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THE IMPACT OF SEX AND ROLE IDENTITY ON EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTIONS OF MANAGERS' COMMUNICATION STYLE

Michael Willemyns, Cynthia Gallois and Victor J. Callan

Abstract

This study reports the findings of quantitative analyses of 157 employees' perceptions of their managers in both negative and positive conversations. The main theoretical frameworks were Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity Theory. MANOVA analyses revealed that intergroup dynamics, including ("us vs. them" perceptions such as "distancing", "dominant" "controlling") were invoked in the negative conversations, especially with male managers, while in-group dynamics (e.g. "similar to me", "supportive" and "friendly") were invoked in the positive conversations, especially with female managers. Further, the results showed that managers were perceived more negatively by their same-sex than their opposite sex employees. Finally, high-role-identifying employees rated managers in unsatisfactory conversations more positively than low role-identifying employees did. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Field of research: Management

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1. Introduction

The present study reports on statistical analyses of questionnaire data to analyze employees' perceptions of their managers in unsatisfactory (negative) conversations, and satisfactory (positive) conversations. While both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, only the quantitative results are discussed in this paper, due to space limitations.

A long tradition of the communication literature has found gender differences in communication behaviors and interactants' perceptions of communication behaviors (e.g., Sheridan, 2007; Weatherall and Gallois, 2003). Women have been found to be more accommodating in their communication style than men. For example, women are more likely to display affiliative and supportive communication (e.g., personal self-disclosure, facilitative topic management) and affiliative nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smiling, laughing: Barker, 1993). There is also much research showing that women are more likely to display "powerless" communication styles than men, such as using hedges, tag-questions, less interruptions and yielding the conversational floor (Smith, 1985; Tannen, 1994).

However, perceptions of a speaker's behavior often differ from actual behavior, due to factors such as situational norms and sex-role stereotypes. For example, despite the increase of women in higher status positions in organizations over recent years, female managers are often evaluated more negatively than males when they communicate in a power-marked manner, such as using assertive communication behaviors (see Sheridan, 2007; Wilson and Gallois, 1993).

As Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Social Identity Theory are the main theoretical frameworks in this research, they are now briefly discussed (for more comprehensive overviews, see Gallois et al., 1988; Shepard, Giles, and Le Poire, 2001). Central to CAT is the argument that during interactions, people often modify their communication style (e.g., accent, vocabulary, tone, dialect, formality) in order to achieve various goals. For example, interactants may have *accommodating* goals or motivations, such as seeking the other's social approval (Giles, Mulac, Bradac and Johnson, 1987), making communication as smooth and effective as possible (Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles and Coupland, 1988), or signaling that they belong to the same social group, such as a particular professional group (Bourhis, 1991). Conversely, CAT proposes *counteraccommodating* goals or motivations, such as signaling disapproval, or emphasizing social distance (Street, 1991).

As CAT takes a largely social-psychological intergroup perspective when examining interpersonal communication, social identity plays a major role in accommodation processes, so an understanding of social identity theory is necessary to understand the complexities of accommodation processes. For a comprehensive introduction to Social Identity Theory in the workplace context, see Haslam (2001). Social identity was defined by Tajfel (1974) as "the

individual's knowledge that he *(sic)* belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership" (p31). Social identity theory proposes that self-concept is comprised of personal identity, based on idiosyncratic characteristics such as abilities and psychological traits) and social identity, based on social group memberships. A fundamental concept in social identity theory is that of "ingroups vs. outgroups" ("us vs. them"). The more a person identifies with his or her ingroup (e.g., manager), the more he or she will feel distinct from outgroup members (e.g., employees).

Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate (2000) have argued that social identity theory can assist in our understanding of the intergroup nature of communication between individuals from different groups in organizations. Thus, interpersonal communication in the workplace is not only a function of individual characteristics of communicators, but also of social group memberships, such as status in the workplace (e.g. manager or employee).

Based on the research literature on sex-differences in communication (eg Sheridan, 2007), it was expected that in satisfactory conversations, female managers would be perceived more positively than male managers. For example, it was expected that male managers would be perceived as particularly negative in terms of power-marked communication such as dominance and control. Conversely, female managers in the satisfactory conversations were expected to be perceived more positively in terms of affiliation and relationship-oriented communication behaviors such as communicating similarities, positive non-verbal communication warmth and affiliation.

