

Dimensions of gender for systems thinkers*

Gender Issues in Systems Thinking Group

Learning outcome: that students can describe at least three gender dimensions, one each in individual behaviour/work style, group behaviour and organisational culture, and give examples from their experience including education, recreation or use of public services.

Our gender influences all aspects of our lives but its influence on our attitudes, behaviour and ways of thinking about the organisations we encounter in our daily lives has only been studied in detail in the last quarter of the twentieth century. We aim in this section to introduce you to a small number of the dimensions of gender which we express in our individual workstyles and our behaviour in groups and which we encounter in the culture of organisations. These in turn are influenced by the culture in which we were brought up and the culture in which we now live. Gender dimensions to behaviour which often persist throughout our lives emerge early in our lives.

SAQ 1: the extract on the following page contains a number of generalisations and generalisations can always be misleading. Think for a few minutes about your adult friends and acquaintances, in particular anyone you meet in a group or organisational context, at a club, society or religious organisation, at a parents' association, voluntary organisation or at work. How far do these childhood behaviours persist into adulthood?

A note about the author: Deborah Tannen is a sociolinguist who, in her earlier book, *That's Not What I Meant!* (1986) explored ten areas in which conversational styles can lead to misunderstanding. One of these was gender but 90% those who responded to her wanted her to explore the gender dimensions of conversational styles. So she wrote *You Just Don't Understand* from which this and other extracts are taken.

*© Gender Issues in Systems Thinking Group; last updated 2000

Boys tend to play outside, in large groups that are hierarchically structured. These groups have a leader who tells others what to do and how to do it, and resists doing what other boys propose. It is by giving orders and making them stick that high status is negotiated. Another way boys achieve status is to take center stage by telling stories and jokes of others. Boys' games have winners and losers and elaborate systems of rules that are frequently the subject of arguments. Finally, boys are frequently heard to boast of their skill and argue about who is best at what.

Girls, on the other hand, play in small groups or in pairs; the center of a girl's social life is a best friend. Within the group, intimacy is key; differentiation is measured by relative closeness. In their most frequent games, such as jump rope and hopscotch, everyone gets a turn. Many of their activities (such as playing house) do not have winners or losers, Though some girls are certainly more skilled than others, girls are expected not to boast about it, or show that they think they are better than the others. Girls don't give orders; they express their preferences as suggestions, and suggestions are likely to be accepted. Whereas boys say, "Gimme that!" and "Get outta here!" girls say, "Let's do this," and "How about doing that?" Anything else is put down as "bossy." They don't grab center stage — they don't want it — so they don't challenge each other directly. And much of the time, they simply sit together and talk. Girls are not accustomed to jockeying for status in an obvious way; they are more concerned that they be liked.

Table 1: Tannen (1992, pp. 43-44)

Girls and boys in the Netherlands do not appear to value performance, relationship or avoidance orientation differently. That is, Dutch boys do not appear to attach more importance to winning a game, or to being best or being the leader, than do Dutch girls. Similarly, Dutch girls do not rate the initiation and maintenance of positive interactions with peers higher than Dutch boys do, nor do they envisage the avoidance of negative outcomes or negative interactions and relationships with peers to be of more importance. Dutch girls and boys are thus much more alike in their goal orientations than U.S. girls and boys.

Table 2: van Rossum (1998)

Many things affect the ways in which we behave — the examples we get from others, the rewards we receive for behaving in particular ways and the ways in which we are told by others that we should behave.

The extract on the current page comes from an account by Jacques Van Rossum ‘Why children play’ in Hofstede’s book *Masculinity and femininity*.

SAQ 2: why do you think this might be?

In 1970 Geert Hofstede began to explore the impact of culture among the staff of IBM, the computer giant. Over the next ten years he identified four dimensions which appeared to be significant for IBM staff in the cultures in which they lived and worked:

- Power distance — how equal/unequal relationships are
- Uncertainty avoidance — how rigid/flexible people are
- Individualist/Collectivist — how important acting alone or acting together is
- Masculinity/Femininity — how tough/tender people think they should be.

