4-1-2017

Gendered Communication Styles in the Workplace

Erica Greenwood

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xulanexus

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xulanexus/vol14/iss2/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by XULA Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in XULAneXUS by an authorized editor of XULA Digital Commons. For more information, please contact kstidell@xula.edu.
Gendered Communication Styles in the Workplace

Erica Greenwood

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kimberly Chandler, Communication Studies

Abstract
Research on African American communication styles within an organization is scant within the literature. Scholarship focusing on these communication styles through the lens of gender is even less researched. The purpose of this research is to examine African American gendered communication styles in the workplace. An ethnographic method was used to study a Human Resources office on a southern HBCU campus. Four African American employees, one male and three females, were observed in order to explore how the intersection of gender, race, and culture create unique communication behaviors. Findings suggest that African American communication styles were pervasive in this office. However, gender informed the ways in which these styles manifested themselves within interpersonal contexts. Stereotypical feminine and masculine norms were not attributed to men and women, respectively. As a result, the study found that the intersection of race, communication, culture and gender creates unique communication characteristics that do not mirror those of the dominant society.

Key Terms:
- Gendered Communication
- Masculine Norms
- Workplace Communication
- Feminine Norms
- African American Performance
Introduction

Previous studies have focused on gendered communication styles and how they reflect masculine and feminine norms (Merchant, 2012; Wood, 1994). This research centered around how masculine and feminine norms seek to identify certain characteristics that are unique to each group and how the characteristics are performed in the workplace (Merchant, 2012; Wood, 1994; Verderber, 1995). However, there is a lack of research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chosen to increase research on African American gendered communication styles in relation to workplace communication. Using ethnography as a method, this study seeks to examine these styles of communicative interactions between employees in a human resources office at a southern Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This specific subject was chose

Literature Review

Gendered Communication Styles

In order to understand the need for the present study, it is necessary to understand how gendered communication functions within people. For the purposes of this research, gendered communication is looking at the differences between male and female communication characteristics. Gendered communication norms vary based on feminine and masculine styles. Past literature suggests that feminine styles, or what can be called feminine speech communities, reflect characteristics such as upholding support, maintaining connections, and being open in order to maintain relationships (Wood, 1994). Feminine speech communities are comprised of gendered communication norms that many women exhibit; however, men can also exhibit these norms as well (Wood, 1994). Speech communities are comprised of people whose communication reflects the same characteristics.

Research also suggests that masculine communication styles reflect the need “…to exert control, define goals, defend personal stance, [demonstrate] knowledge [and] dominate…conversation[s]…to be forceful and direct” (Verderber, 1995, p. 21-22). Just as there are feminine speech communities, there are also masculine speech communities. These speakers reflect the need to accomplish goals, establish status, and exert control when in conversation with others (Wood, 1994). This communication style can be characterized by assertive and firm behavior, reflecting the need for power within relationships. As previously stated with feminine speech communities, both men and women can reflect masculine communication styles.

Gendered Communication Styles in the Workplace

In addition to gendered communication styles and norms, previous research has also focused on the ways in which feminine and masculine norms function in the workplace (Verderber, 1995). This is important to note because Tannen (1990) suggests that people who are immersed in the working world must find ways to communicate with the opposite sex in order to successfully communicate their ideas and positions. Understanding how people in these speech communities engage in
communication sheds light on the effectiveness of each communication style within the workplace. For example, some researchers have found that male managers tend to use soft aims with other male managers and hard aims with female managers (Merchant, 2012). In relation to this research, aims are defined as specific targets used to distribute tasks in the workplace. This means that male managers use specific targets such as soft tones and demands with other males in the workplace and are forceful and louder with females in the workplace when assigning tasks. These findings imply that males rely more on appealing to pathos, defined as appeals to emotions, with other males and rely more on exerting power over other females.

Contrastingly, Merchant (2012) found that females used discussion and motivation regularly with other female employees, while exchange tactics were reflected with male employees. Exchange tactics are those strategies that one uses to give and take with another person. This implies that when communicating in the workplace, females pride themselves on being emotionally connected to other females and finding common ground with other males. This implication shows that females are more of the silent and passive communicators in the workplace.

African American Communication Style

While previous research reflects the salience of gendered communication norms in the workplace, there is a lack of scholarship on the impact of culture on gendered norms in the workplace. For example, African American communication styles reflect specific cultural characteristics. In terms of communication styles, researchers Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) state “… African Americans are likely to include enhanced nonverbal immediacy behaviors like eye contact and head nods, lots of laughter, in-group gestures, and a lack of Mainstream American English; whereas in Black-White conversations, there is often restraint and awareness of grammar” (p.144). Speech norms also include “… characteristics that distinguish African American communication styles like aspectual be and double negatives” (Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003, p.145). This means that within African American communication, words are often spoken such as “she be” and “ain’t got” because the grammatically correct meaning is often understood without being said explicitly amongst participants.