In the unsatisfactory conversations, however, it was expected that female managers would be perceived more negatively than male managers, as they would be perceived as having broken enduring sex-role expectations relating to feminine communication style (see Burgoon & Burgoon, 2001). As Wilson and Gallois (1993) discussed in terms of sex role appropriateness in assertive communication, attribution theory states that behavior which violates role expectations is perceived in an exaggerated manner.

As well as sex differences, the present study aimed to examine the effects of role identity on employees' perceptions of managers' communication behaviors. Willemyns, Gallois and Callan, 2003) demonstrated that social identity processes were salient in manager-employee interactions, particularly in threatening or unsatisfactory interactions, which invoke role identity and status attributions. Similarly, previous research has demonstrated that outgroup social identity issues were salient themes in unsatisfactory interactions, manifest in themes such as coercive power, dominance, face threat, and negative tone. Thus, it was expected in the present study that intergroup dynamics and perceptions of managers would be more salient in the negative conversations than in the positive conversations, especially in conversations involving female managers.

2. Method

The participants (hereafter referred to as 'employees') were 157 management and psychology students who had been in full-time employment for at least six months. They ranged in age from 18 to 58. There were 90 females (mean age 22.12 years) and 67 males (mean age 19.52 years). Their occupations and places of work covered a wide spectrum, including the service sector (retail, hospitality), education, and the health sector (nurses or health practitioners). They completed a set of two questionnaires (one questionnaire rated managers in positive conversations, the other rated managers in negative conversations). The focal questionnaire items are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Focal measured variables analyzed.

All responses were on a 6-point scales (1 = not at all; 6 = very much)

Role identity (Provided on background questionnaire with demographic data):

"*How much do you identify with your role at work*?"

Pre-conversation variables

(Provided immediately prior to writing an account of the conversation):

Stem question: *"Think back to how you thought of this person before you had the conversation. How would you have described him/her then?:"*

Items: friendly, dominant, similar to me, supportive, distancing, cold, typical of workers at the workplace, typical manager

During-conversation variables

(Provided immediately after the written account of the interaction:

"Describe the way the other person communicated during the conversation, by circling a number from 1 to 6 on each line below":

Easy to understand; Controlling of the conversation; Dominating; Communicated in a similar way to you; Considerate of your needs; Polite

Post-conversation variables

(Identical to pre-interaction items, but asked after the employee had written a description of the interaction):

"*As a result of this conversation, how would you describe this person now*:"

Items: friendly, dominant, similar to me, supportive, distancing, cold, typical of workers at the workplace, typical manager

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As shown in Table 1, employees' level of role identity was initially measured as a continuous variable (the questionnaire item "How much do you identify with your role at work?" 1 = not at all, 6 = very much). In order to analyze employee role identity and its interaction with employee sex in the series of MANOVAs below, this variable was recoded into three categories (low, medium and high role identity). The cut-off scores for each level were determined by making the number of employees per condition as even as possible. Table 2 shows the number of employees within each level. As the table shows, employees with a rating of 1, 2 or 3 were designated as low identifiers, those with a score of 4 were designated as medium-level identifiers, and those with a score of 5 or 6 were designated as high identifiers.

Table 2. Number of Employees Per Role Identity Category

Level of Role Identity	Rating on scale item	Number of employees
Low	1-3	57
Medium	4	49
High	5-6	51

Independent variables. The between-groups factors were employee sex, manager sex and employee role identity. Employee role-identity had three levels (low, medium and high). The repeated-measures factor was pre-post, which examined the difference between employees' pre-conversation and post-conversation ratings of their managers on questionnaire items.

Dependent variables. As shown in Table 1 above, the dependent variables consisted of structured questionnaire items (1 = not at all, 6 = very much), which measured employees' perceptions of their managers, pre-, during- and post-conversation.The pre-conversation items asked the employees to rate their managers as they thought of them before the conversation (friendly, dominant, similar to you, supportive, distancing, cold, typical of people at the workplace, typical manager). The during-conversation items asked employees to rate their managers' communication behaviors during the conversation on the following variables: easy to understand, controlling of the conversation, dominating, communicated in a similar way to you, considerate of your needs, and polite. Next, post-conversation items asked the employees to rate their managers

according to how they thought of them after the conversation, on the same items as the pre-conversation items

Overview of MANOVA analyses. The first four MANOVA analyses involved, respectively, the pre-conversation, during-conversation, post-conversation, and attribution variables for the satisfactory condition. The next four MANOVA analyses examined the same four sets of variables in the unsatisfactory condition. Finally, a set of repeated-measures MANOVA analyses was conducted, with pre- vs. post-conversation ratings ("*pre vs. post*") as the repeated measures factor (i.e., pre-conversation vs. post-conversation perceptions of managers' friendliness, politeness, support, dominance, distance and coldness). The between-subjects factors were manager sex, employee sex, and employee role identity.