He has since explored with associates such as Jacques Van Rossum many of the implications of these dimensions for the ways in which people in particular cultures think and behave and in 1991 published a table of countries with their ‘masculinity’ scores. Great Britain and the U.S. are in the top half of this list and the Netherlands near the bottom. Yet on the Power distance and the Individualist/Collectivist dimensions the U.S. and the Netherlands are very similar. In a separate study with Mieke Vunderink (Vunderink and Hofstede, 1998) he found that female American students have more masculine beliefs than male Dutch students.

Hofstede stresses that he is using the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in an anthropological sense, that is, he is talking about the belief systems of people in whole countries, not about their behaviour and that the masculinity index is an

Masculinity pertains to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct (i.e. men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life); Femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap (i.e. both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life).

Table 3: Hofstede (1991, pp. 82–83)

‘average’ of the stated beliefs of people in these countries. So, even in a ‘feminine’ country, you will find males and females with more ‘masculine’ belief systems and being in a country with a ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ belief system does not mean you will act in a particular way. It will simply be one of the influences on the ways in which you behave and the ways in which you explain your behaviour.

SAQ 3: how far do either of these descriptions in the extract on this page fit:

- the family into which you were born?
- the schools you went to?
- the circle of friends you now have?
- your current family, if any?
- the families of friends from abroad, if any?
- your employment situation, if any?
- any organisation, informal or formal, of which you are a member?
- the people you have met through the Open University?

Remember that Masculinity/Femininity is only one of four dimensions which Hofstede has identified; so people’s ideas about how others should behave will also be influenced by other dimensions, such as Individualism/Collectivism or Uncertainty avoidance.

However, among the areas that Hofstede and his associates have explored so far, three which exhibit variation on the Masculinity/Femininity dimension are relevant to thinking about individual and group behaviour in a working environment — motivation, equal opportunities and consultation.

For many years in the UK it has been reported that, overall, more women work for social goals and more men for personal goals (see, for example, Cooper and Makin, 1984) though, as more women have entered the labour market in the UK, some doubt has been cast on this in relation to women (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1990).

Hofstede has found that, while this tends to be the case in masculine countries, in very feminine countries, these differences tend to disappear; that is to say, women and men express social or personal goals in roughly equal numbers.

The feminist movement has also expressed itself differently in masculine and feminine countries; in more masculine countries feminists have striven for access to situations previously only open to men, for example, to become a professional jockey, a boxer or a chief executive. In more feminine countries feminists have argued for redistribution of responsibilities, for example, for men to take a more active role in parenting and household duties and women in these countries are several times more likely to be members of parliament and to hold ministerial office than women in more masculine countries.

In more feminine countries, people expect to be consulted by their managers before their managers make a decision (Vunderink and Hofstede, 1998); in masculine countries, consultation is seen as weakness.

Finally, both women and men in countries with more masculine cultures are more likely to deny or ignore the existence of gender dimensions.

It should be clear by now that the systems of which we are a part as we grow up can have a profound influence on our behaviour and the ways in which we think about ourselves and others. Some of our behaviour is influenced by our physiology — being male or female, being short or tall — or physical well-being — being starved or nourished. But much is influenced by the family in which we live, the friends we meet, the schools we attend and the cultures to which we are exposed. Geoffrey Vickers calls the complex network of ideas and beliefs which we acquire over the years our ‘appreciative system’ (Checkland and Casar, 1986) and the importance of our ‘appreciative system’ for the ways in which we behave as individuals, in groups and in organisations has been recognised by various systems thinkers. Peter Checkland, for example, uses the German term *Weltanschauung*, which means ‘the way you look on the world’ and is sometimes translated ‘world-view’, to describe the particular belief which motivates a group of people to act together to achieve something. This *Weltanschauung*, he argues, has to be acceptable to all members of the group if they are to achieve their common aim. Geoffrey Vickers would argue that our experience of working together under a particular *Weltanschauung* will influence whether it becomes more or less significant for our ‘appreciative system’ in the future.

