

Gender differences in communication styles: The impact on the managerial work of a woman school principal

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Abstract

Communication is an important managerial function of school principals. Research indicates that women's communication styles differ from those of men. This article supports and provides evidence for the claim that women and men use language differently. We live in a society in which there is substantial inequality and some of these inequalities are partly grounded in gender social relations and the construction of different gendered identities based on male-female dualism. A number of competing explanations for this situation and considerable controversy exist among different positions. Literature suggests that women display linguistic politeness and converse cooperatively, while men tend to organise their conversations competitively. The differences in the communication styles of women and men may cause misunderstandings in conversations. Due to other factors involved in communication, such as culture, class and age, as well as lack of knowledge about effective ways of communicating, miscommunication can occur not only in mixed gender talk but also in same-sex conversations. Consequently, managers should acquaint themselves with gender differences in communication to avoid miscommunication. Moreover, women educational managers in rural contexts in South Africa experience cultural barriers to communication as African women are not expected to talk much and should feign to know little in the presence of men. Using qualitative research methods, a single case study was conducted in Limpopo Province, South Africa, to explore the communication strategies of a woman principal. Findings indicate that the woman principal was a good communicator who overcame cultural barriers, often by practising what is not traditionally acceptable. Moreover, the woman principal's communication was shaped by the context in which she functioned as a woman, a mother, a wife, an African, an educational manager and as an individual with her own unique personality.

Introduction

This article reports on a study that focused on the communication strategies of women principals in secondary schools. Gendered communication is worthy of exploration because it brings into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequalities (Lackoff, 1973, p.73). In the last two decades, research on gender and education has grown and the growth comes at a time when many women are aspiring to be managers. As women take on management roles, men and women are curious to know about women's communication as managers. This curiosity is mirrored in the burgeoning literature about women's communication, the frequent reference to academic research on gender and communication in popular books and magazine articles, and the increased number of training workshops in communication skills for managers. It is critical that this area of study be explored seriously, in particular in African rural educational settings, because effective communication is important in management.

Bredeson (1998) indicates that communication constitutes the greater part of the principal's work life by citing the following empirical studies. Martin and Willower (1981) found that 84.8 percent of the secondary school principals' total number of activities was spent in verbal encounters. Kmetz and Willower (1982) reported that elementary school principals spend about 70 percent of their time involved in their personal contacts. March (1978) and Wolcott (1973) in their respective studies also indicated that the school principal's daily activities are dominated by verbal interactions.

Communication does not always work and it is a critical factor in some problem situations in organisations. Wrong or superfluous information may de-motivate employees and, as a result, interfere with the job performance. Boone and Kurtz (1984, p.372) go on to say that "information that is misinterpreted can cause problems that otherwise would not have existed". It is therefore important to explore communication differences, as there are social consequences of linguistic sex differences, which affect the women principal's managerial work. However, it is also important to note that language is used to transmit inequalities between sexes, which help to maintain the bigger political, economic structure (Thorne & Henley, 1975, p.15).

Research indicates that women's communication styles differ from those of men. According to Adler, Lanley, and Parcker (1993), research has shown that women and men use language differently. They go on to show that women use signals of courtesy when they talk to people and they show respect by listening and remembering what has been said. Furthermore, Shakeshaft (1989) argues that when women communicate, their speech is less likely to be centred on impersonal subject matter, more likely on emotional and personal issues, and they talk less and listen more than men. In addition, Shakeshaft (1989) shows that women's communication style has been considered as "deficient" and as a result women managers have been told to 'talk like men' in order to succeed. Women's communicative styles are often equated with powerlessness while men's communicative styles are often associated with professionalism and power (Sandler & Hall, 1998; Kramarae 1980; Lakoff, 1973; Thorne & Henley, 1975; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1983; Coates, 1996).