3. Findings

In the satisfactory conversation condition, there was a borderline multivariate effect for employee sex (F (6, 140) = 2.03, p = .065), with univariate effects for *easy to understand* (F (1, 145) = 3.72, p < .05) and *polite* (F (1, 145) = 6.39, p < .05). Follow-up tests indicated that female employees rated their managers as easy to understand more than male employees did (5.43% vs. 5.12), and more polite than male employees did (5.46 vs. 5.06).

The results involving questionnaire items in the unsatisfactory condition also showed that managers were perceived more negatively by their same-sex than their opposite sex employees. For the pre-conversation items, there was a multivariate employee sex by manager sex interaction (F (8, 138) = 2.78, p < .01), with univariate effects for the variables *friendly*, *supportive*, *distant*, *cold*, and *typical of people at work*. Follow-up tests revealed that male employees perceived male managers as less friendly than female employees did (3.32 vs. 4.03; t (89) = -2.39, p = .05). Male employees rated male managers as more cold than female managers (2.42 vs. 3.30; t (65) = -2.92, p < .01), and male employees rated male managers as colder than female employees did (3.30 vs. 2.63; t (89) = 2.52, p < .05). Male employees also rated male managers as more distant than female managers (3.57 vs. 2.93; t (65) = 2.15, p < .05), and as less supportive than female managers (2.68 vs. 3.79; t (65) = -2.83, p < .01). This pattern of results indicates that male managers were perceived more negatively than female managers, especially by male employees.

In the unsatisfactory condition, there was a multivariate main effect for employee role identity for the pre-conversation variables (F (16, 278) = 2.62, p < .001), with univariate effects for the variables *similar to me* (F (1, 145) = 12.05, p < .001), *supportive* (F (1, 145) = 6.81, p < .01), and *friendly* (F (1, 145) = 3.24, p < .05,. Follow-up ANOVAs with Scheffé comparisons revealed that low and medium identifiers perceived managers as less similar to themselves than high identifiers (1.96 and 2.18 vs. 2.98), and that low identifiers perceived managers as less

supportive than high identifiers (2.65 vs. 3.41). Thus, for the pre-conversation items, lower role-identifying employees were more likely to perceive managers in the unsatisfactory interactions as unsupportive and dissimilar, indicating that employees had more negative and outgroup initial orientations toward these managers.

For the during-conversation variables in the unsatisfactory condition, there was a multivariate main effect for employee role identity (F (16, 274 = 2.05, $p < .05$), with univariate effects for the variables communicated in a similar way to me (F (1, 145) = 9.10, $p < .001$) and polite (F (1, 145) = 4.68, $p < .05$). Follow-up Scheffé tests showed that low and medium identifiers perceived their managers as communicating in a less similar way to themselves than the high identifiers did (2.32 and 2.47 vs. 3.12), and that the low and medium identifiers perceived their managers as less polite than high identifiers did (2.49 and 2.33 vs. 2.98). Thus, low and medium identifying employees rated managers in the unsatisfactory conversations more negatively than the high identifying employees, in terms of communicating similarity and politeness.

For the post-conversation variables in the unsatisfactory condition, there was a multivariate main effect for employee role identity (F (16, 278) = 3.42, $p < .001$), with univariate effects (df 1,145) for the variables *friendly* (F = 6.32, $p < .01$), *similar to me* (F = 13.52, $p < .001$), *supportive* (F = 9.18, $p < .001$), and *typical manager* (F = 6.70, $p < .001$). Follow-up tests revealed that low and medium identifiers perceived these managers as being less friendly than the high identifiers did (2.63 and 2.57 vs. 3.14). High identifiers perceived their managers as more similar to themselves than low and medium identifiers did (2.43 vs. 1.62 and 1.76) and high identifiers perceived their managers as more supportive than low identifiers (2.63 vs. 1.86). It is important to note that these means were in the lower half of the 6-point scale. So, while high identifying employees rated these managers less negatively than lower identifiers did, they rated them negatively in absolute terms. Finally, low identifiers rated their unsatisfactory managers as more typical of managers than medium or high identifiers did (4.40 vs. 3.35 and 3.65), indicating that low identifiers perceived these managers in more intergroup terms than higher identifiers did.

