he is an elder and her superior. In fact, she would have behaved the same way had Myong-sik been female. Hyun’s colleagues then realized they had misinterpreted her behavior as a gender issue, when all along it was a sign of respect for Myong-sik’s age and seniority.

Culture and gender are subtle but powerful influences on our behavior. Each acts as a lens, shaping and coloring how we interpret our communication with others. For instance, Hyun and Myong-sik both perceived Hyun’s behavior as perfectly appropriate, even desirable, because it conformed to their cultural expectations for the proper interaction of superiors and subordinates. Hyun’s U.S. American colleagues believed that her behavior was related to Myong-sik’s sex instead of his status, and because her behavior seemed to violate their North American cultural views about male-female equality, they interpreted Hyun’s behavior negatively.

As lenses, culture and gender are always with us, no matter where we are or what we’re doing. Moreover, as we have just seen, they affect not only how we communicate but also how we interpret and respond to other people’s behaviors. Other lenses, such as ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status, also influence some aspects of communication. However, gender and culture shape our behaviors and interpretations in so many ways that it’s worth taking a detailed look at each.

In this chapter, we’ll look at some of the ways that culture and gender affect us as communicators. Specifically, we’ll learn:
What culture is and where our cultural ideas come from
How cultures compare with one another and how communication behavior varies from society to society
What the various components of gender are
How gender influences communication behavior

Understanding Culture and Communication

Our cultural traditions and beliefs can influence how we make sense of communication behavior even without our realizing it. Had Hyun’s colleagues been more familiar with the traditions of South Korean culture, for instance, they might have interpreted her communication behaviors with Myong-sik differently, having understood that subordinates often bow to superiors regardless of their sex. In other words, they may have realized how her communication was affected by her culture. But wait—wasn’t their own behavior affected by their culture too? Didn’t they express concern about Hyun’s behavior only because they thought it conflicted with their cultural values of gender equality? The answer to both questions probably is yes. Each of us is affected by the culture in which we were raised, and we tend to notice other cultures only when they differ from ours. In many people’s minds, culture—like an accent—is something that only other people have. Let’s begin by understanding in what sense we all have cultural traits and biases.

What Is Culture?

People use the term “culture” to mean all sorts of things. Sometimes we connect it to a place, as in “French culture” or “New York culture.” Other times we use it to refer to an ethnic or religious group, as in “African American culture” or “Jewish culture.” Finally, we also speak of “deaf culture” or “the culture of the rich.” What makes a culture?

For our purposes, we will define culture as the learned, shared symbols, language, values, and norms that distinguish one group of people from another. This definition tells us that culture isn’t a property of countries or ethnicities or economic classes; rather, it’s a property of people. Each of us identifies with one or more groups of people who share language, values and beliefs, and traditions and customs. We’ll refer to those shared symbols, language, values, and norms as cultures, and we’ll refer to the groups of people who share them as societies.

A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.
—Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948)
Leader of Indian Independence Movement

Culture consists of a group’s shared symbols, language, values, and norms. One prominent cultural norm in The Netherlands, for instance, is that many of its urban residents ride bicycles to get around, instead of driving cars.
Distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups. Researchers use the term in-groups to refer to groups that we identify with and out-groups to describe groups we see as different from ourselves. If you grew up in the U.S. South, for example, you would probably see other southerners as part of your in-group, whereas someone from the Northwest would not. Similarly, when you are traveling in foreign countries, the residents may perceive you as an out-group member if you look or sound different from them, or if you behave differently.

For some people, being perceived as different can be an exciting or intriguing experience, particularly if they don’t frequently “stand out” in their regular environments. For others, however, this experience can be stress inducing. For example, research shows that immigrants often experience abnormally high levels of stress during their first year in their new homeland. This stress can harm their health by contributing to illnesses such as high blood pressure, depression, and heart disease.

Some researchers point out that our ability to distinguish between people who are similar to and different from ourselves probably helped our ancestors survive by encouraging them to associate with people whose goals and priorities were similar to their own. That tendency endures today, and research shows that many people exhibit strong preferences for individuals and groups they perceive to be similar to themselves. In other words, people are often more suspicious and less trusting of others whose ethnicities, nationalities, or cultural backgrounds are different from their own. This tendency can make it particularly discomforting to live or work someplace where you are considered a minority. The account of Muslim students studying in the United States illustrates this point (see “Dark Side” box, p. 43).

The in-group/out-group distinction is a major reason why so many nations struggle with the issue of immigration. Some countries, including Sweden and the United States, have relatively lenient policies that allow many applicants for immigration to move to those countries and eventually to become citizens. Other nations have much stricter policies about whom they will accept as immigrants or even permanent residents. Denmark, for instance, significantly toughened its immigration policies in 2001, making it harder for foreign-born people to immigrate or become citizens.

How best to manage immigration—and the population of immigrants living in the country illegally—is currently a controversial issue in the United States. These examples all illustrate the complex and sometimes contentious relationship between in-groups, such as current citizens or residents of a country, and out-groups, such as those who wish to move to that country.

Acquiring a culture. How do we acquire a culture? Because cultures and societies vary so much around the world, it might seem that we inherit our culture genetically, the same way we inherit our eye color; but that isn’t the case at all. Culture is learned. Your culture is not necessarily related to or based on your ethnicity, your sex, or any of your other physical attributes. Rather, it is determined by who raised you and
what their symbols, language, values, and norms were. Researchers call this process “enculturation.”

For instance, a Cambodian citizen raised in the United States will likely adopt the language and practices common to where she was brought up. Her ethnicity and citizenship are Cambodian, but her culture is the U.S. American culture. Likewise,
someone born in New Zealand but raised in Nigeria may adopt the Nigerian culture as his own, even if he is Caucasian. The point is that we acquire our culture by learning the traditions, values, and language of the people by whom we are raised.

**The Components of Culture**

Cultures and societies vary enormously. Imagine a group consisting of people raised in Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Iceland, Namibia, Paraguay, Israel, and the U.S. Southwest. Not only would they differ in their native languages, but they most likely would also adhere to different religious beliefs and political viewpoints, enjoy different sports, prefer different foods, wear different clothes, and have different ideas about education, marriage, money, and sexuality. Indeed, you might have a harder time identifying their similarities than their differences: That's how powerful an influence culture can be.

Going further, as we'll see later, values, beliefs, and preferences often vary even among different regions of the same country. For example, native Hawaiians, native Texans, and native New Yorkers might vary considerably in their customs and values, even though they were all raised in the United States.

No matter what their differences, though, cultures have some common components, as our definition of culture made clear. These components include symbols, language, values, and norms. In this section we take a closer look at each one.

**Symbols.** As we saw in Chapter 1, a symbol is something that represents an idea. Words are symbols, and every culture has its own symbols that represent ideas that are vital to that culture. For example, when someone says that something is “as American as baseball and apple pie,” he or she is using baseball and apple pie as symbols of U.S. American life. The U.S. flag, the bald eagle, and “The Star-Spangled Banner” are also symbols of the United States. Each society makes use of symbols that carry particular meanings for its members. For instance, the Chinese national anthem, “Yiyongjun Jinxingqu” (“March of the Volunteers”), serves as a symbol of Chinese culture. Similarly, “Die Stem van Suid-Afrika” (“The Call of South Africa”), the national anthem of South Africa, symbolizes South African culture.

**Language.** Researchers believe there are about 6,800 languages used in the world today. (And, according to the New York State Comptroller’s Office, more languages are spoken in Queens, New York, than in any other city in the world: 138 at last count.) Language allows for written and spoken communication, and it also ensures that cultures and cultural ideas are passed from one generation to the next. Today, Chinese, English, and Spanish—in that order—are the three most commonly spoken languages in the world. Unfortunately, many other languages are in danger of extinction. In fact, researchers believe that at least 10% of the world’s languages are spoken by fewer than 100 people each. We’ll learn more about the use of language in Chapter 5.

**Values.** A culture’s values are the standards it uses to judge how good, desirable, or beautiful something is. In short, they’re our ideas about what ought to be. For instance, sociological research indicates that U.S. American culture values things such as equal opportunity, material comfort, practicality and efficiency, achievement, de-
mocracy, free enterprise, and individual choice. When you travel to other countries, you might find that their cultural values are dramatically different from yours.

Norms. Finally, norms are rules or expectations that guide people’s behavior in a culture. As an example, consider the norms for greeting people. In North American countries people shake hands and say “Nice to meet you.” In other cultures it’s normal to hug, kiss on both cheeks, or even kiss on the lips. Cultures also vary in their norms for politeness. Therefore a behavior that would be considered very polite in one culture may be frowned upon in another.

Cultures and Co-Cultures

When you think about culture as shared language, beliefs, and customs, it may seem as though you belong to many different cultures at once. If you grew up in the United States, for example, then you likely feel a part of the U.S. American culture. At the same time, if you’re really into computers, or music, or skateboarding, you may notice that the people who share those interests appear to have their own ways of speaking and acting. Or perhaps you notice that people in your generation have different values and customs than people who are older than you—or that different ethnic or religious groups at your school seem to have their own traditions and beliefs. Does each of these groups have a culture of its own? In a manner of speaking, the answer is yes.

