Gender and Communication:
Perceptions of Diffuse Status Characteristics in Workplace Email

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that perceptions of gender act as a diffuse status characteristic which impacts how interlocutors perceive the competence, ability, and value of others (Carli, 1990). However, this research was conducted prior to the proliferation of electronic communication, and focused primarily on verbal communication; this is important because visual cues contribute to perceptions of communication as gendered, and stereotypically feminine traits are evaluated less favorably than masculine traits (Carli, 1990). One communication style typically associated with femininity is tentative language; conversely, dominant language is usually associated with masculinity (Carli, 1990). These communication styles manifest not only in face-to-face interaction, but also in electronic and written interaction. Although Ma and Atwell Seate (2017) found that both men and women use tentative language via workplace email when the topic is perceived to be gender salient, little research has been done to show how tentative and dominant communication are associated with perceptions of diffuse status characteristics. This study evaluates use of language strategies in workplace emails for their possible association with interlocutor perceptions of diffuse status characteristics. Results may be used to help employees understand how their use of language impacts others' perceptions of them.

RATIONALE

Status Characteristics Theory focuses on "the process through which differences in socially significant characteristics (e.g. race, gender and education level) help create the social hierarchies observed in task-related group settings" (Harringston, 2017, p.1504). Previous research has shown that these characteristics impact the perceived competence, credibility and trustworthiness of individuals in the workplace (Strodtbeck, James and Hawkins, 1958; Torrance, 1954).
Ma and Atwell Seate (2017) examined the effects of gender salience and interlocutor gender typicality on men and women's use of tentative language in emails. They found that when the topic was perceived as masculine, women's language was tentative. If the topic was perceived as feminine, men's language was more tentative. Because there is a lack of research on how tentative and assertive language are perceived in workplace E-mail, our study focuses on perceptions of status characteristics when the sender of the E-mail employs language strategies stereotypically associated with gender.

RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ[1]: Is the use of language strategies in workplace emails associated with interlocutor perceptions of the speaker's a)competence, b)gender, and c)diffuse status characteristics?

METHOD

- Experimental design surveys were distributed through social media and email to measure the perceived diffuse status characteristics (Gender, Organizational Ranking, Trust, and Competency).
- Participants were randomly given one of two emails which contained tentative or assertive language strategies.
- Participants were asked to evaluate the email messages they received for certain status characteristics, including communicative competence and trustworthiness.

- Scales used for evaluation:
- **Communication Competence Scale** (CCS, Wiemann)
  36 items, some of which were removed due to irrelevance
  Tentative: The scale was reliable α= .90, M= 3.79, SD= .91
  Assertive: The scale was reliable α= .90, M= 3.38, SD= .68
  Ex:
- **Individualized Trust Scale** (ITS, Wheeless and Grotz)
  15 questions containing two polarized words placed on opposite ends of a 5 point scale
  Tentative: The scale was reliable α= .93, M= 3.35, SD= .38
  Assertive: The scale was reliable α= .87, M= 2.29, SD= .44
  Ex:
The emails sent out with the survey are listed below:

Tentative:

Dear X,

On my commute home last night, I had some time to think about the meeting we had about our upcoming project. I am thinking that it might be beneficial to start with the proposed idea sometime within the next few weeks, depending on your schedule. I think I heard someone say that our draft is expected by early next month. I believe this should be a manageable timeline.

When are you available to get together and discuss this? Let me know and I'll get back to you as soon as possible.

Best,

Y

Assertive:

X,

I reflected on the meeting we had about our upcoming project. We're going ahead with the proposed idea as soon as possible. Our results will be expected by the first of the month, so we'll start tomorrow afternoon. Meet me in my office tomorrow at 2:00PM.

Thanks.

Y

FINDINGS

	Assertive		Tentative			
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*-test	DF
Communication Competence	3.38	0.68	3.79	0.91	5.21***	141
Individualized Trust Scale	2.99	0.44	3.35	0.38	3.32**	138
**p<.01. ***p=.001.						

- T-tests revealed a significant difference between scores on communication competence in the tentative and assertive conditions
- The tentative/assertive condition were not associated with evaluations of status characteristics related to demographics (age, gender, organizational ranking, education level)

PARTICIPANTS
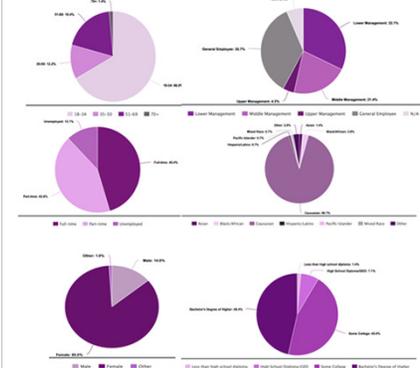
DISCUSSION

Our findings, although the opposite of what was expected, reflect a societal shift in preferred communication styles from those typically associated with masculinity (assertive) to those typically associated with femininity (tentative). In light of previous research and findings on gender and workplace communication, our findings may serve as fresh evidence of the impact of the influx of women in the workplace, including progressive implications regarding computer mediated communication's impact on perceptions of gender and diffuse status characteristics. While this study uncovers important insights as to gendered communication, the distributed survey was overwhelmingly completed by women from ages 18 to 34. A suggestion for future research would be to secure a more evenly distributed survey so as to have biological sex as an equally represented variable.

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