While differences in communication styles of women and men can be attributed to many factors, nonetheless, socialisation into gender positions is clearly a major factor that leads to the differences in the way women and men talk. What this paper demonstrates is how powerfully women are positioned in society (families and the workplace) to accept gendered roles. Thus, as adults women must confront their 'inner voices' in taking up management positions, voices which suggest managers are male, as well as dealing with structural inequality in organisations.

Certainly, we live in a society in which there is substantial inequality and some of this inequality is partly grounded in gender social relations and the construction of different gendered identities based on male-female dualism (Davies, 1982, p.2). A number of competing explanations for this situation and considerable controversy exist among different positions.

The point of such an argument is to provide alternative subject positions for women and girls and men who, at any time, are both powerful and powerless in different contexts, sometimes active and sometimes passive. Of course, also at issue here would be how women might reflectively develop their capacity to critique the portending of gender relations in their own society. To describe lack of awareness simply as 'false consciousness' is increasingly limited as an analytical tool. Women will, at different

times and in different ways, be more or less aware of their gendered positioning (Weiner, 1994, p.64).

This paper explores the verbal communication of educational managers and the possible misconceptions that may occur because of these differences by focusing on a qualitative study conducted in Limpopo province, South Africa, on the communication of women principals in secondary schools. Based on the findings, recommendations are also made.

Conceptualising verbal communication: Linguistic politeness

When communicating verbally, women more often than men tend to use speech style that gives the impression of politeness. Holmes (1995) and Coates and Cameron (1988, p.123) refer to women as more polite than men when all the necessary reservations and qualifications have been taken into account. Politeness is referred to as 'women styles' by Coates (1986, p. 102). Holmes (1995, p.2) goes on to show that women are better than men in terms of verbal skills, especially initially. She also underscores what I have noted earlier, that men and women use language differently and that this is where differences in politeness can be observed. Politeness is therefore defined as "behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour" (Holmes, 1995, p.5).

Politeness is expressed differently by different cultural and linguistic groups. It is thus imperative to pay attention to social context when analysing conversational politeness.

As pointed out at the beginning, women, more often than men, tend to use speech styles that give the impression of politeness. They often use hedges and boosters as devices of politeness. Hedges reduce the strength or force of an utterance, while boosters intensify or empathise the force. Hedging and boosting are devices used by women to show that they are taking other people's feelings into account. In this way, they signal a wish not to impose (Coates, 1996, p.264, Holmes, 1995, p.74). Hedging and boosting devices are tag questions, questions, repetition, apologies, disclaimers, qualifiers and fillers (Coates, 1987, pp.103-107, Coates, 1996, pp.265-268; Holmes, 1995, p.74, Lemmer, 1996, pp.57-58).

Tag questions

Women use tag questions far more than men (Coates, 1987, p.105; Holmes, 1995, p.84). There are four kinds of tags: epistemic modal tags which express the speaker's uncertainty; challenging tags which are confrontational as they pressure a reluctant addressee to reply or aggressively boost the force of a negative speech act; facilitative tags which invite the addressee to contribute to the discourse; and softening tags which alternate the force of negatively affective utterances such as directives (Coates, 1986, p.104; Holmes, 1995, p. 80-82).

Coates (1987, p.105) points out that 59 percent of tags used by women are facilitative while 61 percent of tags used by men are modal (compared to 35 percent for women). To confirm this, Holmes (1995, p.85), in her study of the use of tags in New Zealand, found that "women generally use ... tag questions more often than men in facilitative positive politeness function". Lakoff (1973, p.54) however, points out that there are situations or instances in which tags are the only legitimate sentence form.

Interestingly, as shown by Cameron et al (in Coates and Cameron 1998, p.75), Holmes challenges Lakoff's view, which sees women's language as associated with weaknesses or subordination. Holmes (1995) tries to modify Lakoff's view by indicating that men use tags as well, the difference only comes when women use more facilitative tags with affective meaning.

Questions

Women have a tendency to convert statements into questions when communicating (Coates, 1987, p.106; Coates, 1996, p.266; Lemmer, 1996, p.57; Mills, 1995, p.22).