What are co-cultures? Within many “large” cultures, such as the Italian, Vietnamese, or U.S. American cultures, are a host of “smaller” cultural groups that researchers call co-cultures. Co-cultures are groups of people who share values, customs, and norms related to mutual interests or characteristics besides their national citizenship. Your co-culture isn’t based on the country you were born in or the national society in which you were raised. Instead, it is composed of smaller groups of people with whom you identify.

The bases of co-cultures. Some co-cultures are based on shared activities or beliefs. If you’re into fly-fishing, organic gardening, or political activism, for example, then there are co-cultures for those interests. Similarly, Buddhists have beliefs and traditions that distinguish them from Baptists, regardless of where they grew up.

Some co-cultures are based on differences in mental and physical abilities. If you’re deaf, for instance, you’ve probably noticed that many deaf populations have certain values and customs that differ from those of hearing populations. Even if they don’t share the same language, political positions, or religious beliefs, people who are deaf often share social customs that are distinctive.
For instance, whereas many people would be uncomfortable having constant eye contact with another person while talking, deaf people frequently maintain steady mutual gaze while communicating through sign language. In addition, they often make it a point to notify others in the group if they are leaving the room, even if just for a few moments. Because they cannot hear one another call out from another room, this practice helps avoid frantic searches for the person who has left. Among hearing people, however, it would be considered annoying at the very least to announce your every departure. Sharing these and other customs, then, helps deaf people interact with one another as members of a shared co-culture.12

The deaf co-culture also places strong emphasis on the distinction between in-group and out-group members. People who are deaf may point out that a person really can’t understand the physical experience of deafness—or the social experience of being treated as deaf—unless he or she is, in fact, deaf. As a result, deaf individuals often express a strong preference for interacting with other deaf individuals. They may treat sign language interpreters and hearing parents of deaf children as “honorary deaf people,” but they are frequently hesitant to accept hearing people as part of the deaf co-culture.13

As one illustration of this tendency, students at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., whose undergraduate student body consists entirely of deaf people, staged an eight-day protest in 1988 demanding the appointment of a deaf president for the university. The board of trustees responded by appointing the first deaf president in the university’s 130-year history.

**Can you belong to multiple co-cultures?** Many people identify with several co-cultures at once. For example, you might relate to co-cultures for your age group, your ethnicity, your religion, your sexual orientation, your musical tastes, your athletic interests, and even your college major. Every one of those groups probably has its own values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and even ways of using language that distinguish it from other groups. Going further, some co-cultures have smaller co-cultures within them. For example, the deaf co-culture consists of people who advocate using only sign language and others who advocate the use of cochlear implants, which may help a person hear.

**Communicating with Cultural Awareness**

People with different cultural backgrounds don’t just communicate differently; in many cases they also truly think differently. As you might imagine, those differences can present some real challenges when people from different cultures interact.

The same thing can happen even when people from different co-cultures communicate. For instance, teenagers and senior citizens may have difficulty getting along because their customs and values are so different. Adolescents often enjoy the most contemporary music and fashions, whereas seniors frequently prefer songs and clothing that they enjoyed as younger adults. Teenagers may value independence and individuality; older people may value loyalty, family, and community.

Young and elderly people might speak the same language, but they don’t necessarily use language in the
same ways. Teenagers may have no problem understanding one another when they
talk about “blogging” or “IMing,” for example, but their grandparents may have no
idea what they mean. Maybe you’ve experienced this kind of situation, or perhaps
you’ve seen other co-cultures have difficulty understanding each other, such as Demo-
crats and Republicans, or gay and straight people.

To complicate this problem, not only do people from different cultures (and co-
cultures) differ in how they think and behave, but they’re also often unaware of how
they differ. For instance, a U.S. American college professor might think a Japanese
student is being dishonest because the student doesn’t look her in the eyes. In the
United States this behavior can suggest dishonesty. Within the Japanese culture,
however, it signals respect for the teacher. If neither the professor nor the student is
aware of how the other is likely to interpret the behavior, then it’s easy to see how a
misunderstanding could arise.

Communicating effectively with people from other cultures and co-cultures re-
quires us to be aware of how their behaviors and ways of thinking are likely to differ
from our own. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Many of us operate on what
researchers call a “similarity assumption”—that is, we presume that most people think
the same way we do, without asking ourselves whether that’s true. In the preceding
example, the professor thought the student was being dishonest because she assumed
the lack of eye contact meant the same thing to the student that it did to her. The
student assumed the professor would interpret his lack of eye contact as a sign of
respect, because that’s how he understood and intended it.

Questioning our cultural assumptions can be a real challenge because we’re of-
ten unaware that we hold them in the first place. At the same time, however, it is
one of the basic ways in which studying interpersonal communication and learning
about the influences of culture can make you a more competent communicator.

Learn It: What is a culture, and how is it different from a society? How do socie-
ties use symbols, language, values, and norms to reflect their cultures? What are
some examples of co-cultures? What is the similarity assumption, and how does it
influence our ability to communicate with cultural awareness?

Try It: Choose two of your close friends, and make a list of the co-cultures that
each friend belongs to. Remember to include co-cultures for age, ethnicity, disabil-
disability, religion, and activities or interests, if they are relevant. Next to each co-culture
that you list, write down one statement about how you think it affects your friend’s
personality or communication style. What did you learn about each friend by going
through this exercise?

Reflect on It: Which in-groups do you identify the most strongly with? When
have you noticed your own cultural awareness being challenged? How did you re-
spond when that happened?

How Culture Affects Communication

If you’ve ever had difficulty communicating with someone from a different cultural
background, you’ve experienced the challenge of overcoming cultural differences in
communication. Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede and American anthropol-
ologist Edward T. Hall have pioneered the study of cultures and cultural differences. Their
work and the work of others suggest that seven cultural differences, in particular, influence how people interact with one another. In this section, we’ll discuss:

- Individualism and collectivism, or whether a culture focuses more on the needs of the individual or the needs of the group
- High-context and low-context cultures, which refers to how explicit people expect one another’s language use to be
- Power distances, a measure of how equally power is distributed within a society
- Cultural masculinity or femininity, which refers to whether traditionally masculine or feminine values are promoted
- Monochronic and polychronic cultures, a distinction based on how a culture thinks about the importance of time
- Uncertainty avoidance, or how important certainty is within a given culture
- Communication codes, meaning those words or gestures that have particular meaning only to people within a given culture

Individualism and Collectivism

One way cultures differ is in how much they emphasize individuals rather than groups. In an individualistic culture, people believe that their primary responsibility is to themselves. Children in individualistic cultures are raised hearing messages such as “Be yourself,” “You’re special,” and “There’s no one else in the world who’s just like you.” Those messages emphasize the importance of knowing yourself, being self-sufficient, and being true to what you want in life. Indeed, the motto in an individualistic culture might be “I gotta be me!” People in individualistic societies also value self-reliance and the idea that people should “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps,” or help themselves when they need it, instead of waiting for others...
to help them. Research shows that the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia are among the most individualistic societies in the world.16

By contrast, people in a collectivistic culture are taught that their primary responsibility is to their families, their communities, and the companies they work for. Instead of emphasizing the importance of being an individual, collectivistic cultures focus on the importance of taking care of the needs of the group. People in these cultures place a high value on duty and loyalty, and they see themselves not as unique or special but as part of the groups to which they belong. Among the Kabre of Togo, for instance, people try to give away many of their material possessions to build relationships and benefit their social groups.17 The motto in a collectivistic culture might be “I am my family and my family is me.” Collectivistic cultures include Korea, Japan, and many countries in Africa and Latin America.18

How individualistic or collectivistic a culture is can affect communication behavior in several ways. When people in individualistic cultures experience conflict with one another, for instance, they are expected to express it and work toward resolving it. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures are taught to be much more indirect in the way they handle disagreements, to preserve social harmony.19

Another difference involves people’s comfort level with public speaking. Many people experience anxiety when they have to give a speech, but this is especially true in collectivistic societies, where people are taught to “blend in” rather than to “stand out.” Being assertive and “standing up for yourself” are valued in individualistic cultures, but they can cause embarrassment or shame for a collectivistic culture.

Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that the individualistic-collectivistic distinction is the most fundamental way that cultures differ from one another. Other researchers disagree, maintaining that this distinction by itself can’t adequately characterize cultures.20

High- and Low-Context Cultures

If you’ve traveled much, you may have noticed that people in various parts of the world differ in how direct and explicit their language is. In a low-context culture, people are expected to be direct, say what they mean, and not “beat around the bush.” Low-context cultures value expressing yourself, sharing your opinions, and even trying to persuade others to see things your way.21 As you might have guessed, the United States is an example of a low-context society, as are Canada, Israel, and most northern European countries.

