The construction of gender through attitudes toward the word “feel”

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Abstract

Research suggests that gender differences exist in how men and women emotionally express themselves and that there are gender-based rules for this behavior. Some of this research evaluates emotionally expressive language but none have looked specifically at attitudes towards specific emotionally declarative verbiage. Using discourse analysis, this exploratory study focused on how participants constructed themselves as emotional subjects through their perceptions of their use of the word feel in same-sex and opposite-sex communication. Findings suggest that the word feel was used to construct gender identity. In particular, both male and female participants referred to the word feel as feminine, weak, and emotional, requiring different management approaches based on the gender of the communication partner. In addition, the management of the word feel revealed an attitude of caution on behalf of female participants when describing their use of the word with men. This was contrasted by attitudes of free expression with other women.

Key words: gender, feel, relationships, emotion, self-disclosure

Introduction

Lackoff (1990) stated that, “gender related differences have a strong psychological component: they are intimately related to the judgments of members of a culture about how to be and think like a good woman or man” (p. 202, 1990). These differences can be explainable through differences in cultural values or differences in social power between men and women (Weatherall, 2002).

Gender stereotyping of emotion has been shown to be a factor in the equal treatment of women since male rules for this form of expression have been dominant (Matsumoto, 2009; Ridgeway, 2001; Shields, 2002). Ragins & Winkel (2011) presented that the gendering of emotion can influence perceptions, expectations, and attributions about emotion. For example, women are expected to display positive emotions like compassion, warmth, cheerfulness and nurturance while men are expected to show emotions such as confidence, pride, and anger (Conroy, Elliot, & Pincus, 2009; Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005; LaFrance, 1998; Ragins & Winkel, 2011). Not only do gender differences exist in how men and women emotionally express themselves but discrepancies in gender-appropriate self-disclosure have also been outlined (Ragins & Winkel, 2011).

These social rules for expressivity are not limited to specific contexts but can be accounted for in many domains. In many instances, women have been shown to be disempowered in environments that typically reward male-stereotyped emotional display (Gibson & Schroeder, 2002). Even when women display “male emotions” like anger, they are likely to be evaluated unfavorably in historically male-dominated contexts (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). The gender rules of expressivity indicate that women should display fewer male emotions and more gender appropriate emotions. However, these rules offer a “no win” scenario, perpetually keeping women disempowered because expressing stereotypical male emotions as a female or expressing stereotypically female emotions in male dominated settings can both be judged negatively (Ragins & Winkel, 2011).

According to some, anger is the one emotion that women are less likely to display than men (Brody & Hall, 2000). Although emotions are still experienced similarly across gender they are displayed much differently (Geer & Shields, 1996). Men may emotionally express less often because they have been socialized to not show feelings other than anger. As a result, there are gender rules which govern
emotional expression. Hochschild (1983) and Shields (2005) described them as governing which emotions can be displayed by whom, how much they can be displayed, and when.

Lakoff (1990) asserted that women are also socialized into using linguistic features which represent tentativeness, deference and a lack of authority, explainable through observing historical patterns of women occupying powerless social positions. In all, the effect of the gendering of emotion is that men have emotions but women are emotional (Shields, 2005). This notion has created powerless conditions for women which can cause their emotional behavior to be judged as “out of control” (p.10, Shields, 2005). Furthermore, Hoschilrd (1983) purported that the social rules have been constructed and perpetuated mostly by men, reflective of a “state of power and influence” (p. 381, Ragins & Winkel, 2011). As a result, these gender rules are an effect of a power propagated over time. Are differences also observable in attitudes towards specific emotional language use?

**Gender and emotional language**

One theoretical perspective on gender identity is that gender is something that people do and not a stable trait or quality that people possess (Beall, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). That is, gender is socially constructed and reproduced. A person can adapt their behavior to align themselves with many social situations and the gender rules therein (Janssen and Murachver, 2004). In this way, Weatherall (2002) outlined that language reflects and perpetuates gender and acts as an important instrument in these productions. She also described that power was once believed to be separate from language but, since, has been understood as inextricably linked. There are rules that govern the use of language and certain word choices in communication that propagate gender identity more than others (Sheridan, 2007).