Questions are very important as they give the speaker opportunity to evoke response. Instead of using questions only to get information, when one speaker can take a role for an expert, women use them for other reasons as well. They use questions to construct and sustain friendship: to draw speakers into conversation and to sustain the conversation to check if what is said is still acceptable to everyone present (Coates, 1996, p.265; Mills, 1995, p.22). It would therefore be correct to say that women use questions more at interactional level than at informational level, because they are

facilitators. Consequently, they use questions, as questions are much less threatening than making an assertion.

In the study conducted by Holmes (1995, p.45), both women and men used almost the same proportion of supportive and critical elicitations. They only differed with antagonistic elicitations, where men expressed proportionately twice as many antagonistic elicitations than women. This means that men explicitly disagreed with or challenged the speaker. It then verifies the notion that women are more polite because they are more sensitive to the face of the speaker than men are.

Apologies

As the case with the previously discussed hedges and boosters, it is generally argued that women apologise more frequently than men do. In fact, Lemmer (1996, p.58) points out that women even apologise for circumstances for which they are not responsible.

Mills (1995, p.154-176) conducted a thorough study in New Zealand about apologies and the findings try to explain the differences with regards to how often, and how differently women and men apologise. The study did not show significant differences in the distribution of apologies used by women and men. This led Mills to explore other social features of apology behaviour between women and men. Looking at apology strategies, which are explicit exclusion of apology; explanation or account; and acknowledgement or responsibility; she found that women used strategies of expressing lack of negative intent and recognising the others' right to an apology. On the other hand, men tend to use strategies, which focus on the relative status with the other, blaming and expressing self-deficiency.

Further, women and men were found to differ in the kinds of differences for which the apologies are meant. Women particularly apologise for intrusions relating to a person's personal space and infringements of the talking rights of others. Men were more concerned about the inconveniences, which cost another person time or money, and faults that cause damage to another's possessions.

The study (Mills, 1995) goes on to reveal that women may interpret situations differently from men; the 'same' behaviour may evoke an apology from a woman but not from a man. Thus, men often apologise for heavily weighted offences, while women tend to apologise for less serious faults. Mills (1995) suggests this may be why women apologise more frequently than men.

Disclaimers, qualifiers and fillers

Women are said to use more disclaimers, fillers and qualifiers (Lemmer, 1996, p.58). The following are examples provided by Lemmer (1996, p.58): disclaimer statements like "I think", "I guess...", "I wonder"; qualifiers such as non-specific adjectives such as "awfully nice", "terribly nervous", or "really super"; and fillers such as words or phrases like "ums", "you know", "er", or "like".

Commands and directives

Women are said to be less direct when speaking or giving instructions (Hung Ng & =, 1993; Goodwin, 1980 & Mills, 1995). In a study of the use of directives in same-sex talk of both girls and boys in a street of Philadelphia in the US, it was found that boys and girls used different directive forms.

The boys used "aggravated" directives, which are directives which explicitly establish status differences between participants, for example, "Get off my steps" or "Gimme the wire...Look man, I want the wire cutters right now". On the other hand, girls used directives, which minimised status differences, and which suggested rather than demanded action, for example, "Let's ask her 'Do you have any bottles?' or "we could go around looking for more bottles" (Coates (1987, p. 107)).

According to Coates (1987), Goodwin indicates that it does not mean that girls are incapable of using more forceful directives in other contexts, such as in cross-sex arguments. She alludes that "the linguistic forms used reflect the social organization of the group; the boys' group is hierarchically organized, with leaders using very strong directives forms to demonstrate control, while the girls' group is non-hierarchical with all girls participating in decision making on equal basis" (Coates, 1987, p.107).

Interruption and topic control

Interruptions are, according to Zimmerman and West (1975, in Coates, 1987; p. 99), violations of the turn-taking rules of conversation where interrupters prevent the speaker from completing his or her turn, at the same time gaining a turn for themselves. There are different types of interruptions including simple interruptions, overlaps, butting in, silent interruptions and talk overs (Craig & Pitts, 1990 in Breshanan & Cai, 1986, p.173).