In contrast, people in a high-context culture, such as Korea, the Maori of New Zealand, and Native Americans, are taught to speak in a much less direct way. In these societies, maintaining harmony and avoiding offending people are more important than expressing your true feelings.22 As a result, people speak in a less direct, more ambiguous manner, and they convey much more of the meaning through subtle behaviors and contextual cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice.

One example of how this cultural difference affects communication is the way in which people handle criticism and disagreement. In a low-context culture, a supervisor might reprimand an irresponsible employee openly, to make an example of him or her. The supervisor would probably be very direct and explicit about what the employee was doing wrong, what the expectations for improvement were, and what the consequences would be for failing to meet them.

In a high-context culture, however, the supervisor probably wouldn’t reprimand the employee publicly for fear that it would put the employee to shame or cause him or her to “lose face.” Criticism in high-context cultures is more likely to take place in private.
The supervisor would also likely use more ambiguous language to convey what the employee was doing wrong, "talking around" the issue instead of confronting it directly. To reprimand an employee for repeated absences, for example, a supervisor might point out that responsibility to one’s co-workers is important and that “letting down the team” would be cause for shame. The supervisor may never actually say that the employee needs to improve his or her attendance record. Instead, the employee would be expected to understand the message by listening to what the supervisor says and paying attention to the supervisor’s body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions.

As you may have guessed, when people from low- and high-context cultures communicate with each other, the potential for misunderstanding is great. To illustrate this point, imagine that you have asked two of your friends if they’d like to meet you tomorrow evening for a coffee tasting at a popular bookstore cafe. Your friend Tina, who’s from a low-context culture, says, “No, I’ve got a lot of studying to do, but thanks anyway.” Lee, who grew up in a high-context culture, nods his head and says, “That sounds like fun.” Thus, you’re surprised later when he doesn’t show up.

How can you account for these different behaviors? The answer is that people raised in high-context cultures are often reluctant to say no—even when they mean no—for fear of causing offense. Another person from Lee’s culture might have understood from Lee’s facial expression or tone of voice that he didn’t intend to go to the coffee tasting with you. Because you grew up in a low-context society, however, you interpreted his answer and his nodding his head to mean he was accepting your invitation.

Low- and High-Power Distance

A third way cultures differ from one another is in how evenly power is distributed within the society. Several things can give someone power, including money or other valuable resources, education or expertise, age, popularity, talent, intelligence, and experience. In democracies such as the United States, people believe in the value of equality—that all men and women are created equal and that no one person or group should have excessive power. This belief is characteristic of low-power-distance cultures. The United States and Canada belong to this category, as do Israel, New Zealand, Denmark, and Austria.23 People in these societies are raised to believe that even though some individuals are born with more advantages (such as wealth or fame), no one is inherently better than anyone else. This doesn’t necessarily mean that people in these societies are treated equally, only that they value the idea that they should be.

In high-power-distance cultures power is distributed less evenly. Certain groups, such as royalty or the ruling political party, have great power, and the average citizen has much less. People in these societies are taught that certain people or groups deserve to have more power than others and that respecting power is more important than respecting equality. Mexico, Brazil, India, Singapore, and the Philippines are all examples of high-power-distance societies.24

Power distance affects many aspects of interpersonal communication. For example, people in low-power-distance cultures usually expect friendships and romantic relationships to be based on love rather than social status. In contrast, people in high-power-distance cultures are expected to choose friends or mates from within their social class.25

Another difference involves the way people think about authority. High-power-distance societies place great emphasis on obedience and respect for those in power. People are taught to obey their parents and teachers without question.26 In contrast,
people in low-power-distance societies are more often taught that it’s their right—even their responsibility—to question authority. In these cultures it’s not unexpected for people to ask “Why?” when their parents or teachers tell them to do something.

This difference is also seen in the relationships and communication patterns people have with their employers. Workers in low-power-distance cultures value autonomy, the ability to make choices about the way they do their jobs, and the ability to have input into decisions that affect them. Such workers might provide their input through unions or employee satisfaction surveys. By contrast, employees in high-power-distance cultures are used to having little or no say about how to do their jobs. Instead, they expect their employers to make the decisions and are more likely to follow those decisions without question.

**Masculine and Feminine Cultures**

As you’ll see later in this chapter, we usually use the terms “masculine” and “feminine” when we’re referring to people. Hofstede has suggested that we can also apply these terms to cultures. In a highly masculine culture, people tend to cherish traditionally masculine values, such as ambition, achievement, and the acquisition of material goods. They also value sex-specific roles for women and men, preferring that men hold the wage-earning and decision-making positions (such as corporate executive) while women occupy the nurturing positions (such as homemaker). Examples of masculine cultures are Austria, Japan, and Mexico.

In contrast, in a highly feminine culture, people tend to value nurturance, quality of life, and service to others, all of which are stereotypically feminine qualities. They also tend not to believe that men’s and women’s roles should be strongly differentiated. Compared with masculine cultures, therefore, it would not be as unusual for a man to care for children or a woman to be her family’s primary wage earner. Examples of feminine cultures are Sweden, Chile, and The Netherlands.

According to Hofstede’s research, the United States has a moderately masculine culture. U.S. Americans tend to value sex differentiated roles—although not as strongly
as Austrians, Japanese, or Mexicans do—and they place a fairly high value on stereotypically masculine qualities such as achievement and the acquisition of resources.28

**Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures**

Cultures also vary with respect to their norms and expectations concerning the use of time. Societies that have a *monochronic* concept of time, such as Swiss, Germans, and most U.S. Americans, view time as a commodity. We save time, spend time, fill time, invest time, and waste time, as though time were tangible. We treat time as valuable, believe that “time is money,” and talk about making time and losing time.29

A monochronic orientation toward time influences several social behaviors. Because people in monochronic cultures think of time as valuable, they hate to waste it. Therefore, they expect meetings and classes to start on time (within a minute or so), and when that doesn’t happen, they are willing to wait only so long before leaving. They also expect others to show up when they say they will. Perhaps you can think of situations when you’ve felt frustrated by a co-worker or a classmate who wasn’t punctual.

By comparison, societies with a *polychronic* orientation—which include Latin America, the Arab part of the Middle East, and much of sub-Saharan Africa—conceive of time as more holistic and fluid and less structured. Instead of treating time as a finite commodity that must be managed properly to avoid being wasted, people in polychronic cultures perceive it more like a never-ending river, flowing infinitely into the future.30

One result of this orientation is that schedules are more fluid and flexible than they are in monochronic cultures. In Pakistan, for instance, if you’re invited to a wedding that begins at 4:30 and you arrive at 4:30, you will most likely find yourself the first one there. A bank or a restaurant may not open at a specified time—as it would be expected to do in a monochronic society—but whenever the owner or manager decides. Students would not expect their professors to begin class at an appointed time. Instead, students would arrive over a period of time, and the class would begin whenever the professor was ready. People in a polychronic culture don’t prioritize efficiency and punctuality. Instead, they attach greater value to the quality of their lives and their relationships with others.

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

Humans have a natural tendency to avoid situations that are unfamiliar or that make them feel uncomfortable. In other words, we dislike uncertainty: In fact, uncertainty causes many of us a good deal of stress.31 Not all cultures find uncertainty to be equally problematic, however. Cultures vary in what Hofstede called *uncertainty avoidance,*
or the extent to which people try to avoid situations that are unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable. Individuals from cultures that are highly uncertainty avoidant are drawn to people and situations that are familiar, and they are relatively unlikely to take risks, for fear of failure. They are also uncomfortable with differences of opinion, and they tend to favor rules and laws that maximize security and reduce ambiguity wherever possible. Argentina, Portugal, and Uruguay are among the countries whose cultures are the most uncertainty avoidant.

By contrast, people in uncertainty-accepting cultures are more open to new situations, and they are more accepting of people and ideas that are different from their own. They take a “live and let live” approach, preferring as few rules as possible that would restrict their behaviors. Societies with cultures that are highly accepting of uncertainty include Hong Kong, Jamaica, and New Zealand. Hofstede has determined that the U.S. culture is more accepting than avoidant of uncertainty, but it is closer to the midpoint of the scale than many countries are.

**Cultural Communication Codes**

Finally, cultures differ from one another in their use of communication codes, those verbal and nonverbal behaviors whose meanings are often understood only by people from the same culture. Three kinds of communication codes—idioms, jargon, and gestures—differ greatly from society to society and can make intercultural communication especially challenging.

**Idioms.** An idiom is a phrase whose meaning is purely figurative; that is, you can’t understand the meaning by interpreting the words literally. For example, most U.S. American adults know the phrase “kicking the bucket” has nothing to do with kicking a bucket. In U.S. American culture, this is an idiom that means “to die.” If you grew up in the United States, you can probably think of several other U.S. American idioms. For example, if something is “a dime a dozen,” then it is very common or is nothing special. Having “two left feet” means you’re not a very good dancer. Finally, “shaking a leg” means you’re hurrying, but “pulling someone’s leg” means you’re joking.