As hypothesized, employee role identity was not salient in the satisfactory conversation, but was very salient in the unsatisfactory conversations. This demonstrated that, as predicted, employee role identity was provoked in unsatisfying, threatening conversations. The findings also indicated that low role-identifying employees perceived female managers as more accommodating than male managers, in that female managers were perceived as using more informal, personal, non-role-oriented communication, including greater use of self-disclosures. This is consistent with recent research showing that female managers are more likely to use relationship-maintenance management styles, while male managers are more likely to use formal, instrumental approaches to

management, including a more authoritarian, coercive style of management (Stanford et al., 1995).

Pre vs. Post Conversation Main Effects

Results of the MANOVA analyses involving pre- vs. post-conversation perceptions are now discussed. The means for these items are shown in Table 3, and Table 4 shows the significant results of the MANOVA analyses. As Table 4 shows, in the satisfactory condition, there was a significant multivariate main effect for *pre-vs.-post* in the satisfactory condition (F (8, 138) = 8.97, p < .001), with highly significant univariate *pre-vs.-post* effects for all variables except the two typicality variables. In the unsatisfactory condition, there was a significant multivariate main effect for *pre-vs-post* (F (8, 138) = 9.16, p < .001), with univariate pre-vs.-post effects for all variables.

Table 3. Means For Pre- vs. Post-Conversation Comparisons

	Satisfactory Condition		Unsatisfactory Condition	
	Pre-conv.	Post-conv.	Pre-conv.	Post-conv.
Friendly	4.57	5.12	3.69	2.78
Dominant	3.92	3.57	4.34	4.60
Similar to me	3.27	3.86	2.36	1.92
Supportive	4.28	4.77	3.04	2.24
Distant	2.65	2.15	3.43	3.85
Cold	2.19	1.81	3.30	3.65
Typical of people at work	3.66	3.73	3.44	3.19
Typical manager	4.10	3.97	3.99	3.83

Table 4. Significant MANOVA Results For Pre- vs. Post Conversation Items

Satisfactory condition

Source	Multivariate F	Variables [b]	Univ. F
Pre-post [a]	8.97***	Friendly	40.47***
		Dominant	12.53***
		Similar to me	39.21***
		Supportive	31.25***
		Distant	29.21***
		Cold	16.69***

Unsatisfactory condition

Source	Multivariate F	Variables [b]	Univ. F
Pre-post [a]	9.16***	Friendly	56.84***
		Dominant	4.44*
		Similar to me	20.35***
		Supportive	43.61***
		Distant	6.10**
		Cold	16.47***

Source	Multivariate F	Variables [d]	Univ. F
Pre-post x role identity x employee sex [c]	1.85*	Similar to me	4.95**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ [1] $p = .07$
[a] df = 8, 138 [b] df = 1, 145 [c] df = 16, 274 [d] df = 2, 145

Overall, the results involving changes in employees' perceptions of managers were as expected. Managers in the satisfactory conversations were perceived in more positive ingroup terms after the conversations than before them, in which they were perceived as communicating accommodatingly. In contrast, managers in the unsatisfactory condition were perceived in more negative outgroup terms after the conversations, in which they were perceived as communicating in a counteraccommodating manner.

Consistent with previous findings involving employee role identity (e.g., Gallois and Wilson, 1993) the results involving differences before and after the

conversations indicated that employees' role identity was made salient as a result of the unsatisfactory managers' counteraccommodating communication. That is, while low role-identifying employees perceived managers in more intergroup terms before the interactions than high identifiers, this intergroup effect became even more pronounced after the unsatisfactory interactions than prior to them, as a result of the managers' counteraccommodating communication behaviors.

In sum, managers were perceived in more ingroup, accommodating terms in the satisfactory condition, but in outgroup, counteraccommodating terms in the unsatisfactory condition, and these perceptions were amplified post-conversation. Further, role identity was again shown to be elicited in the threatening, unsatisfactory conversations (particularly for low and medium role-identifying employees), but not in the satisfactory condition, which is consistent with the overall pattern of results involving employee role identity.

4. Discussion

Overall, the results involving manager sex, employee sex, role identity, and pre- vs. post-conversation differences revealed a number of interesting findings, both predicted and unexpected. As predicted, female managers were perceived by employees as more accommodating than male managers overall. For example, female managers were perceived as communicating interpersonal similarities more than male managers. As noted earlier, communication of similarities is a central concept in communication accommodation theory, indicating interactants' desire to accommodate the listener through communicating personal similarities, shared views, etc., and thereby reduce social distance.

