Gendered Differences in Listening

Andrew Billings

Wisconsin Lutheran College
This chapter will cover the differences both real and perceived between genders pertaining to listening. A well-known body of research suggests that inherent listening differences are observable between men and women including listening profile style and empathy. Many of these observable differences point to the conclusion that women are better listeners than men, although why exactly this is remains unclear. What is lacking in the public knowledge, however, is the equally legitimate school of thought that these differences are overblown and account for a very small amount of individual communication style; particularly when viewed from the dichotic lens of communal and agentic communicators.

Deborah Tannen’s 1990 contention that men and women speak in distinct ‘genderlects’ contributed greatly to the research and discussion of gender differences in the time since then. According to Tannen (1990), women tend to hear symbols of connection and intimacy while communicating and men symbols of independence and status. Should her premise be accepted that a different dialect is being used, would it not imply difficulty for communicators in listening to the other gender on these grounds? Booth-Butterfield (1984) echoes Tannen’s assertion of differences in listening between gender in stating that men and women “[listen] for different purposes and have different goals.” Weaver (1972) posited that attention to cues in communication is an area with noticeable gender disparity; men being goal and fact oriented in attention to cues and women being relation oriented. Females are predispositioned to people-oriented style of listening while men are more predisposed to action, context, and time orientations (Johnston, Weaver, Watson, Barker, 2000).

The problem with taking research of such general nature at face value is that it makes sweeping statements that should make the reader question the legitimacy of such broad generalizations. Has the recent wave of attention crashing down on the transgender movement...
done nothing to shed light on the fact that even within a group bound by biological sex or the construct of gender, great differences can exist. The student as a seeker of truth should be curious about the consequences of making stark distinctions between two groups (male and female) that are far more similar than different. Differences are indeed noticeable between females and males in listening, that much is clear, and this review is not intended to undermine existing research, but rather to synthesize it in a way that allows it to fit into the reader’s communication schema.

One of the most observable areas of differences in listening between males and females is in the realm of empathic listening: listening with the intent of understanding the speaker’s feelings. Pence and Vickery (2012) suggest that listening that is desirable and good has to by definition be empathic. They stated that listening is person oriented and sees a communicator attempting to understand what the feelings of another person are. Echoing this sentiment is the statement of Johnston, Weaver, Watson, and Barker that males display more characteristics of traditionally poor listeners than women do. When the effects of personality are controlled, females still exhibit the tendency to show significantly better responses in an active-empathic manner than do males (Pence and James, 2015). Pence and James stated that these findings were in line with a larger body of research that suggests females have greater tendencies toward empathy than males. This finding is important to remember, especially in regards to Johnston, Weaver, Watson, and Barker’s suggestions about listening and personality covered toward the end of this chapter. If the proposition that empathic listening inherently constitutes good listening, then the conclusion that women have at least some advantage over men in being good listeners is inescapable.
Empathic listening is far from the only area that women have the upper hand over men when it comes to listening. Bryden (1980) and Lurito (2000)’s findings paint a fascinating picture over how these observed differences come about, and offer some neurological reasoning for them. The right hemisphere of the human brain is the dominant side for processing emotional information, while the left side is associated with understanding. Bryden found that females use both sides while processing information, while Lurito found that males tend to listen primarily with the left side. While understanding no doubt is a crucial component to empathy, the fact that the female brain can better marry it with processing emotion is likely an important component of both better empathic listening and listening in general. Sawyer, Gayle, Topa, and Poneis (2014) found listening fidelity (the degree to which mental images help by senders and receivers converge) to have a small difference in genders, with females having the advantage and that gender had a small effect on listening apprehension levels. Future research would be prudent to compare listening fidelity when people of different genders communicate. Bassili (1979) and Macoby and Jacki (1974) both found that females exhibit better use of verbal memory and ability to comprehend nonverbal messages than males do. Females certainly seem to enjoy a degree of advantage in listening that males do not possess.