Every society has its own idioms whose meanings are not necessarily obvious to people from other cultures. In Portugal, for instance, a person who “doesn’t give one for the box” is someone who can’t say or do anything right. In Finland, if something “becomes gingerbread,” that means it goes completely wrong. If someone in Brazil says “Fish don’t pull wagons,” he is encouraging you to eat red meat. Likewise, if an Australian is “as flash as a rat with a gold tooth,” she’s very pleased with herself. When you interact with people from other cultures, it’s helpful to be aware that they may use phrases you’re unfamiliar with.

Cultural differences in language use can also make it hard to translate phrases or slogans from one culture to the next, and this has made for some humorous examples of mistranslated signs and advertisements:

- Sign in a Bangkok dry cleaner: “Drop your trousers here for best results!”
- Sign in a Copenhagen airline ticket office: “We take your bags and send them in all directions.”
- Sign in a Hong Kong tailor shop: “Ladies may have a fit upstairs.”
- Sign in an Acapulco restaurant: “The manager has personally passed all the water served here.”
- Sign in a Moscow hotel room: “If this is your first visit to the USSR, you are welcome to it.”
Jargon. A specific form of idiomatic communication that often separates co-cultures is jargon, or language whose technical meaning is understood by people within that co-culture but not necessarily by those outside it. Physicians, for instance, use precise medical terminology—what we might think of as “Doctorspeak”—to communicate among themselves about medical conditions and treatments. In most cases, this technical jargon is used only with people in the same co-culture. Therefore, although your doctor might tell her nurse that you have “ecchymosis on a distal phalange,” she’d probably just tell you that you have a bruise on your fingertip. Similarly, if your dentist orders a “periapical radiograph,” he just wants an X-ray of the roots of one of your teeth.

Not understanding jargon such as this can make you feel like an outsider. In addition, you might get the impression that doctors and dentists talk this way just to reinforce their in-group status. Jargon can serve an important function, however, by allowing people who use it to communicate with one another in ways that are very specific, efficient, and accurate.

Gestures. Cultures also differ a great deal in their use of gestures, which are movements, usually of the hand or the arm, that express ideas. The same gesture can have different meanings from society to society. For instance, U.S. American parents sometimes play the game “I’ve got your nose!” with infants by putting a thumb between the index and middle finger. This gesture means good luck in Brazil, but it is an obscene gesture in Russia and Indonesia. Similarly, holding up the index and pinky finger while holding down the middle and ring finger is a common gesture for fans of the University of Texas Longhorns. In Italy, however, this gesture is used to suggest that a man’s wife has been unfaithful.34

The “At a Glance” box on page 55 provides a quick summary of the seven aspects of culture we have discussed here.

Communicating cross-culturally can be a challenge. If we’re aware of cultural differences, however, those differences can help us to understand one another better. Do you ever feel that men and women don’t speak quite the same language? In the next section, we examine several reasons why that may sometimes be the case.
Learn It: In what ways do people from individualistic and collectivist cultures differ in their communication behaviors? Do people use more explicit language in high- or low-context cultures? Is power more evenly distributed in a low- or a high-power-distance culture? How do people from monochronic and polychronic cultures differ in their use of time? In what ways does a culture’s uncertainty avoidance affect the communication behaviors of its members? Why are idioms and gestures considered examples of cultural communication codes?

Try It: How sensitive are you to other cultures? Fill out the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale in the “Getting to Know You” box on page 56 to find out. If your score is lower than you’d like, remember that the first step to becoming more culturally sensitive is learning as much as you can about what culture is and how cultures vary, as you’ve read about in this chapter.

Reflect on It: How are culture’s effects on communication learned and reinforced? What challenges have you experienced when communicating with people from other cultures?

Understanding Gender and Communication

Gender has a profound influence on how we live our lives. What’s the first thing you ask about a new baby? “Is it a boy or a girl?” Our gender is a defining feature of our identity, shaping the way we think, look, and communicate.

Although gender is powerful, it is far from simple or straightforward. The concept of gender includes many influences, such as psychological gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation. As we’ll see, some interpersonal behaviors are strongly influenced by psychological gender roles, and others are more strongly influenced by...
biological sex or sexual orientation. In this section, we’ll take a look at these components of gender, and we’ll critique one of the most common explanations for why communicating across gender lines can be so challenging.

To reduce potential confusion, I will use the term “gender” as a broad term encompassing the influences of gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation in places where I’m not drawing specific distinctions among those terms. Otherwise, I will use “gender roles” in reference to masculinity, femininity, and androgy. When addressing the differences between females and males, I’ll use the term “biological sex” (or simply “sex”), and I’ll use “sexual orientation” when discussing how one’s sexuality influences behavior. See Figure 2.1 for an illustration of how I’m using these various terms.

**Gender Roles and Communication**

A role is a set of behaviors expected of someone in a particular social position. Expectations for male and female behavior make up a culture’s gender roles, or norms for how women and men are supposed to act. In U.S. American society, for instance, men have traditionally been expected to be the breadwinners and women the homemakers. Men are supposed to be interested in cars, sports, and guns, whereas women are supposed to like shopping, cooking, and childrearing. That doesn’t mean men and women always are interested in those things, only that traditional gender roles suggest that they ought to be. Similarly, in many cultures, men are expected to make the decisions and occupy the positions of power, although this is not always the case.

These and other expectations reflect our culturally influenced ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man. We can think of gender roles as falling into three specific categories: masculinity, femininity, and androgy.

**The masculine gender role.** When used in reference to people rather than cultures, the term masculinity refers to the set of gender role expectations a society typically

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**FIGURE 2.1 Diagram explaining gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation**

Communication research has examined effects of gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation on interpersonal communication behavior.
assigns to men, although anyone can have masculine characteristics and communication behavior patterns. Specific masculine qualities might differ from one culture to the next, but the masculine role usually emphasizes strength, competition, independence, sexual aggressiveness, risk taking, logical thinking, and the acquisition of resources. Traditional masculinity also tends to reject weakness, emotional expressiveness, and any characteristic or behavior that resembles those of women. In childhood, masculine behavior includes playing with toy guns and cars and competing in sports, since those activities emphasize strength, dominance, and winning.


The first thing many of us want to know about a new baby is its sex. Whether we do it consciously or not, many of us interact differently with male and female infants.
Masculine behavior in adulthood includes being a leader, being a breadwinner, and focusing more on action than on talk.

Like most things, masculinity has its good and bad points. For instance, the emphasis on strength and dominance can motivate and enable men to protect themselves and their families against threats. Thinking logically can help solve problems, and being willing to take risks can help someone achieve things he or she didn’t believe were possible.

Masculine role expectations can also pose problems, however. For example, the emphasis on independence may keep men from asking for help—such as medical care—when they need it. Focusing on competition and aggression can put men in harm’s way and may account for the fact that men are more likely than women to be victims in every type of violent crime except rape. Men are also much more likely than women to commit violent crimes. Masculinity also emphasizes risk taking; therefore, men are more likely than women to smoke, drink excessively, drink and drive, and fail to use seatbelts and sunscreen, and also more likely not to exercise, all of which increase their chances of illness, injury, and premature death.

The feminine gender role. The set of role expectations a society typically assigns to women is called femininity, although this term can characterize either sex. Like masculinity, femininity varies somewhat from culture to culture. In general, the feminine gender role typically emphasizes empathy and emotional expressiveness, a focus on relationships and relational maintenance, an interest in bearing and raising children, and attentiveness to appearance. Traditional femininity also emphasizes cooperation and submissiveness and tends to downplay intellectual achievement and career ambition.

Like masculinity, femininity has its pros and cons. The focus on caregiving has helped to ensure the survival of countless generations of children and families. The emphasis on empathy and relationships has allowed women to build strong, intimate friendships with one another and to excel at careers that require interpersonal sensitivity, such as teaching and counseling. Emphasizing cooperation instead of competition has probably also helped women to solve interpersonal problems in mutually beneficial ways.

Traditional femininity can also impose limits on the choices and options available to women. In the past it has discouraged many women from pursuing their education and achieving their career goals out of the belief that a woman’s proper place is in the home. In addition, the emphasis on appearance has placed tremendous pressures on many women to achieve certain body types. As a result, women are far more likely than men to develop depression and eating disorders. The focus on submissiveness has also made it difficult for some women to leave abusive relationships.

The androgynous gender role. Masculinity and femininity are, to a large extent, opposing concepts; that is, part of what makes a trait masculine is that it is not feminine, and vice versa. Not everyone is best described as either feminine or masculine, however. Rather, some people seem to have both characteristics. For example, a woman might love children yet be very assertive, logical, and unemotional in her job. Similarly, a man may be strong and independent while still being sensitive and caring deeply and expressively for his friends. Androgyny is the term used to describe the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. When a person strongly identifies with both gender roles, we say that he or she is psychologically androgynous.