Tannen (1993; 1996), for instance, framed that women communicate more to establish intimacy while men communicate to display or maintain social status. There is plenty of research which claims that emotionality (i.e., sharing one’s emotions) is a female characteristic. For instance, Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker (2008) quantitatively analyzed a broad range of text samples and found small but consistent gender effects. Of their most significant findings, they learned that women use a more “rapport” style of language than men, focusing on social topics and internal feelings. They concluded that women use more of a social-emotional focus in their language use, communicating in order to develop and maintain rapport and disclose feelings. Meanwhile, men communicate to help solve problems, debate, express opinions, and share facts (Holmes, 1996; Lakoff, 1973; Tannen, 1990).

Others have learned that men interrupt more than women, a potential assertion of power and authority (Weatherall, 2002). These observations exhibit themselves in interpersonal communication. Evidence also suggests that a listener’s gender influences how feelings are shared through language. Mixed-sex conversations showed different use of language than same-sex language (Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001)). Same-sex conversations reveal less stereotypical representations because gender-preferential language is more pronounced in same-sex relationships (Mulac & Bradac, 1995), an indication that gender-preferred language is co-constructed in conversation and not fixed.

These patterns fit the gender stereotype that casts women in a more nurturing and relationship-focused light and men as more emotionally detached (e.g., Carli, 2001; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Lakoff, 1990; Zimmerman, Holm, & Haddock, 2001). Hochschild (1983) had also viewed women’s affect-laden communicative style as being linked to their limited access to power since the meaning of words has been typically determined or controlled by men. Therefore, the language choices in emotional disclosure can be analyzed for its role in perpetuating positions of vulnerability and dependence in social relationships. Are there gender-preferential characteristics in how men and women manage language that discloses their inner feelings?

**The word feel**

The word feel was selected as the object of study for its emotional and personal qualities. Ortony, Clore, and Foss (1987) described the word feel as “an elliptical way of expressing a more complex idea”. Fiehler’s (2002) established the role of feel in verbal emotional expression as “experientially declarative” (p. 88), illustrating its conceptually encompassing breadth. “Experience”, he described, is a more accurate way of discussing the inner private lives we live. The word feel was chosen because it has a clearer emotional connotation than other self-disclosing speech acts including words such as think or believe. To self-disclose is, “to deploy an available discourse resource... that performs a par-
ticular function” (p. 330, Coupland et al., 2008). In essence, the use of the word *feel* can perform the act of emotional self-disclosure less ambiguously than these alternatives. Like any social rules which guide certain behavior, the rules pertaining to the word *feel* can be accepted or resisted in any context or relationship.

Overall, research pertaining to the word *feel* and gender is sparse. Mayer and Tormala (2010) examined messages containing *think* or *feel* as acts of persuasion. They learned that women were more affectively oriented, impressed more by *feel* messaging while men were more affected by the use of the word *think*. Mayer and Tormala noted that while people may use these words interchangeably their impact is not the same. They concluded that beyond possible lay assumptions which posit that *think* is a replacement for *feel*, the affective or cognitive orientation of the listener are the most important features. That is, using the word *think*, according to their data, has a persuasive effect on men due to their tendency toward a less emotional identity. However, it is noteworthy that, in cases, the word *think* could be interpreted as idiomatic whereby its actual use may not reflect cognitive activity but is representative of other private inner experiences such as emotions. This makes perceptions and attitudes towards the use of the word *feel* intriguing, particularly if they lead to its avoidance. Gender identity is also a factor shown to produce different sets of rules that affect the linguistic choices people make in different contexts. Specifically, gender identity may contribute to the conscious modification of language to maintain a gender-appropriate alignment within certain social situations (Cameron, 1995; 2006; Eckert, 1992). Past research on emotions, language, and gender provides the opportunity to explore attitudes towards *feel* for its role in the construction of gender identity.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this article is to portray how people may construct themselves as male or female through their beliefs about the use of word *feel* with people of the same or opposite gender. Three questions guided this inquiry, 1) How do participants construct their gender identity through their beliefs about the word *feel*? 2) How do people perceive their management of the word *feel* across their different social relationships? 3) What are the gender differences, if any, about the attitudes towards the word *feel*?

**Participants**

Fifteen participants ranging in age from 19 to 76, (6 male, 9 female; average age = 36 years) were interviewed. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission. Participants responded to a poster advertisement describing a study on *feel* at a campus student services facility. Those who showed interest were in contact via telephone or email. After additional information sharing, an interview was scheduled where another opportunity was given to review the information about the study. At this point, a consent form was completed outlining their rights as a participant. If consent was obtained, the interview commenced.

**Data collection and analysis**

Interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes and focused on attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about the use of the word *feel* in daily life. After general perceptions were collected, participants were asked questions about their specific use of the word in their same and opposite gender communication.