Education and the classroom environment is an arena that listening differences between genders manifest in particularly interesting ways. The structure of our education system has been traditionally thought at times to be disenfranchising to women, though that may not be the case in practice. Research by Tannen (1990), Fishman (1978, 1980), and Berkley et al (1986) has suggested that learning styles vary between genders, with male learners being oriented toward activity based learning and females toward learning that is an exploration of thoughts and feelings. A 1998 study by the Oregon Mathematics Education Council found that there were
significant gender differences in individual listening styles, which stays in line with existing research on listening styles between genders. The same study also saw that males were outshined by females in reading and writing outcomes. These results were not an anomaly. A 2000 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study of 32 nations found that females were superior in reading in all countries, often across every single dimension of reading studies. In keeping with the notion of difficulties listening across genders being the consequence of different genderlects, a link has been identified between the feminization of classroom talk and the underachievement of boys academically, although Hunter, Gambell, and Randhawa (2005) question the legitimacy of this link. The apparent reason for this link is that as education moves in a direction of small group interaction carrying higher importance, females are better positioned to thrive in such an environment. A few studies have been conducted on communication in small groups between genders, with interesting results. Maskit and Herz-Lazarewitz (1986) indicated that an even balance of gender in a group setting in a language arts class allowed for the most giving and asking for advice than a group dominated by either gender. Madhek (1992) found similar results with an even split in a small group in a science classroom with researchers observing lower stress levels and higher on-task discussion in gender-balanced groups. These findings suggest that while males may seem to be poorer listeners by many measures, they are absolutely necessary for the most ideal synthesis of communication. In terms of contradicting evidence to this idea however, the most important finding on the subject of small group communication and gender comes from Hunter, Gambell, and Randhawa’s 2005 study. In this study it was shown that in small groups dominated by females, groups were better advanced and stimulated discussion, and were more willing to voice ideas. Even males in these groups showed more tendencies to communicate in a traditionally effeminate manner, higher capacity to
listen actively, better use of body language, and increased proficiency in use of nonverbals. It goes without saying that this dichotomy begs many questions. For instance, the possibility of males even being considered good communicators as society is currently structured is called into question. Females are clearly more predisposed to experience success in academics than their male counterparts, particularly on account of the more inclusive nature of female listening and communication in general.

Females, for various reasons, tend to show stronger and more desirable characteristics as listeners then do males, but do they know it? Data on how listeners perceive themselves reveals that men and women generally understand their listening style differences and that men are more likely than women to perceive themselves as better listeners than they really are. According to Sargent and Weaver (2008) women rate themselves accurately as people listeners and men likewise as content listeners. Although adolescent males may be disadvantaged in school on account of poorer listening skills, they do tend to believe that they are better listeners than they really are (Sawyer, Gayle, Topa, and Poneis 2014). This can be dangerous, as a poor listener is not wont to improve his listening skills if he perceives himself to be perfectly respectable in that regard. Echoing the 2000 OECD study referenced previously, self-efficacy (the seeing of self as capable of meeting benchmarks and welcoming obstacles) in reading is higher worldwide for females than males. Perhaps the answer to the question of if males and females realize the listening differences between them is evident in the gender with which they prefer to communicate. Both male sand females perceive interaction with females to be more satisfying and meaningful, citing intimacy and disclosure as reasons for this (Hunter, Gambell, and Randhawa 2005).
Thus far, it seems that the differences between males and females as listeners are stark and clearly defined. However, it would be an injustice to you, the student, if you were not exposed to the school of thought that the consequences of these gender differences are overblown in proportion to how much they truly influence listening. A sizable body of research (Ashmore, 1980, Bem, 1985, Defrancisco, 1992) suggests that differences between men and women as communicators may be more perceived than real. More specific to the current subject, Ares (1998) and Bem (1993) contend that gender differences are real but merely play minimal roles in listening style. Canary and House’s 1993 meta analysis indicated that sex differences only account for about one percent of variables in social interactions. While this isn’t narrowed down specifically to listening and gender, it stands to reason that individuals are shortchanged by theories that suggest they be shuffled neatly into a preconceived notion as to how genders listen and communicate. For example; Al-Amari and Al-Mahanseh (2011) both found that male and female undergraduates at Hashemite University did not exhibit significant differences in dimensions of listening styles profiles. While this is a small sample size and a statistical outlier, it raises a few important points: listening styles could be cultural, listening style differences could be generally true but may not bear out perfectly, and most importantly that males and females are clearly not simply assigned a listening style based on their gender; freewill is an important factor that is ignored when stereotyping and generalizing across billions of people.

Stereotypes are indeed powerful in communication; Newcombe and Arnkeiff (1979) found that in instances of men and women displaying identical communication behaviors, they were perceived still by listeners in terms of stereotypes for their gender. This hits on a possibility that could explain to a large degree perceived differences between genders. Stereotypes can lead individuals to become self-fulfilling prophecies. If an individual constantly
hears that he or she communicates a certain way based on their gender, it is quite likely that they will be inclined to some degree to fall neatly into their assigned place. One of the most thought provoking theories pertaining to this discussion is Hunter, Gambell, and Randhawa’s theory that if gender is accepted largely as a social construct then it must follow that stereotypes between genders are just as much a social construct. Like gender, stereotypes are real, but they may simply be an invention of society, and not inherently real. This would not upset existing theories and findings on gender listening differences, but may shed light on these things that seem inherent to humans; namely, that they are inherent only because we say that they are.
References


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