Being androgynous does not mean that a person is homosexual or bisexual, or that he or she wants to be of the other sex. Instead, it means the person identifies...
strongly with aspects of both femininity and masculinity. As a result, an androgynous person is often less concerned about behaving in gender-appropriate ways than someone who is more strongly masculine or feminine would be.

For instance, an androgynous man would be unlikely to consider working as a nurse to be a threat to his gender identity. Likewise, an androgynous woman probably wouldn’t be uncomfortable serving as her family’s primary breadwinner. In 1994, British journalist Mark Simpson coined the term “meterosexual” to refer to a man, usually heterosexual, who has adopted the more feminine behavior of paying a great deal of attention to his appearance and grooming, making him an example of an androgynous person.45

**How gender roles change and vary.** Gender roles are never set in stone. Like most roles, they change over time, and they vary from culture to culture. Let’s look at media representations of masculinity and femininity for some examples.

In the United States, images of women and men in movies, television shows, and advertisements have changed dramatically, even within the last few decades. In the 1950s, for instance, TV shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* depicted men, women, and children in very gender-specific ways. Fathers were strong, authoritative, and the sole breadwinners for their families. Mothers were homemakers whose concerns centered on their husbands, their children, and their housework. Boys were interested in masculine activities, such as fishing or playing with cars, and girls were portrayed doing feminine activities, such as playing with dolls or baking cakes. Later television shows, such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Entourage*, and *Sex and the City*, have featured more flexible portrayals of femininity and masculinity in which women work outside the home, sometimes in traditionally masculine professions such as surgery, and men are demonstrative of their feelings, even with other men.

Gender roles also differ by culture. For example, in nomadic societies, where people move from place to place to hunt and forage, there is little difference in the way girls and boys are brought up. This may be because everyone’s daily tasks are similar—to find food and water—so there is little need to differentiate the roles of girls and boys. By contrast, agricultural societies that rely on farming and herding for their food usually socialize boys and girls very differently, raising girls to tend to the children and home, and boys to tend to the livestock and crops.46
As we saw earlier, researchers have even applied the terms “masculine” and “feminine” to cultures themselves. In highly masculine cultures, such as Japan, Italy, and Mexico, men are admired for their strength, material success, and aggressiveness, whereas women are valued for their sensitivity and modesty. In feminine cultures, such as Sweden, Costa Rica, and Thailand, modesty, tenderness, and a concern for relationships are highly valued in both women and men.47

There’s no question that gender role expectations influence our lives, but being masculine or feminine is not the same thing as being physically male or female. In the next section, we’ll explore the meaning of biological sex and how it can affect communication behavior.

Biological Sex and Communication

The term “biological sex” refers to being female or male rather than feminine or masculine. Before we examine how biological sex influences communication behavior, let’s take a closer look at what biological sex is and how it differs from gender roles.

When you were conceived you were neither male nor female. About seven weeks later, though, your genes activated your biological sex. Each of us has 23 pairs of chromosomes, which are strands of DNA, in the cells in our body. The 23rd pair is made up of the sex hormones that determine whether you’re female or male. Human sex chromosomes are called X and Y, and we inherit one from each of our parents. Mothers supply us with one X chromosome. Fathers give us either a second X or a Y, depending on which one their sperm is carrying. If we get another X, then we grow up female. If we get a Y, then we become male.

We tend to think of “male” and “female” as the only categories of biological sex, but some people have difficulty fitting into one or the other group. There are at least three reasons for this difficulty—psychological, genetic, and anatomical—and we’ll take a brief look at each one. Understanding the diversity in forms of biological sex will help us appreciate why studying sex differences in communication behavior is often more complex than it may seem to be at first.

Psychological differences affect biological sex. Some people experience conflict between the sex they were born into and the sex they feel they should be. For instance, a person may see herself as male even though she was born female. The term “transgendered people” is used to describe individuals who experience this type of conflict.48 Emotional distress and depression are common among transgendered people, who may struggle with the feeling of being “trapped in the wrong body.”49 Some transgendered people undergo hormone therapy or sex-reassignment surgery to bring their physical bodies in line with their images of themselves. We often refer to people who have undergone these procedures as “transsexual people.”50

Genetic differences affect biological sex. Not everyone is born with either XX (female) or XY (male) chromosomes. Women with Turner’s syndrome, for example, have an X chromosome only (XO), and those with trisomy X have an extra X chromosome (XXX). Men with Klinefelter syndrome also have an extra X chromosome (XXY).
Other combinations are also possible, such as XXXX or XXYY. People with these disorders are prone to behavioral and developmental problems, which can influence how they interact with others. Researchers estimate that about 1 in 1,700 people is born with some type of chromosomal disorder.51

Anatomical differences affect biological sex. Finally, some people have internal sexual organs that don’t match their external appearance. For instance, a child might be born with a penis but have ovaries instead of testicles. Doctors call this condition “intersex,” and it can be caused by delayed physical development or by hormonal problems.52 People with this condition are often able to lead normal, healthy lives, although questions about their correct biological sex may make it difficult for others in their social environments to accept them.53

Like gender roles, biological sex is a fundamental part of a person’s identity. No matter what a person’s biological sex and gender role are, however, his or her interpersonal behavior can also be influenced by a third aspect of gender, sexual orientation. We will examine this aspect next.

Sexual Orientation and Communication

Sexual orientation describes the sex or sexes we are sexually attracted to. Scientists disagree concerning the extent to which sexual orientation is determined by genetics (the way biological sex is) or by socialization (the way gender roles are). Sexual orientation isn’t always considered an aspect of gender, but a growing body of research suggests that it influences communication behavior just as gender roles and biological sex do. We’ll look briefly at four patterns of sexual orientation: heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality.

Heterosexuality. Heterosexuality refers to being physically and romantically attracted to people of the other sex. Several studies have confirmed that the majority of adults in most societies have experienced mostly heterosexual attraction and have engaged in primarily heterosexual behavior.54 One possible reason for this tendency is that heterosexual interaction has the potential to support reproduction, whereas other forms of sexual interaction don’t. Another reason is that, in most cultures, heterosexuality is the most socially approved form of sexuality. Therefore, heterosexual people in those cultures enjoy a level of social support that others often do not.55

Homosexuality. The term homosexuality refers to romantic and sexual attraction to members of one’s own sex. Homosexual males are commonly referred to as “gay” and female homosexuals are typically called “lesbian.” Although sexual contact between members of the same sex has been common across cultures and time periods, homosexuality did not really become a recognized part of a person’s identity until the 1800s.56 Before that point, it was not uncommon for adults of the same sex to sleep in the same bed or to write love letters to each other. Such behaviors were interpreted as expressions of affection rather than markers of sexual orientation.57

Researchers have come up with many different theories to explain homosexuality. Some studies have focused on the social influences of parents and other role models, whereas others have emphasized physiological or genetic explanations.58 According to a national survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2.3% of U.S. American men aged 15–44 identified themselves as homosexual, although 6.5% reported having had sexual interaction with another man. Similarly, 1.3% of U.S. American women identified themselves as homosexual, although 11% reported having had sexual interaction with another woman.59
As you probably know, the issue of whether homosexual adults should be allowed to marry or form legal domestic partnerships has been contentious in the United States for some time. The argument against formalizing homosexual romantic relationships often implies that such relationships are inherently less stable than heterosexual marriages. Is this true? Check out the “Fact or Fiction?” box above to find out.

Fact or Fiction?
Heterosexual Relationships Are More Stable and Satisfying Than Gay or Lesbian Relationships

There’s a great deal of disagreement these days about whether homosexual adults should be allowed to marry. At present, same-sex marriage is only legal in a few U.S. states. By contrast, 17 states have constitutional provisions banning it. Opponents of same-sex marriage have long claimed that gay and lesbian relationships are less stable and more dysfunctional than heterosexual relationships. Is that argument true?

At this point the answer appears to be no. In fact, several studies have shown that same-sex romantic relationships are just as stable and satisfying, on average, as opposite-sex relationships. For example, one study matched samples of heterosexual and homosexual men and women who were in serious romantic relationships. After ruling out any differences in the participants’ age, education level, ethnicity, and length of relationship, the researchers found no differences between the heterosexual and homosexual samples in how close or satisfying their relationships were.

These findings don’t suggest that all gay and lesbian couples are happy and problem-free. They indicate, however, that same-sex relationships can be just as stable and satisfying as heterosexual relationships. Whatever your individual beliefs about the morality of homosexual relationships, the argument that they are prone to dysfunction simply does not stand up to the evidence.

Ask Yourself:

- Where do you stand on this issue? What type of evidence is the most persuasive to you?
- What do you think contributes to relationship stability and satisfaction?