Female managers were described as more dominating than male managers in the unsatisfactory conversations. Again, this may have been due to sex-role stereotypes by the employees, who perceived assertive female managers as dominating, while perceiving male managers as displaying expected managerial behaviors (see Wilson and Gallois, 2003).

In addition, in the unsatisfactory conversations, male managers were perceived as using more coercive and aggressive communication behaviors than female managers. Together, these findings suggest that while managers' dominating behaviors may be seen as more appropriate for male managers than female managers, and are therefore more salient when communicated by female managers, there is a threshold at which male managers' negative communication is no longer considered role-appropriate. The results suggest that this threshold is triggered not by dominance, but by threat, as both coercive power and aggression involve a form of threatening behavior on the part of managers, as discussed in the content analysis in the previous study (see also Gallois and Giles, 1998).

The results involving manager sex by employee sex interactions yielded an unexpected but consistent pattern of results. While it was predicted that male managers would be perceived as more accommodating with male employees than with female employees, the opposite was found. For example, female employees perceived male managers as more empathic than male employees did in the unsatisfactory conversations. Consistent with this unexpected finding, employees perceived their same sex managers as more counteraccommodating than their opposite sex managers. For example, male employees perceived male managers as using more negative communication styles than female managers, and female employees perceived female managers as using negative tone more than male employees did.

The finding that managers were perceived as more accommodating with their opposite-sex employees than with their same-sex employees can partly be explained by the finding that people in mixed-sex dyads feel greater self-consciousness and a need to cooperate (see Burgoon et al., 1987). Burgoon et al. also pointed out that studies have found more competition in all-female groups than in all-male groups or mixed-gender groups. This could explain why female employees in this study perceived male managers as more accommodating than female managers. It may also explain the finding that male employees perceived female managers as more accommodating than male managers. The latter finding was predicted, as females have been found to be more accommodating than males in general, but also because female managers have been found to use more relational and supportive management styles than male managers, who rely more on instrumental and task-oriented management styles (Amason and Allen, 1997; Stanford et al., 1995; Tannen, 1994).

In terms of role identity predictions, it was hypothesized that employees with high role identity would perceive their managers in intergroup terms more than employees with lower role identity. However, this was only partly supported. While all employees perceived unsatisfactory condition managers in counteraccommodating and intergroup terms, regardless of their level of role identity, high role identifiers perceived these managers in relatively less counteraccommodating terms than the low and medium identifiers.

As discussed above, high role identifiers may indirectly identify with their managers in the organization (this was supported by the finding that high identifiers rated their managers as more similar to themselves than low identifiers did), and thereby high identifiers may discount their managers' counteraccommodating behavior to some extent. Indeed, Haslam (2001) found that there is conceptual overlap between identification with an organization, and identification with one's work role. More research is needed to examine the different dimensions underlying organizational identification and its consequences for manager-employee communication.

Interestingly, results involving role identity and differences in perceptions pre- vs. post-conversation showed that employee role identity became more salient in the unsatisfactory condition, especially post-conversation. This indicated that, as predicted, intergroup perceptions were invoked as a result of managers' negative, counteraccommodating communication. This effect did not occur in the satisfactory condition. This is consistent with Gallois and Giles (1998), who argued that negative, threatening interactions with outgroup members provokes intergroup dynamics, while positive, non-threatening interactions with outgroup members are likely to result in intergroup dynamics being minimized, and interpersonal dynamics becoming salient.

Conclusion and Implications

In sum, this study demonstrated a number of sex differences in perceived communication accommodation behaviors between managers and employees, with female managers being perceived as more positive and accommodating than male managers in satisfactory conversations, but being perceived as more negative and counteraccommodating than male managers if they broke sex-role stereotypes (see Burgoon and Burgoon, 2001; Wilson and Gallois, 1993). It also demonstrated that employees perceived their opposite sex managers as more positive and accommodating than their same-sex managers. Finally, employee role identity was a salient factor in employees' perceptions of managers' communication accommodation behaviors.

The theoretical implications of these findings are that they support the robustness of Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity Theory as frameworks for analyzing manager-employee communication. The practical implications are that the findings demonstrate that the use of ingroup communication by managers can reduce social distance and facilitate more inclusive positive perceptions by employees, leading to more effective workplace communication. A limitation of this study was the relatively small number of respondents, so larger-scale studies are necessary for further generalizability of the findings.

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