The reasons we give for making decisions about what we are going to do have been studied in detail by Carol Gilligan, Professor of Education at Harvard University, and her colleagues. These studies have shown that, while there are overlaps between the ways in which women and men in the USA make decisions, most women and men in the USA prefer to make decisions using quite different frameworks.

These preferences appear to emerge during the late primary school period when

In this particular dilemma, a man named Heinz considers whether or not to steal a drug which he cannot afford to buy in order to save the life of his wife . . . “Should Heinz steal the drug?”

Jake, at eleven, is clear from the outset that Heinz should steal the drug. Constructing the dilemma . . . as a conflict between the values of property and life, he discerns the logical priority of life and uses that to justify his choice . . .

In contrast, Amy’s response to the dilemma conveys a very different impression . . .

Seeing in the dilemma not a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extends over time, Amy envisions the wife’s continuing need for her husband and the husband’s continuing need for his wife and seeks to respond to the druggist’s need [to be paid for the drug] in a way which would sustain rather than sever connection.

Table 4: Gilligan (1982, pp. 25–28)

children often spend a large amount of time in single sex groups, learning how to be a girl or a boy so that, by their early teens in the USA, girls and boys are thinking about moral dilemmas in quite different ways (extract on the current page).

These preferences, the logical approach adopted by many men to resolve dilemmas and the concern for relationships adopted by many women, were not just discovered in the twentieth century; as Gilligan (1982) points out, they are present in Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice* where the ‘masculine’ morality of the courtroom is contrasted with the ‘feminine’ morality of the women towards the men who have both let them down in the matter of the rings. They may also be present in the Greek tragedy *Antigone* in which Antigone is punished for burying her dead brother after her uncle Creon, the king, has ordered that he should not be buried because he is a traitor for attacking the city.

Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan et al., 1988) have found that in the USA most men prefer to make decisions according to a morality of fairness or justice in which relationships are seen as reciprocal (‘do as you would be done by’) and moral problems are construed as conflicts which can be resolved by reference to people’s roles and responsibilities and various rules and principles. Within this framework decisions are seen as ‘moral’ if they can be justified logically and the rules that were applied were ‘fair.’

Most US women, however, prefer to make decisions according to a morality of

care in which relationships are seen as a response to others and moral problems are construed as relationship issues which can be resolved by reference to these relationships and promoting the welfare of others. Within this framework decisions are seen as ‘moral’ if they have a positive outcome and the general state of relationships is improved.

But some people, both women and men, see ways forward which incorporate both frameworks and, even among those with a preference for one framework, many can, with prompting, describe how they would approach the dilemma from the other framework and some of those who initially showed a preference for one framework rather than the other can describe an approach that integrates the two perspectives.

However, though many people are able to make use of both frameworks, in the first instance, three out of four US men will use the justice framework to resolve a dilemma and three out of four US women will use the care framework to resolve a dilemma.

SAQ 4: Again, we have a number of generalisations relating to women and men in the US. This time, think about a situation where someone of the opposite sex made a decision which you would not have made. Do any of the generalisations above help you to understand why they made the decision?

The dimensions Gilligan and her colleagues explore have become enshrined in US and UK management; consider for example some of the standard ways of making redundancies — last in, first out, early retirement, all those in a particular grade; these can all be justified within a fairness or justice framework without reference to the people concerned. Yet, if a manager uses such a criterion, some people will probably be affected more seriously than others and so the consequences of the decision may be unfair and the manager may lose valuable, as well as less valuable, staff using such a criterion.

These masculine ways of taking decisions have become so much part of the ways in which we think about certain decisions in organisations that many are now enshrined in European and UK legislation and both women and men have made use of these rules and principles to justify improvements in their situations. But the fact that, even in a relatively masculine country such as the USA, three in four women and some men do not approach decisions in this way should at least give pause for thought as to whether there are other ways of resolving conflicts between people and organisations or within organisations.