Between 1% and 3% of the U.S. American adult population self-identifies as homosexual. Many societies throughout history have persecuted homosexual women and men for interacting in ways those societies deem abnormal or immoral.
Bisexuality. **Bisexuality** refers to having romantic and/or sexual attraction to both women and men. Although bisexuals have some level of attraction to both sexes, they are not necessarily attracted to both sexes equally. Moreover, bisexual people don’t usually maintain long-term romantic relationships with members of both sexes. Rather, they often have a romantic relationship with a partner of one sex while engaging in or thinking about sexual interaction with people of the other sex. According to the CDC survey mentioned earlier, 1.8% of men and 2.8% of women in the United States identify themselves as bisexual.

Asexuality. The term **asexuality** is used to describe people who have very little interest in sex. As you might imagine, this orientation is fairly uncommon. In one British study, for example, only 1% of respondents indicated they had never really been sexually attracted to anyone. Researchers aren’t sure whether asexuality is a type of disorder or whether it simply represents another sexual orientation. Asexuality is not the same as celibacy, which is the practice of abstaining from sex. In fact, some asexual people do have sex, and most celibate people are not asexual.

A quick summary of the three primary components of gender appears in the “At a Glance” box above.

**At a Glance: Three Components of Gender**

In this section, we discussed three primary components that make up the experience of gender:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Roles</td>
<td>Psychological orientation toward masculinity, femininity, or androgyny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sex</td>
<td>Genetic characteristics that distinguish females from males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>Sexual attraction toward members of the other sex, the same sex, both sexes, or neither sex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Some Explanations for Gendered Communication**

These days, it’s a cliche to say that women and men have different styles of communicating. Moreover, based on the complexities we’ve just discussed, it doesn’t seem very accurate to approach men and women as definitively masculine or feminine. From time to time, maybe you feel as though talking with a person of the other sex is like talking to someone from another planet. Popular author John Gray captured this sentiment in his highly successful book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus.*

According to Gray, “Men and women differ in all areas of their lives. Not only do men and women communicate differently but they think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need, and appreciate differently. They almost seem to be from different planets, speaking different languages and needing different nourishment.”

In contrast to Gray, communication experts don’t believe that men and women are from different planets. Nevertheless, some researchers, including communication scholar Julia Wood and linguist Deborah Tannen, do argue that men and women constitute different “gender cultures.” Their thesis is that each sex constitutes its own culture, with its own rules and values. The fundamental difference between the two cultures is that each sex values different components of relationships. Specifically, women are taught to value the communicating of intimacy and emotional support, whereas men are taught to value the sharing of activities.

When Zach and his friend Sergio get together, for instance, their time is likely to revolve around a mutual activity, such as going for a hike or watching car racing on
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TV, because for them, sharing activities is a means of bonding. Sometimes they talk about personal topics, but to them, their conversation is of lesser importance than the shared activity. For Zach’s wife Aisha and her friend Thérèse, however, time together is more likely to revolve around conversation. Whatever shared activity they may be doing is often of lesser importance than the conversation itself.

The concept of gender cultures further maintains that when women and men communicate with each other, they each bring their own rules and values to the table. Because these rules and values differ, the result is often gender clash, or the experience of each sex not understanding the other. For instance, when Sergio’s daughter was undergoing treatment for leukemia, Aisha couldn’t understand why Zach didn’t invite him over “just to talk,” but instead invited him to a baseball game. This action seemed insensitive to Aisha, who thought Zach should be a better friend to Sergio by getting him to open up about his feelings. As Zach explained, however, going to a ball game and just “hanging out” with no expectation of a deep conversation was his way of letting Sergio know he cared. He also assured Aisha that Sergio would interpret it that way.

There’s little question that communicating across genders can be challenging and that several communicative behaviors appear to be affected by sex, gender roles, and/or sexual orientation, as we’ll discuss in the next section. Some scholars disagree, however, that the sexes actually constitute different cultures. For example, communication scientists Brant Burleson and Adrianne Kunkel have pointed out that even though the “different cultures” idea seems intuitive, it has not been well supported by the data. In fact, several studies have demonstrated that women and men are more similar than different in the forms of communication they value.
In their analysis of supportive communication, for instance, Burleson and Kunkel reported substantial similarity—not difference—in the value both sexes place on supportive communication skills, such as comforting and listening. They also reported that women and men have similar goals in support situations and consider the same types of messages to be supportive. Interestingly, both women and men prefer to seek support from women instead of men. In each of these outcomes, men and women behave as though they are from the same culture, not different cultures. Indeed, the lack of scientific evidence for the gender cultures idea has led communication researcher Kathryn Dindia to suggest a more modest metaphor for gendered communication: "Men are from North Dakota, women are from South Dakota."

Each of these three perspectives—the sexes come from different planets, the sexes comprise different cultures, and the sexes are more similar than different—is intuitively appealing in its own way. In fact, it’s easy for many of us to “see” sex differences in communication behavior almost anywhere we look. For instance, you might have a disagreement with a supervisor of the other sex and chalk it up to a sex difference, even if it really wasn’t. Societies also find humor in sex differences, making them the focus of jokes and comedic movies and television shows. This practice probably adds to our tendency to see sex differences as large and pervasive.

Just because an idea is intuitive or seems to reflect your personal experience doesn’t mean the idea is accurate, however. This is an example of why scientific tests are so important: They allow us to subject our ideas to rigorous scrutiny. From my perspective, the best scientific evidence tells us that sex, gender roles, and sexual orientation all play a part in how people communicate, but not as large a part as we might think. Women and men differ from each other in many ways—as do masculine, feminine, and androgynous people, and heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual people. When it comes to communication behavior, however, we are more alike than different. The research tells us that John Gray’s claim that women and men “differ in all areas of their lives” may be an exaggeration. It’s true that our differences are often more apparent to us than our similarities, but the scientific evidence suggests that, as communicators, we are not as different as we often think we are.
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How Gender Affects Communication

Our gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation all play a part in how we communicate with others. Whether you think of the sexes as coming from different planets, constituting different cultures, or just plain being different, you can probably appreciate the influence of gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation on several types of communicative behaviors. In this section, we’ll look at differences in language (the use of spoken and written words) and nonverbal behavior (the ways we communicate without words) to better understand how these various aspects of gender affect our interactions with others. We will also learn more about language in Chapter 5 and nonverbal behavior in Chapter 6.

Getting to Know You

Try It Activity

Below is a list of personality characteristics. How well does each characteristic describe you? Using a 1–5 scale, write a number next to each item indicating how well you think it describes you. A score of 1 means it doesn’t describe you at all, and 5 means it describes you very well.

1. ______ Affectionate
2. ______ Athletic
3. ______ Feminine
4. ______ Forceful
5. ______ Sympathetic
6. ______ Willing to take risks
7. ______ Sensitive to the needs of others
8. ______ Dominant
9. ______ Eager to soothe hurt feelings
10. ______ Aggressive
11. ______ Loves children
12. ______ Masculine

When you’re done, add up all your scores on the odd-numbered items (1, 3, 5, etc.). This is your femininity score. Next, add up all your scores on the even-numbered items (2, 4, 6, etc.). This is your masculinity score. Each score should be between 6 and 30. If your femininity score is much higher than your masculinity score, then you are highly feminine. If the opposite is true, then you are highly masculine. Finally, if you scored high (say, above 25) on both scales, this indicates that you are androgynous.


When men and women agree, it is only in their conclusions; their reasons are always different.
—George Santayana (1863–1952) U.S. American philosopher

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CHAPTER 2  CULTURE AND GENDER
Before we go on, we need to consider two important points. First, even though gender includes the influences of biological sex, gender roles, and sexual orientation, most of the research we’re going to discuss has simply compared the communication behaviors of men and women. As a result, we know quite a bit about sex differences but comparatively little about the effects of gender roles or sexual orientation on communication.

Second, although some behaviors differ between the sexes, other behaviors do not. In addition, some sex differences are large, but many others are fairly small. In recent years, several scholars have encouraged communication researchers and students to be cautious when looking at sex differences in behavior so that we don’t exaggerate them beyond the findings that the evidence actually supports.72

Gender and Verbal Communication

Research shows that gender influences both the content and the style of our speech. In this section, we’ll take a closer look at three gender effects:

- Expressive and instrumental talk
- Language and power
- Gendered linguistic styles

Expressive and instrumental talk. Some communication scholars have argued that women and men grow up in different “speech communities,” meaning they have different norms and beliefs concerning the purpose of communication.73 This idea is similar to the “gender cultures” theory, but it focuses more specifically on differences in speech and communication behaviors. In particular, these researchers believe that women are socialized to practice expressive talk, which means they are taught to view communication as the primary way to establish closeness and intimacy in relationships. In contrast, men are taught to practice instrumental talk, or to see communication as a means to solve problems and accomplish things.74

To understand these different approaches to communication, consider the following scenario. Shannon has noticed that whenever she talks to her co-worker Max about a problem, he always responds by telling her what she should do to fix it. The following exchange illustrates this point.

Shannon: My boss is totally blaming me for losing one of our biggest accounts—but it’s completely his fault! He’s the one who never returns their calls and wouldn’t let me help them last year when one of their shipments was delayed.

Max: You should call your regional manager and tell her what’s going on. Show her the paperwork from the order that got delayed so she’ll see that you tried to help.