Another example of these characteristics is reflected in Scott’s (2000) study of two discourse markers, “girl” and “look,” used by a group of Black women in discussion about their language use across cultural borders. While the use of “girl” indicates solidarity between Black women, the use of “look” is reported as calling attention to differences in identity with those who are not Black and female. The women’s talk about the use of these two discourse markers indicates an awareness of the implications of language choice when negotiating identity and social distance in various cultural worlds.

The kind of masculine and feminine norms Scott (2000) reflects are not universal. Rather, they reflect unique African American communications styles that must be understood within a cultural context to be appreciated. This understanding is critical in order to understand that these communication styles are complex. The gendered communication styles reflected in previous research display more universal speech styles rather than culturally informed communication styles. The present study seeks to remedy that issue by focusing exclusively on African American gendered communication styles in the workplace. To that end, the research question guiding this study is as follows: What are the features of African American gendered communication styles in the workplace?
Method

To understand the unique features of African American gendered communication styles in the workplace, the method of ethnography was chosen. Ethnography is the study of people speaking, interacting, and performing their own culture (Brown and Hill, 2006). According to Seth Kahn (2001), ethnographers “observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, rethink, and describe cultures, their members, and [their] own involvements with them” (p.177). Ethnographic studies typically focus on people using methods such as observations, in-depth interviews, and face-to-face interviews (Brown and Hill, 2006).

Observation was the tool used to acquire the data for the present study. This tool was used because I was a work-study student at the research site.

Procedure

In keeping with ethnographic procedures, I utilized my position as a student office assistant to observe a Human Resources office, the site in which this study took place. My positionality as a student office assistant is vital because I get to see what goes on inside and outside of meetings, and what goes on inside of each employee’s office, which is not something that everyone has the opportunity to observe. In addition, this particular site is one that deals with every aspect of an employee’s personal information, whether faculty, staff, or student. This range of information ranges from tax, family, and insurance information. What I found the most useful about this office in relation to this study is the fact that at the time of my observation, it was going through some top-down staff changes, which meant that many employees were getting fired or moved to other jobs across campus. Being that jobs were moving constantly, I felt as though what I would observe would be quite authentic. Furthermore, I went to this office every day for two weeks and gathered data on four employees. Before going to the office, I would take my notepad and laptop out and label them. Across the top of the pages I would have the employee’s name, and I would have the dates going down the page. Then, I went into the office and carried out my normal work-study duties as normal, so the employees would not know that I was observing them for my research. I did not let the employees know that I would be observing them because I did not want them to perform their daily activities and conversations in any altered way. I wanted to observe them in their comfort zone. However, by not informing the employees that I would be observing them brings my ethics into question. The ethical dilemma with using ethnography as a method that Murphy and Dingwall (2001) mentions is that covert observation is seen by some as particularly problematic since it necessarily implies deception; yet to let people know they were being observed might result in an alteration of their behavior. In qualitative research it may be impossible to maintain a neat distinction between covert and overt research. However, knowing this limitation upfront allows for an ethical research practice.

I spent two hours per day over a total of six months with each person to closely observe them. While observing, I was looking at the employees’ use of gestures, African American female communication styles since the office is made up of majority females, and how power was distributed in the office. As I observed each person and their interactions with each other, I became intimately acquainted with their personalities, use of language, and gestures. The female employees’ interactions with each other, the entire staff’s interactions with guests to the office, and the female staff members’ interactions with their male supervisor are noted in the findings. With this data I plan to gain new insights that can be used to describe African American gendered communication.
Participants
As noted above, a total of four African American employees (three females, one male) were observed in a Human Resources office at an HBCU. In this working environment, the first female observed will be noted in this study as Female 1. The second female observed will be noted in this study as Female 2. The third female observed will be noted in this study as Female 3. The male observed will be noted in this study as Male 1. These four employees were selected because they held the most potential to acquire data demonstrating gendered communication in the workplace within an African American cultural context.

Findings and Analysis

Situation One
After collecting data on the four employees, I started to see particular gendered communication features happen often when the African American employees talked amongst themselves and to others of the same race. I found in my data situations where gestures were used in order to show support for one another. For example, the women in this office seemed to be more comfortable with hugging those who are African American rather than those who are not. I came to this conclusion because I saw their subtle facial expressions given when they went to hug those of another race. However, the African American women still hugged those who were not of the same race. The male in the office seemed to not be comfortable with hugging at all in times when support was needed. To gauge levels of comfort, I made sure to also offer support and listen whenever someone needed me to. Both the male and the females gave eye contact and head nods when listening to others speak. However, the male seemed to lose interest after a while and stopped giving eye contact. The following example demonstrates a conversation involving a hug being given:

Female 1: Hey Jennie (nickname given to one of their coworkers) …why you looking so sad today?!”