Research shows that men tend to interrupt more than women (Breshnan & Cai, 1986; Coates, 1987; Winter & Wigglesworth, 1993). Furthermore, men tend to interrupt even where a woman has a high status (Holmes, 1995, p.52). It has also been argued by some scholars that uninterrupted conversations signify liking, affiliation and sensitivity to the interactive needs of others. Conversely, interruption indicates dominance, aggression, a face threat, and conversational mis-coordination (Breshanan & Cai, 1996, p.172). Thus, interruptions by men have been explained through factors such as male/female dominance social expectations and cultural differences (Aries, 1976; Craig & Evans, 1991; Malts & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1983, 1993; Thorne & Henley, 1975; all cited in Breshanan & Cai, 1986, p. 172).

Again studies suggest when women interrupt men with agreement interruptions, men rate them as more dynamic and competent but as having a low socio-intellectual status, while men using any kind of interruption were rated as having high socio-intellectual status by their partners (Breshanan & Cai, 1986, p.174). She goes on to show that females tend to interrupt informative speech and are less likely to interrupt supportive talk. Also, research has found that women and men with a masculine identity interrupt partners more than women and men with a feminine identity.

Thus, Coates (1986, p.101) postulates that men use interruptions and delayed minimal responses to deny women the right to control the topic of talk. Women and men use simultaneous talk differently (Breshanan & Cai, 1986; & Coates, 1987). Women are said to produce simultaneous speech more than men (Mills, 1995, p.23). Simultaneous talk is when two people or more speak at the same time (Mills, 1995, p.23). It also takes place when speakers complete each other's utterances, or repeat or rephrase each other's words.

Social consequences of communicative gender differences

It is now clear that men and women communicate differently. These differences may cause miscommunication between co-workers in any organisation. There are seven areas where miscommunication can take place in mixed conversations as elaborated by Coates (1987, p.152-155).

The meaning of questions

Because women use questions for conversational maintenance, men might interpret the questions as a simple request for information. On the other hand, women may be silenced by the way men ask questions.

Link between speaker turns

When taking turns in conversations, women normally begin by acknowledging the contribution of the previous speaker. Men do not find it necessary to link with the previous speaker, but women find it necessary to link with the past speaker's contribution. In this case, most women become resentful at having their comments ignored, while men will miss the cut and thrust of conversations played according to their rules.

Topic shifts

Women discuss one topic for long time, building on each other's contribution; on the contrary, men move from one topic to another. This might cause communication problems for both genders.

Self-disclosure

Women's conversation is mostly therapeutic because they see it as an opportunity to share problems and experiences and offer reassurances and advice; men do not prefer discussing personal problems. Thus, the response of men and women to another person's disclosure will be different, with men taking on the role of an expert, lecturing to the other speaker.

Verbal aggressiveness

Men are often involved in arguments, speak loudly, shout and swear. Women, on the other hand, try to avoid displaying verbal aggressiveness. In mixed groups, women might find this kind of conversational behaviour disruptive, whereas men find it normal, which might be uncomfortable to women.

Interruption

Women use minimal responses such as “mm, eh” to show active listenership and men usually interpret this as a conversational defect. On the contrary, men are always looking or waiting for a chance to talk (a turn) and they are most likely to be seen as denying the other speaker a right to speak. The consequence of this problem is that in mixed-sex conversations, women are silenced.

Listening

Listening is an important part of communication style. As discussed in previous paragraphs, the women’s style shows value for the role of listening. This is done by using minimal responses, not interrupting, and actively encouraging others to speak through tags. Conversely, men seem to regard conversation as competition, aiming to be a speaker. This causes communicative problems. Coates (1987, p.184) puts it this way: “Women’s behaviour is seen as failure to assert their right to speak rather than as active listening; men’s behaviour is perceived by women as insensitive to their right to speak as well as to listen”. As a result, in mixed groups, women speak less.