Max’s response is a good example of instrumental talk. When Shannon explained her problem, Max viewed it as a request for help, and he offered his suggestions for how to make the situation better. Contrast Max’s response with the response Shannon got when she shared the same problem with her sister Sabrina:

Sabrina: That’s so unfair! I’m sorry he’s blaming you—you must be so frustrated, especially since it’s his fault in the first place.
Sabrina’s response is an example of expressive talk. Instead of suggesting how Shannon might solve the problem, Sabrina acknowledged Shannon’s feelings and expressed her own unhappiness at Shannon’s frustration. According to communication scholars such as Julia Wood, this is a common difference between women and men. That is, for women the purpose of sharing problems is to express your feelings. From this perspective, a good friend should listen and empathize. For men, though, the purpose of sharing problems is to get advice on how to solve them. From this perspective, a good friend should offer his opinions about what to do.75

How do women and men become socialized into different speech communities? One of the earliest influences seems to be the games they are encouraged to play as children. If you think back to your own childhood, you probably remember that at an early age most children played only with other children of their same sex76 and that boys and girls played very different games. Boys’ games, such as football or building models, tend to emphasize structure, rules, and competition. In contrast, girls’ games, such as playing house or jumping rope, emphasize cooperation, sensitivity, and flexibility. One possible result of these patterns is that girls learn to use language to express their feelings and to build camaraderie, whereas boys learn to use language to give instructions and share information.77

With respect to sexual orientation, the common stereotype of gay men as feminine and lesbians as masculine would suggest that gay men engage in more expressive and less instrumental talk than heterosexual men, whereas lesbians engage in more instrumental and less expressive talk than heterosexual women. Research indicates that both of these predictions are accurate.78 Importantly, this observation doesn’t mean that gay men talk like women or that lesbian women talk like men. Rather, it suggests only that gay men’s speech patterns are more expressive and less instrumental than those of heterosexual men, and that lesbian women’s speech is more instrumental and less expressive than that of heterosexual women.

Language and power. For years, researchers have noticed that men and women talk to each other in a style that reflects how superiors and subordinates to talk each other.79 Powerful forms of speech, such as those used by superiors, include behaviors such as talking more, interrupting more frequently, giving more directions, and expressing more opinions. Less powerful forms of speech, such as those used by subordinates, include asking more questions, using more hedges (“sort of,” “might be”) and disclaimers (“I could be wrong, but . . .”), and speaking less overall.

In an extensive review of the current research, communication scholars Pam Kalbfleisch and Anita Herold found that, on average, men use more powerful forms of speech than

Language is described as more powerful or less powerful based on communication behaviors such as interrupting, giving directions, expressing opinions, asking questions, using disclaimers, and speaking more or speaking less. From the perspective of language and power, how would you characterize the speaking styles of the three judges on American Idol?
How Do We Know?

Women Are Not More Talkative Than Men

In this section, you learned that women and men speak approximately the same number of words per day—roughly 16,000 on average—which is contrary to the stereotype that women are more talkative than men. How do we know this?

The study that identified this finding took place between 1998 and 2005 and involved almost 400 students from universities in the United States and Mexico. Each participant wore a device called an electronically activated recorder, or EAR. The EAR is a digital voice recorder that unobtrusively tracks a person’s real-world interactions with others by recording 30-second snippets of sound every 12.5 minutes while the person is awake. The researchers then transcribed each recording and counted the number of words spoken, analyzing them as a function of the percentage of waking time the EAR recorded.

When the researchers compared the results by sex, they found that women and men spoke, on average, 16,215 and 15,669 words per day, respectively. These totals were not significantly different, suggesting that the stereotype that women are more talkative than men isn’t accurate.

Ask Yourself:

• How valid is the use of the EAR to measure how talkative people are? What other methods might be used to measure talkativeness?
• Why do you think the stereotype of women as talkative exists? Do you see this perception changing at all?

From Me to You:

• One reason why this study is so important is that it provides scientific evidence that a common stereotype about women and men isn’t true. That doesn’t mean all stereotypes are false—they aren’t—but it does illustrate that some of our commonsense notions about communication may be inaccurate. When you encounter a stereotype, take a minute to think about how accurate it is before you use it to guide your behavior.

In this exchange, Emelie starts off with a disclaimer ("I don't know if this is a good idea"); she then hedges her opinion ("I sort of think"); and she concludes with a question that seeks validation from others ("don't you?"). By contrast, Stefan's words are directive ("Find out what the client wants") and opinionated ("The slogans aren't that great"). Also, unlike Emelie, Stefan doesn't end his statement by asking if others agree with him. These are examples of less powerful (Emelie) and more powerful (Stefan) forms of speech.

Although these research findings are important, keep in mind two critical points. First, the findings don't apply equally to every woman and man. You can probably think of women who use very powerful styles of speaking and men whose language styles are less powerful. Whenever we compare groups (such as women and men) with each other, we're focusing specifically on average differences. Clearly, there can be many individual exceptions to whatever differences we discover. Second, even if a man uses more powerful speech patterns than a woman does, that doesn't necessarily mean that he is more powerful. Rather, he is simply using the speech patterns that are typical for men in our society.

A particularly troubling example of the difference between powerful and powerless speech is the use of linguistic violence, which is language that degrades and dehumanizes a group of people. One way the more powerful nature of men's speech is expressed, for instance, is through terms that objectify and degrade women. You can probably think of words that have this effect. Using language to put down other people can constitute a type of emotional violence in the same way that hitting can constitute a type of physical violence.

Unfortunately, linguistic violence is frequently directed not only against women but also against people who are homosexual, bisexual, and/or transgendered. These communities are frequently marginalized, meaning they are subjected to unfair discrimination and prejudice on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. One way marginalization manifests itself is in the form of linguistic violence against members of these communities. Just as you can likely think of some derogatory terms used to put down women, you can probably think of similar terms used to degrade gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered people.
**Gendered linguistic styles.** Thus far, we have looked at gender differences in the purpose of speech (expressive versus instrumental) and in how powerful speech sounds. Research suggests that men and women differ in still other aspects of their speech patterns, or linguistic styles.

For example, women are more likely than men to use second- and third-person pronouns (“we,” “they”) and to make references to emotions (“hurt,” “scared”) when they talk. They also use more intensive adverbs, such as describing someone as really tall or so smart. Women also speak in longer sentences than men do, on average. As an example, Carmen might describe her new house in this way:

> We love our new home! It has a really big yard where the neighborhood children can play, and two very large guestrooms on the ground floor for when we have company. We also have a really nice kitchen, and the master suite is so spacious!

Men’s linguistic style makes greater use of self-references (“I” statements) and judgmental adjectives such as “good” or “worthless.” Compared with women, men also use more references to quantity, such as informing other people that something costs four hundred fifty dollars or someone is six feet, eight inches tall. Men are also more likely than women to use location statements (“It’s in the back”) and incomplete sentences (“Nice job.”). For example, Carmen’s husband Diego might describe their new home in this way:

> The house is great. It’s got twenty-two hundred square feet, plus a three-car detached garage. There’s about an acre and a half of land. I got a good deal on the mortgage, too. Five point one percent for thirty years.

In these examples, Carmen uses the pronoun “we” whereas Diego uses the pronoun “I.” Carmen also uses intensive adverbs (“really big yard,” “very large guestroom”), whereas Diego makes several references to quantity (“twenty-two hundred square feet,” “acre and a half of land”). Carmen’s sentences are also longer than Diego’s, on average, and Diego uses an incomplete sentence (“Five point one percent for thirty years”), whereas Carmen does not. Only a few studies have examined whether these patterns are influenced by sexual orientation, and most of the results indicate that they are not. Whether gender role affects the use of these linguistic styles is still unclear.

**Gender and Nonverbal Communication**

At the beginning of this section on gender, we explained that nonverbal communication is communication that occurs without the use of words. We use several nonverbal behaviors to communicate, including gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and the use of personal space. To understand gender and nonverbal communication, let’s look at three specific examples:

- **Touch and body movement**
- **Emotional communication**
- **Affectionate behavior**

**Touch and body movement.** Touch is an important form of nonverbal communication because it can express warmth and intimacy as well as power and dominance (as we’ll see in Chapter 6). Many studies have shown that women and men exhibit different patterns of touch behavior. In an analysis of several of these studies, one research team discovered that sex differences in touch depend on whether the touch involves
two adults or an adult and a child. When only adults are interacting, the researchers found that:

- Men are more likely to touch women than women are to touch men, unless the touch is occurring as part of a greeting (such as a handshake).
- Other-sex touch is more common than same-sex touch.
- In same-sex pairs, women touch each other more than men do, but this difference is smaller in close friendships than among acquaintances.

In general, these results show that men do more touching than women in other-sex relationships, whereas women do more touching than men in same-sex relationships. The patterns are quite different when one of the parties is a child, however:

- Same-sex touch is more common than other-sex touch.
- Women are more likely than men to initiate touch.
- Boys and girls are about equally likely to be touched.

