Further Readings


Kramarae, Robin Lakoff, Marsha Houston, and Deborah Tannen.

Most communication scholars date genderlect theory to a 1974 article written by Cheris Kramer (later known as Kramarae) and published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. In this article, Kramer considered evidence for the existence of sex-linked systems of language use. Kramer’s analysis highlighted grammatical, phonological, and semantic aspects of language but also considered more general differences in the ways in which women and men use language. Her use of the term *genderlect* was intended to add to the field of sociolinguistics, which focuses on how social variables are related to language use. Sociolinguists study what are called *lects*, a term referring to social or regional varieties of speech. Within sociolinguistics, the conceptual connection is clear between the central term *dialect* and the related term *genderlect*. A *genderlect* is a set of linguistic features that characterizes the language production of a socially defined gender category (typically “woman/girl” and “man/boy”). Genderlect theory has led scholars to search for systematic linguistic correlates of women’s and men’s language use—mainly phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and suprasegmental phonemes (features related to the sound of speech, such as pitch, stress patterns, intonation).

The women’s movement of the 1970s (now referred to as *second wave feminism*) shaped the emerging field of *language and sex*. A major proposition in this field was that women and men, even when they speak what is considered the same language (such as American English), actually use language in systematically different ways. Early work in genderlect theory explored how gender patterns in language use often diminish, marginalize, weaken, or even silence women’s position compared to men’s.

Writing at the same time as Kramer, linguist Robin Lakoff emerged as a major figure in gender-
Gender Schema Theory

stereotypically associated with females, and Amanda Holmstrom and associates found that females judged other females delivering emotionally insensitive messages as less likable than males delivering the same message.

Some gender role theorists have argued that even small statistical differences in evaluations can be of practical significance. For example, Richard Martell and associates used a computer simulation to show how relatively small differences (e.g., a negative bias toward women of only 1%–5%) could have large cumulative effects on promotions. In the simulations, men and women started out in equal numbers, but after eight opportunities for promotions, only 29%–35% of the women were in the highest positions, compared with 65%–71% of the men. The cumulative outcome of this simulation mirrored the kind and size of gender discrimination that has been reported in the workplace.

Summary

Gender role theory predicts differences or similarities between males and females based on the degree of variations in ascribed roles and related evaluations. Gender role theory has generated substantial research, academic debate, and questions—processes that seem likely to continue. Since humans create, reinforce, and change social roles, including gendered ones, perhaps we should consider what is in our collective best interests as we engage in these processes.

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See also Feminist Communication Theories; Feminist Standpoint Theory; Gender and Biology; Gender and Media; Genderlect Theory; Gender Schema Theory; Muted Group Theory; Rules Theories

Further Readings


Dindia, K., & Canary, D. J. (Eds.). (2006). Sex differences and similarities in communication: Critical essays and empirical investigations of sex and gender


Gender Schema Theory

Gender schema theory (GST) is a cognitive theory developed to explain the role of gender in organizing meaning, both for self and for others. GST was first proposed by psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem in 1981. Bem’s formulations built on the more general developmental process through which children learn to incorporate content-specific information into more abstract cognitive structures that are used to process and organize what the person perceives. Observing that all societies make distinctions between male and female, Bem was interested in how children learn to use the content around them related to gender both to evaluate people and situations and to assimilate new information.