Research design

A single case was used to conduct a qualitative study in Limpopo Province, South Africa, to explore the communication strategies of a woman principal. The aim of the study was to examine how the principal’s managerial task is affected by how communication takes place.

Reputational sampling was used for the selection of the participants and the site. One women principal of a secondary school and six teachers, both male and female, at the same school were shadowed for a period of one month.

Data gathering was done by means of multiple methods. Firstly, I conducted in-depth interviews with the principal and the selected teachers. The interviews were guided by

three sets of semi-structured questionnaires for the principal and one set of questions for the teachers. Data gathering was also done by observation, whereby the communication between the principal, the teachers and other support staff was observed in multiple situations (morning assemblies, during tea breaks and lunch time, during staff meetings, in the principal's office, at staff functions and in the staff room/office). For this purpose, an observation schedule was developed and used. Thirdly, document analysis was used to examine written communication embodied in school policies, the staff minute book, the information book and the school journal.

To ensure trustworthiness of data, I used the above-mentioned strategies of data gathering, which are multiple methods, multiple participants, and multiple situations. Thus, my data was also triangulated.

The interview data was not edited, to allow the style and rhythm of the participants' speech patterns to remain intact. However, because the participants were English as a second language speakers, grammatical errors which may have obscured meaning were corrected. Participants were also assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Findings and discussions

One of the objectives of the empirical research was to find out how the woman principal communicated verbally. I endeavoured to determine if politeness predominated in her communication style. Since politeness is expressed differently by different cultural and linguistic groups, it is critical to analyse politeness in relation to solidarity, social distance, power, and formality dimension.

Tag questions

As discussed in the literature section, women are said to use tags far more than men do. However, although women use more tags, the literature (for example, Holmes, 1995, p.82) suggests that they often use facilitative tags which invite the addressee to contribute to the discourse, and softening tags which alternate the force of negatively affective utterances such as directives or criticism. In this study, however, the principal never uttered any kind of tag in her conversations.

Apologies

Again, the literature section alluded to the general belief that women apologise more often than men do. In this study, however, the data did not indicate this. Throughout the period of fieldwork, the principal was never heard to apologise to anyone, which is unusual. This suggests that, although gender and cultural expectations may be present, there are other factors that also shape the communication of individuals. This is not to say that the principal did not ever apologise as a woman, but that in her role of principal she chose not to express frequent apologies which could possibly have diminished her authority as principal.

Questions

The principal's statements were mostly presented to the staff as questions. She also used questions when giving suggestions to teachers; for example, her suggestion regarding a teachers' workshop for developing action plans for the school was expressed as follows:

“Are you of the opinion that the group should do it again?”

However, this question was not intended to seek permission to act, but rather that she thought it would be a good idea for the teachers to repeat the exercise.

Again, the principal asked questions when seeking the help of a male teacher who was reputed to be adept with computers. When instructing him to design a school emblem, she put it like this: “Would you like to design a school emblem?” but actually meant “I want you to design a school emblem”.

This principal's staff seemed to understand her idiosyncratic usage of questions. They differentiated between interactional questions and informational questions, and therefore no miscommunication was caused because of her particular framing of questions.

Disclaimers and fillers

During discussions with the principal and during the observations, it emerged that she often used disclaimers in her speech. The following extracts from the interviews show how often she used disclaimers:

“No, I **don’t think**, eh, I got it in a formal manner”.

“Okay, mm, weaknesses, **I think** I talk too much. I like talking so much so that, you know, perhaps a thing that should be said in short I usually end up taking too long to communicate. And **I think**, also **maybe** because we are Africans, **maybe** even appropriateness of what you are speaking. **Maybe** I am also, **I think maybe**, you **might think** that in a work situation you have to stick to English all the time”.

In addition, she used many fillers when she communicated. It appeared almost impossible for her to finish a sentence without using fillers. The following extracts from the interview transcripts are evidence of how she used fillers.