SAQ 5: The dimensions of *report-talk* and *rapport-talk* in the extract on the following page appear in many other situations. Can you think of situations where men typically express their preference for *report-talk* and situations where women typically express their preference for *rapport-talk*?

Who talks more, then, women or men? The seemingly contradictory evidence is reconciled by the difference between what I call *public* and *private* speaking. More men feel comfortable doing “public speaking” while more women feel comfortable doing “private” speaking. Another way of capturing these differences is by using the terms *report-talk* and *rapport-talk*.

For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences. From childhood, girls criticize peers who try to stand out or appear better than others. People feel their closest connections at home, or in settings where they *feel* at home — with one or a few people they feel close to and comfortable with — in other words, during private speaking. But even the most public situations can be approached like private speaking.

For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information. From childhood, men learn to use talking as a way to get at and keep attention. So they are more comfortable speaking in larger groups made up of people they know less well — in the broadest sense, “public speaking.” But even the most private situations can be approached like public speaking, more like giving a report than establishing rapport.

Table 5: Tannen (1992, pp. 76–77)

Later on in the book Tannen explores ‘overlapping’ or ‘contrapuntal’ speech in which others in the conversation speak at the same time in order to encourage the existing speaker to continue. This can be interpreted by those who prefer *report-talk* as interrupting and can disrupt their flow. However, for those who value *rappport-talk*, failing to ‘interrupt’ can be interpreted as lack of interest on the part of the listeners.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that, while overlapping speech is more often found among females than among males, the pace of the overlapping varies widely among cultures so that the same amount of overlap, whether used by females or males, may be viewed as ‘pushy’ in one culture and ‘reticent’ in another.

The extract on the next page describes some characteristics of a more formal, but leaderless, group in a relatively masculine country. Many of these behavioural characteristics reflect the beliefs about the ways in which males and females should behave as described in Hofstede’s Masculinity/Femininity dimension.

It also illustrates the complexity of the situations we may find ourselves in. In this relatively masculine country, men becoming more feminine in their behaviour and women becoming more masculine in their behaviour were both evaluated sufficiently positively by other members of the group to enable them to become effective leaders.

As Hofstede and his associates have found, the interaction between beliefs and behaviour can produce unexpected results. The extract on page 11 illustrates an apparently different outcome.

SAQ 6: Why do you think this conflict arose and continued?

Though Morton is critical of his boss in this situation, she is in a no-win situation. In more masculine countries like the USA, women who become authoritarian in a work situation are often criticised, particularly by other women, many of whom would not be so critical of an authoritarian male manager (Tannen 1995). In more feminine countries, an authoritarian manager would be less acceptable to both men and women.

[A study] that examined the communication styles of women and men over a 15-week period as they engaged in lengthy group discussions of contemporary problems . . .

The men who took part in the discussions that formed this study were more likely than the women to use informal and third-person pronouns, imperatives, slang and aggressive language. They tended to reference authoritative sources for their arguments, to interrupt the women and to change topic. Their conversations often focused on competition, control, aggression and violence. Women, on the other hand, tended towards communication styles that would foster participation and communication. They self-disclosed more than the men did and used more personal references and emotional tone and language. They tended to listen more actively, rephrasing ideas and asking for clarification. Often, during the 15 weeks that the study ran, women tried to help competitors to reach a consensus.

. . . the most influential members of the group were the men and women who adapted some features of the communication styles of the other sex. Thus, the most effective men softened their speech with tag questions and qualifications and changed topics less abruptly than did their male peers. They were more self-disclosing than the other men and expressed their feelings more readily. The most effective women used more slang, more third-person pronouns and longer, more complex sentences. They refused to be interrupted and they used a technique often adapted by leaders in a group: that of speaking to the group as a whole rather than to the person who asked the last question or made the last comment.