Female 2: Girl, my husband mom died last night.

Female 1: I’m so sorry to hear that. (Female 1 goes to give Female 2 a hug.) Girl let me know if y’all need anything and please give your husband my condolences. I will call to check up on y’all later.

The above conversation shows Female 1 and Female 2, both African American, communicating about family. Also, it shows how comfortable and natural it is for Female 1 to go over and give Female 2 a hug to show sympathy. I was able to measure how comfortable and natural the employees were because every morning when each coworker came into the office they made sure to go around to each other’s office to say good morning. At this point each morning they were then able to see if the other workers were in a good mood or not. If something seemed wrong they would be comforted every time. This shows that the African American women were more open to showing support to others.

Situation Two
In addition to gestures, my data collection showed situations pertaining specifically to African American female communication. For example, the women in this office often communicated amongst themselves and with other African American women by disclosing a lot of information. The conversations amongst the women in the office sometimes got off track of work activities and led to talk about outside activities. The conversations sometimes went on for hours
before they realized and quickly jumped back on track with normal work activities. Also, when family conversations occurred, the women conversing with one another seemed very emotionally attached to the conversation. However, the male seemed to keep it more professional in terms of not having hours of side-tracked conversations. The following example demonstrates a conversation about a non-work related topic:

Female 1: Hey gurl…whatchu got on going on this weekend?!

Female 2: Girl my grandbaby having her birthday party at Celebration Station. You should bring your niece.

Female 1: Sounds fun. Let me see some pictures of what decorations y’all have gotten so far.

(20 minutes have passed by)

Female 2: Girl let me get back to this office, we done got carried away looking at all these pictures.

The above conversation shows the African Americans engaging in talk about outside activities. Also, it shows them getting carried away and losing track of time signifying that they are very responsive to their co-workers. This shows how comfortable the African American women are when having conversations with each other and how they have the upmost respect for family.

Situation Three

In addition to the African American gestures and African American female conversations, my data collected showed a swapping of gender roles and the speech communities one usually demonstrates. This is because the male in the office seemed to have related more to the feminine speech communities because he often used soft tactics, was less direct, and less demanding. The male at times seemed to let others dominate the conversations. However, the women in this office related more to the masculine speech communities. They were often times direct, aggressive, and focused on what they wanted and what they needed to do, all while still at times soft, emotional, and open. The following example shows how a typical meeting goes in this office:

Female 1: I say we stick to paper timesheets in order to have physical backup in case the system fails.

Female 2: Well I say we change to doing more technology based timekeeping.

Male 1: Well if you all say so then I’ll have to consider both options.

Female 2: Mr. P. you have to listen to my plan. It is way more efficient than what Female 1 is proposing.

Male 1: (Silent)

Female 2: Mr. P. do you have any suggestions?

Male 1: Not at the moment, but I will do my best to please the majority.

The above conversation shows how the females in the office are demanding and are not afraid to speak up in meetings. Also, it shows how this particular male is very silent in the meetings instead of the typical voice that gives all of the commands.

Situation Four

Further, not only did my data collection show situations surrounding gestures, African American female conversations, and a crossing of speech communities, but a crossing of the
exertion of power. For example, the male in the office did not seem to exert power when communicating with the women in his office. In meetings, he was more often a silent member than the one overpowering the conversation and demanding what others do. Instead, at times, the women seemed to be the voices that were heard inside and outside of meetings. The following example shows who exerted the most power in the office:

(Meeting starts to discuss changes needed in the office.)
Female 1: Immediately...We should do xyz in order to make the best changes to improve the use of technology versus paper processes for all faculty and staff.

Female 2: Also, we should not only do xyz but we should also set up training sessions to get all the information out to end users.

(Female 1 and Female 2 debate for about 15 minutes)
Male 1: (Silent)
Female 2: Mr. P what do you think about what Female 1 has said we should do?
Male 1: Okay that is fine. I will see what I can work out.

The above conversation shows the females exerting all the power in the meetings. The male typically sat back while the females debated about which office change was best. Typically, one would see the male saying what will be changed and when the change would happen, but in this office it was not the case.

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to examine African American communication styles in the workplace. This study was guided by the following research question: what are the features of African American gendered communication styles in the workplace? Previous research suggests that African American gendered communication styles reflect lots of laughter, in-group gestures, and nonverbal immediacy behaviors in response to this research question (Wood, 1994, and Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003). However, the present study demonstrates new and interesting insights that respond to the research question. Examples of the unique ways in which African Americans demonstrate particular gendered communication styles within the workplace are reflected in what I suggest are three pervasive themes: feminine nonverbal behaviors, crossing of gender and direct/indirect communication styles, and power language. The following discussion reflects an explanation of these themes.