Data analysis focused on the construction of subject positions derived from the attitudes toward the use of the word *feel* across the gender of participants (Lupton, 1992). Specifically, transcript analyses concentrated on (a) the social and discursive functions of the word *feel* and, (b) the rules systems for the suitable use of the word *feel* by gender of the listener (Harré, 1986). Overall, this approach identified how study participants made sense of their gender through their beliefs about the word *feel* and the rule system that guides its use in same and opposite gender communication. This approach to discourse treats perceived use of this word as “context bound or occasioned” (p. 97, Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) and allowed for the examination of the word *feel* as an effect of gender.

Specific analysis of each transcript started with a thorough reading and re-reading of the interview text and identifying statements pertaining to the seven targeted relationships including those with parents, siblings, friends, subordinates at work, superiors (bosses) at work, colleagues at work, and intimate partners. The steps included preparing the transcripts, creating meaning units from the data and tag-
ging them, creating data categories, and categorizing the meaning units under each relationship type (i.e., male-female, male-male, female-female). Patterns in the attitudes towards the word feel were identified in reference to the gender of participants and linked to the available discourses pertaining to gender and emotion described in the literature.

Findings

The findings will be presented according to three themes. First, participant accounts about what the word feel represented will be shared. These interpretations are analyzed for their role in the construction of gender. Secondly, the perceived use of the word will be reviewed for its role in same-gender (i.e., women with women, men with men) and mixed-gender communication. Finally, examples of how participants managed their use of the word feel according to perceived gender rules will be presented and discussed.

Construction of gender

Interviews revealed many examples of how participants constructed their gender identity through their use of language to express emotions, observed through the attribution of feminine qualities to the use of the word feel. In addition, the management of the word feel was described as being influenced by the gender of the person with which they were communicating. For example, When asked whether she perceived the word feel as influenced by gender in any way, Christine explained:

Well there’s that whole thing that people say that women are more sensitive, feeling, and more open. I don’t know what guys are like with each other, but when they are with girls they don’t really use it. They don’t say “I feel this or that”. When girls are together, and we know each other, we are more comfortable with it. Guys have to feel more macho I guess. For guys, to be too feeling is to say that you’re weak in today’s. I don’t know why that it is. I guess it is because when you are sharing feelings it represents sensitivity. (Christine)

The word feel, described by participants as representative of emotions, was consistently referred to as feminine. When asked about the role the word feel has in her relationships, Theresa relates the word to a motherly image:

I’m just a big mushy feeler. There’s no thinking involved! (laughs).

K: What do you mean by that?
I want to make sure everybody is happy and, from my mother, the disease to please is about worrying about yourself last. If it is something that I am really not concerned with or don’t feel strongly about one way or the other like where we’re going for dinner let’s say, I’ll be less assertive… hmmm… I have to get back on track here… yeah, feel is more submissive I guess. (Theresa)

Not only does Theresa depict feel as a feminine word but she noted that its use also subjected its users to a submissive position. Her use of “mushy” to describe this position connotes a lack of strength or perhaps a compromised integrity. Meanwhile, Juliette noted, below, that her gender validated her beliefs about her use of the word feel:

I use (the word feel) to share my personal feelings of my day and about myself. I guess because I’m a girl I use it often… probably many times a day. (Juliette)

Her parsimonious account of the feminine nature of the word feel also revealed her openness and freedom to use it. This belief may also mean that she believes that her gender allows her to use feel as if being a woman makes her usage appropriate.

The emergence of the word feel as a woman’s word, was confirmed by Theresa. Using metaphor, Theresa identified her comfort level with the use of the word while depicted feel as a motherly form of communicating:

I use it a lot with my brother and my mom, not often with my dad. We’re a very tight family and always talking. Nobody is afraid to say “I love you” or show emotion or anything like that. But I’d say we’re all very momish with each other. (Theresa)
Theresa’s implicit acceptance of the word *feel* in conversing with her mother and her avoidance of it with her father, the dominant male in her family, exemplified the word *feel* as something feminine and submissive and her choice of the word “momish” depicts a nurturing quality as well. In addition, her account reveals an association of nurturance and intimacy with its use, a quality described as common in gender difference research (Tannen, 1993).

One participant, Christine, reflected upon the notion that the word *feel* is a feminine word. She referred to “society” for the origin of the rules guiding her use of the word, explaining how, for her, the feminine associations of its use are propagated:

K: You referred to “today’s society” to explain how you use *feel*. What do you mean?