“**Well**, a good day is, **eh**, a day when something is happening in the school. If I may put it that way, **like**, **eh**, I think, **eh**, last year when we had our merit award ceremony. **You know**, it, **eh**, we have the merit award ceremony annually.”

At issue here is that literature suggests that women use more disclaimers, fillers and qualifiers. Where the principal used disclaimers, she appeared to soften instructions and make her speech more persuasive. The teachers understood that she was being courteous and as a result, they were more inclined to agree with her suggestions or instructions. However, it should be borne in mind that this was the way they had been socialised as Africans and the outcome of the use of fillers and disclaimers could be different in other contexts where other factors were involved.

Commands and directives

In her comments during interviews, informal discourse and during meetings with staff, the principal also showed a certain degree of authority by using directives and few commands. As pointed out before, women seem to be less direct when speaking or giving instructions. This does not mean that they are weak; the difference lies in that women use directives which minimise status differences and which suggest rather than demand action. This principal however used fewer direct commands and direct

instructions. The following are examples of less direct commands used when speaking to a teacher:

“Perhaps we could have that as well.” This has been softened. She could have said, “Let’s have that”.

Again when the principal asked a teacher something on his way out of the office, she said: “May I ask you to call Itani (a teacher’s name), please?” She could have said: “Call Itani for me”.

However, the principal did not hesitate to use direct commands on the occasion where she had to instruct two Heads of Department concerning what to do in her absence:

“You must circulate the information book to all the teachers”.
“Make sure that the examination is running smoothly”

In a formal meeting, after realising that she and the teachers did not understand what a particular teacher (Cyril) was saying, she instructed firmly: “Cyril, repeat yourself.”

What emerges clearly is that the principal was capable of using both explicit and suggestive commands. This can be partly explained by her home background in which she had been raised with boys, made friends with boys and was encouraged by her father to be assertive, to read and to achieve in education.

Interruption

In this investigation, an analysis of interruptions by the principal and by the teachers during communication with the principal was done. The principal preferred to be accommodating when interrupted. While the teachers suggested during the interviews that interruptions did not take place, my observations were confirmed by the principal’s comments. She indicated that teachers sometimes did interrupt her but whatever interruptions she encountered were with good intent, such as supportive interruptions. In response to the question: “How do you feel when you are interrupted by the teachers when speaking?” she answered:

“It depends on what type of interruption, you know. Maybe somebody is interrupting because they want to make sure they

get meaning of what you are saying. Maybe they interrupt you because they'd rather you do not go on. So it depends, but I would say that when I'm interrupted, well, it will surprise me a bit but I will always be accommodating."

When asked the question "How do teachers react when you interrupt them?" she assured me, "Well, I don't find it to be much of a problem because usually the interruption is for a good cause."

The point argued is that interruptions may not always be interpreted as a sign of dominance or aggression, but they may also be in agreement or supportive.

When the teachers were asked the question "How do you feel when you are interrupted by the principal when speaking?" they said:

"No, she doesn't [interrupt]". (Nyawa)

"It depends. Normally she would give you a chance to speak until you finish and thereafter she will say what she wants to say. You are given an opportunity to express yourself." (Mateosi)

"Like I said, the way I talk to my colleagues is different from the way I talk to the principal. Like, I don't think that before she finishes talking I will interrupt her. I've got to listen to what she is saying so I can give my point of view of the problem before I answer 'cause I need things to be very clear between the two of us. And I think she's also a good listener." (Linda)

Interestingly, Linda linked the lack of interruptions with good listening skills, which is yet another aspect which enables good communication. The literature section argued that women's style of communication shows value for the role of listening. The principal's ability to listen obviously contributed to the good communication style observed by her teachers.

By and large, both the principal and the teachers tried to promote and sustain good communication, which could be attributed to traditional African customs where respect for seniors and elders is valued.