Theme 1: Feminine Nonverbal Behaviors
Feminine nonverbal behaviors are behaviors that are performed without speaking such as hugging, nodding, and eye contact (Wood, 1994). These nonverbal behaviors were reflected in the data while the African American women were having conversations with other African Americans as well as at times with those people of a different race concerning topics like birthdays, holidays, death, or to show support. By the African Americans performing these nonverbal behaviors amongst themselves and with those of a different race, they differed from previous research because those who communicate with people who are a different race from them typically are skeptical about showing support (Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003). However, this was not the case with the African Americans observed throughout my time of gathering data. This is an important feature to
add to previous research because it offers a more accurate description of these African American gendered communication styles.

**Theme 2: Crossing Of Gender and Direct/Indirect Communication Styles**

Direct communication is when the speaker, usually a male, is typically aggressive and forceful, and indirect communication is when the speaker, usually a female, is passive and less assertive (Verderber, 1995). However, these gendered communication styles were reflected in the data by the male using indirect communication and the females using direct communication. The male used indirect communication in the office through soft tactics, like talking in a soft tone and asking his female employees to do a task when they get a chance. The females showed direct communication in the office when they were always the first to verbalize their opinions and debate issues in meetings. This crossing of gender and typical communication style differs from previous research that found that males tend to use hard tactics with female employees (Merchant, 2012). This is not the situation in this office and brings out an important implication in light of previous research: males may align more with the indirect communication style, and females may align more with the direct communication style. The crossing of direct/indirect communication styles is a unique feature that will enhance what is already known about African American gendered communication styles by suggesting that this particular communication group has the ability to switch the ways in which they communicate based on the situation.

**Theme 3: Power Language**

Power language is language in which the speaker, usually a male, exerts power when speaking in the workplace by giving orders and speaking loudly (Verderber, 1995). However, power language was reflected in the data by the females exerting the power, control and dominating the conversations. On the other hand, the male was mostly a silent partner, while the females dominated the conversations. I think this is because the male was trying to please the female employees, so he did that by letting them overpower the conversations at times. This is different from previous research that found that the male in the work setting exerts power by being direct, demanding, and firm (Verderber, 1995). This new insight is beneficial to previous research because it further shows the complexity of African American gendered communication styles.

**Conclusion**

Although previous research suggests that African American gendered communication styles reflect a lack of Standardized English, nonverbal immediacy behaviors, and laughter, the present study found new features of African American communication styles in the workplace (Wood, 1994, and Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003). The three pervasive themes analyzed – feminine nonverbal behaviors, crossing of gender and direct/indirect communication styles, and power language – all suggest that African American gendered communication styles entail much more complexity than what is currently known. Not only do African American gendered communication styles contain nonverbal immediacy behaviors, a lot of laughter, and in-group gestures as found in previous research, the present study suggests that workplace communication may exhibit females expressing a lot of nonverbal behaviors with all races, females using more power language than males, and females being more direct than males. This adds detail to the features already known about African American gendered workplace communication.

This new information tells us that this style is as valuable as every other
communication style because it has more than one dimension. Also, the fact that those within this communication style can not only conform to the characteristics of the typical communication styles, such as passive and active voice, gestures, and exerting power as stated in previous research, but also make these styles their own, shows just how adaptable and valuable African American communication is. These ramifications about the value of African Americans communication complexity has merit that needs to be added to previous scholarship. These results may suggest positive changes in the workplace, as the way one communicates with African Americans may be altered because of a better understanding of the deeper meanings behind why they communicate the way that they do. There also may be changes to the way one describes this communication style as complex rather than simply lacking Standard English. Also, this study suggests that gendered communication is not fixed, but it is fluid and evolving every day.

Limitations and Future Considerations

One limitation of this study is that the data was only collected on four individuals who were African American. Another limitation was that due to the top-down staff changes happening at this university, the employees were sometimes in and out of the office in a number of meetings, which affected the pool of data.

However, this study is intended to be a rough guide for future scholars who want to add relevant scholarship to what is currently known about African American workplace communication. I suggest that researchers select a wider range of participants to be interviewed by looking at African Americans both inside and outside of this particular office. Also, future researchers can record the employees’ conversations and interactions on lunch breaks and at weekend work-related functions in order to see if any changes or new features of African American gendered communication styles are revealed in relation to how they communicate in the workplace.

References


**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr. Kimberly Chandler for all of her support with advising me while writing this paper. Also, I would like to thank all of the workers in the Xavier University of Louisiana’s Writing Lab for helping me edit and revise my paper.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivate Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit: [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)