You have the media and the movies and stuff like that. Guys, when they are crying too much, people will be like, “Why are they being a cry baby?”. You have your friends and your associates and people at work. It is the community and how everyone interacts with each other. That’s what society is. It is the general environment that you’re in. (Christine)

Since *feel* had been strongly associated with emotions, participants like Christine referred to instances of gender construction through acts of emotional expression. Attitudes were different for men, however. Men also identified *feel* as associated with emotions but showed much more hesitation in their attitudes towards its use. In explaining his reservation, Ben revealed how he hedged his use of the word *feel* with his parents.

When you are a kid, you learn to be right down the middle. So you don’t want to offend dad and you don’t want to hurt mom so you try to walk down the middle where it is acceptable to both. (Ben)

Similar to Theresa, Ben shared how he believed he needed to manage the word *feel* between his mother and father, a sentiment noted by three other participants.

These accounts, in general, revealed how gender can be constructed through specific language use. Both male and female participants noted that the word *feel* meant something feminine to them. These constructions were associated with the concepts emotionality, social support, and vulnerability.

Next, participant reflection concentrated on their perceived same and opposite gender use of word *feel*. The following section segments participant perceptions of their use of the word *feel* across these relationships from both the male and female perspective.

**Between women**

The freest accounts of using the word *feel* were described by women with other women. The word *feel* was portrayed as less constrained, revealing that women *feel* more comfortable. Nadia, for example, commented that, “as for with women, I just use it and I don’t care when or what about”, showing no reference to its use placing her in a vulnerable position. Nadia’s uninhibited use was supported by Brenda in her workplace communication:

I manage a team of professionals and they’re all women and I think we all lean very much on emotional scales and stress scales. “How are you feeling?”, “How is your work load?”, “Do you feel you can handle it?” (Brenda)

Even in the workplace, where appropriate emotional expression is typically reserved for anger (Ragins & Winkel, 2011), Brenda shared that she felt comfortable using it with other women. This transcendence of context is reinforcement of the gender rules for the use of the word *feel*. Female participants’ constructed their gender as emotionally communicative particularly among women.

**Between men**

By contrast, male participants were very hesitant in describing their perceived use of the word *feel* with other men, indicating that the word *feel* was perceived as unwelcome. Alexander, a retired member of the armed forces described its absence in a traditionally very male-dominant environment:

When I joined the army, there were no women other than nurses. There was a lot of machismo. Men didn’t use the word *feel*. It wouldn’t come up. (Alexander)
His use of the word "machismo" depicts feel as being feminine, weak, and something to be avoided, particularly in military contexts. Paul also noted an avoidance of the word with other men. He traced his beliefs to his relationship with his parents as a younger man.

Generally speaking, if we’re going to talk about the differences between mother and father, I’d definitely use the word feel with my mother rather than my father. That’s just the background growing up. My mother would be more comfortable expressing her feelings than my father was. My father was a quiet guy. I didn’t always know what he was thinking about. Generally, he didn’t express his feelings that much so at home I’d use it in communication more with my mother than my father. (Paul)

Paul was not alone in his reflections. Several others explained that they had learned these gender rules from their parents. For example, Jake detailed qualities of his father which defined the appropriateness of the word feel:

My dad was kind of a tougher guy you know. He made sure that you didn’t show too much feeling because we could get hurt doing that. You had to be really careful. You didn’t want to show too much happiness or too much sadness. (Jake)

His account highlights his belief that the word feel is not tough, something men should represent. Interestingly, Ben shared that he has used a variation of the word feel with his male friend.

I’d use the word mostly in a third person situation where I’d say this happened or that happened. Then I would say, “Boy I felt like clocking that guy or I felt like giving them a big hug”. In that sense, you would use the word feel but it is in a story-telling guise. It is not necessarily what I feel like right then. (...) It is removed, like in the third person. It is in the context of the story, with friends, you would use the word feel or felt. (Ben)

Ben’s use in this manner bends the gender rules in that he uses feel in past-tense which means he is not feeling the emotions he describes at the present moment. This metaphorical temporal distance (i.e., how he felt back then) is a more male-like way of its use. Ben’s disclosure of his emotions from the past does not put him in a potentially vulnerable position.

Same-gender communication revealed contrasting attitudes and beliefs about the word feel depending on gender. While women believe it to be an acceptable part of conversation with other women, male participants felt it was not appropriate to use with other men. Reflections regarding its use with parents provided the strongest evidence for the origins of these beliefs, attitudes they maintain as adults. These differing attitudes show how participants construct part of their gender identity through the use of their emotionally symbolic words.

