



An Exploration of Gender Roles and Communication in Emerging Adulthood

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Introduction

What did you say? A common expression uttered by males and females reflects a potential lack of understanding between the sexes. Gender and communication is not a new area, but it is an under researched area within emerging adulthood. Traditionally, development progressed from adolescence to young adulthood, but changes in today's modern society have altered the typical pattern of "growing up". High school graduates are no longer forced into adult roles—careers and marriage—but are able to spend their late teens through mid twenties exploring a variety of opportunities (Arnett, 2007). As a relatively new developmental stage, emerging adulthood has not been studied as in depth as adolescence and adulthood.

Communication differences abound in these two groups, so it is reasonable to hypothesize that similar differences persist throughout emerging adulthood. Some research claims these differences arise because male and female are two different cultures (Tannen, 1990), while others propose that socialization is the basis for this male-female miscommunication (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). A result of socialization, masculinity and femininity develop through reinforcement of gender appropriate behaviors (Maccoby, 2000). It is therefore important to consider how gender roles might affect male-female communication.



Hypotheses

- a) There will be no significant difference in the way males and females interpret the visual stimuli.
- b) Males and females will interpret the visual stimuli differently, and therefore provide differing vignette responses.
- c) The masculine and feminine characteristics that result from socialization will influence the way males and females interpret the visual stimuli. Those who score high for masculine traits and high for feminine traits will be most different, while those with low masculine and low feminine scores might provide more similar vignettes in response to the images.
- d) Relationship status will affect the perception of the relationship portrayed in the visual stimuli.

Method

Participants

- 85 undergraduate students at Pepperdine University, ages 18-26
- 21 individuals outside of Pepperdine
- 26 males and 68 females completed the survey, for a total of 94

Measures

- Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)-Short Form: used to assess gender role characteristics that are denoted as masculine or feminine, 30 questions.
- 6 visual stimuli depicting various relationships between males and females.
- Demographic questions such as gender, age, and relationship status.

Procedure

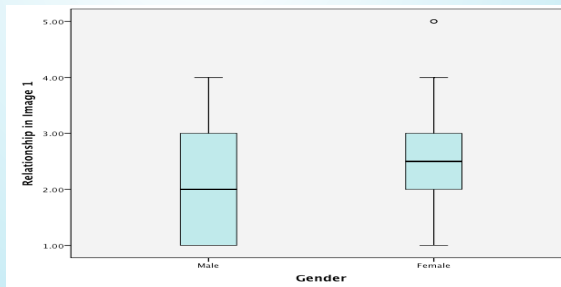
Participants were directed to an online survey, and were informed about the study, any potential risks, and possible benefits. Participants consented to participate by completing the survey. First, the participants were shown the six (6) images, one at a time, accompanied by free-response questions. The questions asked the participant to subjectively interpret the situation occurring before, during, and after the image. After providing a vignette for each image, the short form of the BSRI was presented. The survey concluded with simple demographic questions.



Conclusion and Discussion

Based on preliminary analyses, it appears that there is a difference in the response patterns of men and women to the visual stimuli.

This research did not have the means to explore the topic of gender and communication to the fullest extent, but nonetheless produced new research in the field of emerging adulthood. Gender and communication are two important aspects in better understanding relationships and interactions during emerging adulthood, as well as other life stages. It would be beneficial to further explore this area of research from multiple perspectives, such as ethnicity, birth order, sexual orientation, religion, geographic region, and parent relationship status. Similar research could also be done during various other developmental stages to obtain a better understanding of gender and communication across the life span. Continued research could potentially result in "decoding" or translating these male and female languages that seem to so often be misunderstood.



Results

The final results of this study are still in progress, and only preliminary analysis has been conducted. 26 males and 68 females responded to the questions about the visual stimuli. Although there was some overlap in their responses, it does appear that differences exist. With further analysis, the impact of relationship status, and gender roles will be looked at to gain a better idea of whether these differences are due to gender socialization or the result of two separate cultures.

Resources

- Arnett, J. (2007).** Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for?. *Child Development Perspectives*, 1(2), 68-73. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2007.00016.x
- Maccoby, E. E. (2000).** Perspectives on gender development. *International Journal Of Behavioral Development*, 24(4), 398-406. doi: 10.1080/016502500750037946
- Tannen, D., (1990).** *You just don't understand: Women and men in communication.* New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.