Verbosity

Not surprisingly, the principal and the teachers think that she talks too much. The myth of women being talkative has persisted because society has different expectations for male and female speakers (Coates, 1987, p.103). While men have the right to talk, women are expected to be silent. Thus, talking at any length may be perceived as talkativeness rather than verbosity in women. This is what the principal said about this aspect:

“I like talking too much so that, you know, perhaps, something that should be said in short, I usually end up taking too long to communicate, and I think that is where my great weakness is when it comes to communication. ... I sometimes feel I am dominating even when I, maybe, would like them [the teachers] to talk more. Sometimes they don't talk that much to me”.

Clearly, the principal thinks she talks too much. This kind of attitude could be attributed to her patriarchal upbringing, which socialised her into thinking that women should talk less, especially in the presence of men. Also confirming that the community expects women to talk less than men, even when holding positions of authority, the teachers felt it necessary to draw attention to the principal's 'talkativeness':

“According to our culture, our women should be submissive to the males. Even though a female has something genuine to say, it will be disregarded, because she is a female”. (Nyawa)

“In general, in our culture ... women should not be seen to know much. If there are men, they should look humble all the time”. (Derby)

The data collected showed that the principal was a communicator who liked to explain at length whatever she needed to communicate. Her lengthy explanations enhanced her communication because what she was in fact doing was to clarify the facts to the listener as far as possible.

In spite of the teachers' comments regarding talkativeness, they found the principal a good communicator, who does not want to dominate communication, although they thought that she sometimes rejects teachers' suggestions. Although she uses polite language by punctuating her speech with questions, disclaimers and fillers, her verbal

communication appears to be authoritative and effective. She does not hesitate to use directives and commands where necessary. She emerges as a good communicator despite cultural barriers which she overcomes by continuing to practise what could be considered a cultural taboo in her own community. Her 'victory' is partly made possible because the teachers, too, compromise or modify certain cultural expectations in the interests of the smooth running of the school.

The principal's communication as a woman manager, whether culturally desirable or not, is also shaped by her context in which she is a woman, a mother, a wife, an African, an educational manager and an individual with her own unique personality. In all these identities, women will face contradictions and ambiguities which they have to confront.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although socialisation influences the communication styles of men and women, post-structuralists argue that, during socialisation, each person is active in taking up discourses through which he or she is shaped. This implies that women managers sometimes show feminine communication styles and sometimes masculine communication styles, as was the case in this study.

The paper clearly brings to light the differences in communication styles of women and men and how these differences impact on a woman in a rural African educational setting. Women tend to converse co-operatively, whereas male speakers organise their conversation competitively. Thus, according to Coates (1987, p.154), women tend to put far more effort than men into maintaining and facilitating conversations.

Hung Ng and Bradac (1993, p.48) indicate that there is overarching belief that men are in some sense more powerful speakers than women. They show that there is evidence to show that women (in the US, in any case) are lower on the dynamism dimension of only perceived power. On the dimension of status and intellectual competence, there may be a weak tendency for female language to produce higher ratings than male language; in this sense, females may use a relatively powerful register.

The differences in communication styles of women and men may cause misconception in conversations. The misconceptions are not only found in mixed conversations. Due to other factors involved in communication, like culture, class and age, as well as lack of knowledge about effective ways of communicating, miscommunication can occur not only in mixed gender talks, but also in same-gender talks. Consequently, educational managers should acquaint themselves with the differences in communication of men and women in order to avoid miscommunication.

Combining female and male communication styles might be one of the solutions to minimise misconceptions. Men, in particular, should also be helped to adopt feminine styles of communication. The reason would be that if only women are asked to change their behaviour and adopt a “masculine style”, the characteristics of female forms are ignored, and the assumption of power as domination is reproduced (Kramarae, 1980, p.207). It is, therefore, essential for both females and males to adopt each other’s positive aspects of communication. For example, women are more self-revealing and supportive while men are more assertive and forceful. In this regard, Kramarae (1980, p.207) in her study suggests that effective communication can be self-revealing and forceful, supportive and assertive, if the two styles are combined.

It may be important to help women to improve their communication skills by, for example, maintaining a ‘confident aura’ and capitalising on skills they have, such as verbal, listening and writing skills.

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