**Between gender opposites**

Attitudes shifted in mixed-gender communication. The perceived management of the word changed when gender of the communicating partner changed. The lack of perceived use with other men did not mean that men avoided the word entirely. Several participants revealed that they believed it can be appropriate to use the word feel with women. Several of the male participants referred to their relationships with their mothers as pertinent to the construction of their attitudes towards the use of the word feel. Jake, for example, shared how he felt free to use the word in his relationship with his mother:

Using the word is different with both parents. With my mother, it is always open and accepted to share your feelings. Good or bad, it is good to share your feelings. (Jake)

In general, Charles showed that although the word feel required caution in certain contexts, it played an important role in his private relationships with his family. His depiction, below, pertained to his communication with his wife:

I use the word feel differently with my wife than with every other person. If I’m at work, the word feel would be used the same way with a female colleague or female subordinate or a male colleague or male subordinate. I think I would make a differentiation between friends and family and the work environment. Feel with family would be used more often than it would be in a working environment. Would there be a differentiation between male and female in the workplace? No. Certainly in my personal life there would be. (Charles)
Fitzpatrick, Mulac, and Dindia (1995) learned that same-sex conversations display more stereotypical gender-preferential language use and that mixed-gender use was represented by an adaptation in language, most often by men. In this study, men with spouses shared that although it was a word they would typically avoid, it had a place in private moments with their partners.

Contextual factors, like Charles described above, were apparent in Ben’s perceived use. In a rare instance of use among family members, he described that his father indeed used feel but he had to create privacy in order to do so:

My father was open to sharing feelings but in a very personal context when you are alone. Others shouldn’t know how you feel because it would make you open to preying. In my mother’s case, it was okay to feel and okay to share it and be open about it. (Ben)

It appeared that the creation of private space could be a way of minimizing the vulnerability that feel creates. Overall, Ben’s statement represented a common theme among men that they were socialized not to use the word feel.

Meanwhile, female participants also shared hesitation toward using the word feel with men. Nadia described this interplay, confirming several typical associations of the word shared by others:

I think with men, or the men in my life, I would use it more cautiously because, to me, there’s a connotation of weakness to it. With the men in my life I know that I’m more cautious with using it. If it is in the context of some kind of emotional relationship I would be a lot more cautious. (Nadia)

Nadia’s thoughts confirm the feelings of vulnerability feel elicits with men, particularly if the information disclosed was personal in nature. Theresa, in a similar account, depicted when she believes to use the word feel with her boyfriend:

Let’s say I’m feeling anxious or feeling like there’s something we need to discuss. When it is more in my gut, what I call or used to call nervous belly but that’s something that I’m actually feeling, there’s a physical aspect that comes out. I’m learning feel is a bad word for men in this lousy article I read. Feel is the “F” word. You should never say feel. It’s risky. You should say “think” (laughs). (Theresa)

Lakoff (1975) described women’s language usage weaker than men’s and notes that this weakness is due to societal powerlessness not a sex based inferiority. Weatherall (2002) identified that differences in language use could be a representation of a difference in power or it perpetuation of it. Theresa exemplified hesitation while, at the same time, acquiescing to the rule that the word feel is not appropriate with men. In fact, the conscious exchange of the word feel with think represents a clear example of how she managed her language to stay aligned with the dominant discourse. That is, women are expected to acquiesce to the gender rules for males when two feel discourses compete (i.e., women may use it but men should not). In this example, the female discourse becomes secondary to the male discourse.

Conclusion

Participants described their use of the word feel as a way of fulfilling social norms through following its gender rules. The most significant rule was that the word feel is inappropriate in the male lexicon. Gender stereotypes of emotional expression were observed in that the word feel was depicted as something emotional, weak, and vulnerable and a word that appeared to breach the male identity. However, this does not mean that men had not or would not use it but rather explains how the use of the word feel is influenced by one’s gender identity. This study portrayed the emergence of this gender rule through self-management strategies that were employed by both male and female participants to stay disciplined to the rules for the use of the word. In addition, in accounts of its use with members of the opposite sex, there was evidence of atypical use by male participants but attitudes were strongly opposite when it was considered in same-gender conversation. In addition, these attitudes appear to be influenced by the parental modeling of the use of the word feel. In all, this analysis showed how gender identity can be constructed through the perceived use of the word feel in same and opposite-gender communication.
References


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