Table 6: Vinnicombe and Colwill (1995, pp. 30–31)

Morton, a psychologist on the staff of a private clinic, has a problem with the clinic director, Roberta. At staff meetings, Roberta generally opens discussion of issues by asking all staff members for their opinions. She invites debate about the pros and cons of the proposals, but somehow, when the meeting ends, they always end up deciding — by consensus — to do what Roberta thinks best. The women on the staff are very happy with Roberta as a director. They feel she listens to their points of view, and they like the rule by consensus rather than fiat. But Morton feels Roberta is manipulative. If they are going to do what she wants anyway, why does she make them waste their breath expressing opinions? He would prefer she just lay down the law, since she is the boss.

Table 7: Tannen (1992, p. 216)

Typically the self-ratings of female managers are found to be closer to the ratings made of them by their colleagues than is the case for male managers; the latter tend consistently to overrate themselves compared with how they are seen by others ... it should not be assumed that this lower level of agreement in the case of male managers implies less accuracy or validity of the ratings made of them. The more realistic interpretation is that quite a few male managers are not quite as self-critical as they should be! Perhaps significantly, there is some evidence that people who are more accurate and realistic in their self-assessments are also better performers.

Table 8: Fletcher (1997, p. 81)

SAQ 7: Why might men be less self-critical than women as suggested in the extract on the previous page?

The ability to be self-critical may or may not be connected with effectiveness but the balance of the evidence (Vinnicombe and Colwill, 1995, pp. 53–54) is that women managers are on average more effective than male managers.

The evidence on dimensions of gender suggests that whatever system we construct will influence both the ways in which we behave and the ways in which others respond to us.

Where men construct cultures in which the idea that the way men do things is the way everyone does things, they reduce the variety of options for resolving dilemmas and run the risk of breaking the ‘law of requisite variety’ — the idea that viable systems have to number of flexible ways of responding to situations all of which will enable the system to achieve its goals. For example, where women ‘succeed’ in masculine cultures, they often do so by adopting ‘male’ ways of doing things rather than bringing alternatives to the situation.

Where people are uncomfortable in a culture, they will tend to cope either by adapting themselves to it or by becoming ‘subversive.’ Both of these processes entail stress and it is interesting to note that Vinnicombe and Colwill (1995) report little stress among women managers in the United Arab Republic, a culture which they describe as family friendly and which is identified by Hofstede as significantly more feminine than Great Britain. This does not mean that there are no stresses for a woman in the UAR but that they do not occur in the area of work as they do for women managers in the USA or the UK.

As noted in the extract from Vinnicombe & Colwill above, both women and men in a mixed sex group can adapt their behaviour in order to become more effective in such a group. It is also possible that the pressure on women to adapt to a masculine culture improves their ability to be flexible in their behaviour and therefore increases the range of responses they have available in a dilemma. In other words, in constructing a masculine culture men may have put themselves at a disadvantage in the long run.

Answers to SAQs

SAQ 1: I’m reasonably sure you will have come across many of these behaviours in adults — men who insist on having their way in groups, who tell stories and jokes about others and who see anything someone does or says as a chance to score a point. Men in England in the late 1990s frequently use the word ‘score’ as a euphemism for, or nicer, roundabout way of saying, something which might have been aggressive or illegal.

Similarly, you will probably have come across women who have very close friends; unless you are a woman or have experienced a different culture from the dominant culture of the UK, you probably won't realise the intimate things women talk about which most English men would never share with their male friends and which many would be surprised to find their partners sharing with others.

But you may also be able to think of women and men whom these descriptions fit less well.

Like many dimensions, gender dimensions do not split neatly into feminine and masculine categories. Some women will have characteristics that are usually associated with men and some men will have characteristics which are usually associated with women and the balance of these characteristics, as well as the ways in which we express them, can vary over time and between different situations in our lives.

SAQ 2: Perhaps you thought they weren't measuring the same things as were mentioned in the extract from Tannen. Perhaps you thought the groups of children they were measuring in the USA were different from those Tannen was describing. These possibilities certainly occurred to the researchers who went back to check the research before concluding that their conclusions were valid for American and Dutch children.

Perhaps you thought 'I always knew this gender stuff was a load of rubbish!' If so, you have almost certainly come under the influence of what Hofstede describes as a 'masculine' culture.