These patterns may also be affected by culture. In feminine cultures, for instance, women and men may behave more similarly than in masculine cultures.

In addition to touch, sex appears to affect other forms of body movement. Compared with women, men use more body movement in general, they prefer a greater amount of personal space around them, and they try harder to preserve their personal space when it is violated. They also use more relaxed body movements. Both men and women appear to be more relaxed in their posture and gesturing when talking to men than to women.

With respect to personal space, however, some evidence suggests that gender role, rather than biological sex (or sexual orientation), is the most influential factor. For instance, one experiment found that masculine people (whether male or female) maintained a greater amount of personal distance from others than did feminine people (whether male or female).

**Emotional communication.** Common stereotypes would have us believe that women are more “emotional” than men. We often expect women to cry more than men at sad movies, for instance, or to be more expressive of their feelings for one another than men are. Indeed, a 2001 Gallup Poll found that adults in the United States are significantly more likely to use the term *emotional* to describe women than men.

Even if women are more emotional than men, what does that mean, exactly? Does it mean that women experience more emotion than men or just that they’re more willing to express the emotions they feel? Going further, if women are more expressive than men, does that difference apply to every kind of emotion or just to certain ones? In this section, we’ll look at what research tells us about the effects of sex on emotional communication.

To begin with, women generally express more positive emotions—such as happiness or joy—than men do. The most basic behavior we use to communicate positive emotions is smiling, and several studies have found that women smile more than men. Women also use more affiliation behaviors than men do. Affiliation behaviors demonstrate feelings of closeness or attachment to someone else. Common affiliation behaviors include eye contact, head nods, pleasant facial expressions, and warm vo-
cal tones. Research even suggests that women are more likely than men to express positive emotions in e-mail messages through the use of “smileys.”

When it comes to negative emotions, though, sex differences appear to vary according to which emotion we consider. Some studies have found that men are more likely than women to express anger, but other studies haven’t found a difference. Men do appear to express jealousy in more intense forms than women do, by engaging in dangerous, aggressive behaviors such as getting drunk, confronting the romantic rival, or becoming sexually involved with someone else. Women are more likely than men to express the emotions of sadness and depression, however.

Do women actually experience more emotion than men, or are they just more likely to express it? In a pair of studies, researchers Ann Kring and Albert Gordon found that although women were more expressive than men, they didn’t report actually experiencing any more emotion than men did. Rather, men and women reported experiencing the same amount of emotion. Women simply expressed their emotions more frequently and openly, whereas men were more likely to mask their feelings.

Although most research on gender and emotion has focused on biological sex, some studies have examined the influence of gender roles or sexual orientation. In one study, participants reported on their psychological gender roles, using the same instrument that appeared in the “Getting to Know You” box on page 66. Afterward, they watched film clips that were emotionally arousing while researchers videotaped and subsequently coded their facial expressions. The researchers found that both women and men were more emotionally expressive if they were androgynous than if they were primarily masculine or feminine.

In another experiment, lesbian and gay romantic couples took part in conflict discussions in a laboratory while their facial expressions were videotaped. The researchers found that, compared with gay men, lesbians were more expressive of both positive and negative emotion. This finding suggests that the biological sex difference in expression—meaning that women are more expressive than men—is not really affected by sexual orientation.

Affectionate behavior. Affectionate communication includes those behaviors we use to express our love and appreciation for people we care about. As you might have expected, several studies have shown that women use more nonverbal affection behaviors—such as hugging, kissing, and handholding—than men do. This observation appears to be especially true in same-sex relationships. That is, the sex differences in nonverbal affection behaviors are even greater when women and men are interacting with same-sex friends or relatives than when they are interacting with members of the other sex.

Why are women more affectionate than men? Researchers have offered several explanations. One theory is that because girls receive more affection than boys do, they are more likely to grow up perceiving interpersonal interactions as opportunities for communicating affection. Another explanation is that men are more likely than women to see affectionate communication as a feminine behavior, so they avoid expressing affection out of a fear of appearing feminine. A third possible reason is that the different balances of hormones typically found in men and women make women more likely to behave affectionately. Any or all of these factors may play a part in making women more affectionate than men.

Masculinity and femininity are also related to affectionate behavior, although not in the way you might guess. Because affection is often thought of as a “feminine” way of behaving—at least in North American cultures—you might expect that the more feminine people are, the more affectionate they are. Several studies have found this to be the case. The same studies have shown, however, that the more masculine
people are, the more affectionate they are. As with emotional expressiveness (which we discussed above), it appears that people who score highly on both femininity and masculinity are particularly affectionate.

Only a small number of studies have examined the influence of sexual orientation on affectionate communication. One large national U.S. survey reported that both gay men and lesbian women were more expressive of affection and positive emotion within their romantic relationships than were heterosexual spouses with children. They were not more expressive than heterosexual spouses without children or heterosexual unmarried partners, however.

Two other studies looked specifically at affectionate behavior between adult men and their fathers. The results indicated that fathers are most affectionate with heterosexual sons, less affectionate if they are unsure of their sons’ sexual orientation, and least affectionate with sons who are homosexual or bisexual.

Considered together, these studies present a complex picture of how gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation influence verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors. Sometimes these factors make a difference, other times they don’t, and in some cases they matter in unexpected ways, as when masculinity is positively related to affectionate communication. In addition, as we discussed earlier, even when we do find differences—for example, women use longer sentences than men, or lesbian women use more instrumental speech than heterosexual women—we must keep in mind that these are average differences. Thus, not every woman speaks in longer sentences than every man. Rather, women use longer sentences than men do on average.

As students of interpersonal communication, we should take care not to exaggerate or oversimplify the influence of gender roles, sex, or sexual orientation on communication behavior. These features often influence how we behave, but they do not affect every aspect of our lives at all times, as John Gray suggests. Human communication is more nuanced than that. In addition, our interpersonal interaction is affected by many influences besides the gender role, biological sex, or sexual orientation with which we identify.

**Learn It:** What is the difference between expressive and instrumental talk? How do gender roles, biological sex, and sexual orientation influence the experience and expression of emotion?

**Try It:** The next time you talk to an adult of the other sex, pay attention to your language style. Is your speech more instrumental or more expressive? Are you using powerful or powerless speech? Think about how your language style influences how effectively you are communicating.

**Reflect on It:** How would you characterize your verbal and nonverbal behavior? What role do you think your biological sex, gender role, and sexual orientation play in how you communicate with others?
Section 1} Understanding Culture and Communication (p. 41)

I. Understanding Culture and Communication
   A. What is culture?
      1. Distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups
      2. Acquiring a culture
   B. The components of culture
      1. Symbols
      2. Language
      3. Values
      4. Norms
   C. Cultures and co-cultures
      1. What are co-cultures?
      2. The bases of co-cultures
      3. Can you belong to multiple co-cultures?
   D. Communicating with cultural awareness

Section 2} How Culture Affects Communication (p. 47)

II. How Culture Affects Communication
   A. Individualism and collectivism
   B. High- and low-context cultures
   C. Low- and high-power distance
   D. Masculine and feminine cultures
E. Monochronic and polychronic cultures

- Time is considered to be a finite commodity in a monochronic culture; it is considered to be more infinite in a polychronic culture.

F. Uncertainty avoidance

- Cultures vary in their uncertainty avoidance, or their aversion to novelty and uncertainty.

G. Cultural communication codes

1. Idioms
2. Jargon
3. Gestures

- Cultures differ in their use of communication codes, such as idioms and gestures, which often have meaning only to people in a given culture.

Section 3) Understanding Gender and Communication (p. 55)

III. Understanding Gender and Communication

A. Gender roles and communication

1. The masculine gender role
2. The feminine gender role
3. The androgynous gender role
4. How gender roles change and vary

- Gender roles include masculinity, femininity, and androgyny, the meanings of which evolve over time.

B. Biological sex and communication

1. Psychological differences affect biological sex
2. Genetic differences affect biological sex
3. Anatomical differences affect biological sex

- Biological sex differentiates men and women but is influenced by psychological, genetic, and anatomical factors.

C. Sexual orientation and communication

1. Heterosexuality
2. Homosexuality
3. Bisexuality
4. Asexuality

- Sexual orientations include heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality.

D. Some explanations for gendered communication

- Some writers have argued that women and men communicate as though they come from different planets, or at least, different cultures. Others have asserted that those metaphors are exaggerations.

Section 4) How Gender Affects Communication (p. 66)

IV. How Gender Affects Communication

A. Gender and verbal communication

1. Expressive and instrumental talk
2. Language and power
3. Gendered linguistic styles

- Gender influences verbal communication, such as expressive and instrumental talk, power, and linguistic styles.

B. Gender and nonverbal communication

1. Touch and body movement
2. Emotional communication
3. Affectionate behavior

- Gender influences nonverbal communication, including touch and body movement, emotional communication, and nonverbal affection.