SAQ 3: It is very unlikely that all the people you have met will have had the same ideas about how women and men should behave. Even within a relatively masculine country such as the UK or USA, there will be variation in expectations, not least because, even if you have never been abroad, you are likely to have come across people who have lived in cultures which are relatively more masculine or feminine than your own and whose belief system may differ from yours and/or from the majority of people in the country.

SAQ 4: The generalisations Gilligan and her colleagues make may not have helped you to understand why someone of the opposite sex made a decision you would not have made but this could be because other factors were more influential in the situation.

However, since Great Britain has an even higher masculinity score than the USA, it is likely that, unless you come from a country with a very different masculinity score, you will have found, or you will find if you think about another situation, that these generalisations do help you to understand why some people of the opposite sex in England may have made decisions which you would not have made.

SAQ 5: Here are some of the possibilities:

Men — lectures, seminars and tutorials which are ‘led’ by one person, formal meetings, conferences and symposia

Women — participative seminars and tutorials, mother and toddler groups, support groups

SAQ 6: There are a number of possible reasons; for example, there does not appear to be a balance of genders in the group and Roberta may see little point in changing her style to suit a minority; Morton may never have experienced a female boss and appears not see this as a ‘gender’ issue — some women prefer to do things differently — but as a ‘leadership style’ issue.

Roberta may believe that Morton will eventually see that her approach is preferable for everyone or, if she happens never to have had a male boss, she may not have experience a ‘masculine’ leadership style and be unaware of Morton’s idea of a good boss.

Two common misjudgements occur in situations like this — people assume it is a gender issue and ignore all the other possibilities or, particularly in more masculine countries, they ignore the possibility that it is a gender issue. We may assume that Tannen had the evidence that it was for it to have been included as an example.

SAQ 7: There are many possibilities. Where men are brought up in a masculine culture, they may find people accept what they do because they are men, rather than because of any ability they display and this may give them an exaggerated sense of their ability. Where they have been focusing on personal goals, they may have missed out on learning the social skills that enable them to pick up on feedback from others. Because, in more masculine cultures, it is often assumed that the way men do things is the only way to do things (Kendall and Tannen, 1997), it may never have occurred to them that there is a better way to do things than the one they used. Perhaps, because women in a more masculine culture have to learn from an early age how to adapt to men’s ways of doing things, they have more opportunities to think about and evaluate what they are doing and so gain more experience of self-assessment.

References

- Checkland, P. and A. Casar (1986). ‘Vickers’ concept of an appreciative system: a systemic account. *Journal of Applied Systems Analysis* 13, 109–115.
- Cooper, C. L. and P. Makin (1984). *Psychology for managers* (Second ed.). Basingstoke: Macmillan.

- Equal Opportunities Commission (1990). *Men and women in Britain 1990*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
- Fletcher, C. (1997). *Appraisal* (Second ed.). London: Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press.
- Gilligan, C., J. V. Ward, and J. M. Taylor (Eds.) (1988). *Mapping the moral domain: a contribution of women's thinking to psychological theory and education*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Kendall, S. and D. Tannen (1997). Gender and language in the workplace. In R. Wodak (Ed.), *Gender and discourse*, Chapter 4, pp. 81–105. London: SAGE.
- Tannen, D. (1986). *That's not what I meant*. New York: Morrow.
- Tannen, D. (1992). *You just don't understand*. London: Virago.
- van Rossum, J. H. A. (1998). Why children play: American versus Dutch boys and girls. In G. Hofstede (Ed.), *Masculinity and femininity: the taboo dimension of national cultures*, pp. 130–138. London: SAGE.
- Vinnicombe, S. and N. L. Colwill (1995). *The essence of women in management*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Vunderink, M. and G. Hofstede (1998). Femininity shock: American students in the Netherlands. In G. Hofstede (Ed.), *Masculinity and femininity: the taboo dimension of national cultures*, pp. 139–150. London: SAGE.