KEYING AND ROLE PLAY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: GENDER, AGE AND RACE CUES

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ABSTRACT: *This study comes as a sequel to other two papers published in this journal in 2010 and 2012[1] being part of a larger research that approaches business communication from the perspective of Goffman's theory of the relational dimension of meaning. The paper starts from the premise that meaning is generated within the context of each specific interaction, as a result of a culturally determined process of framing, during which inherited patterns of thought and behavior establish well defined positions from which the interlocutors perceive and respond to one another. It also aims at further analyzing the process of keying by identifying the paradigm shifts that individualize business encounters according to gender, age, and race cues, as well as the communication malfunctions induced by keying errors (misunderstandings, conflict and discrimination).*

KEY WORDS*: framing, keying, business communication, role play, gender, age, race, discrimination.*

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1. INTRODUCTION: NEGOCIATION AND ROLE PLAY IN BUSINESS ENCOUNTERS

As we have shown in a previous paper, "…human communication is endowed with meaning according to a set of rules and principles that pertain to the situation in

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which the interaction occurs rather than to the interaction itself. Under these circumstances, individuals engaged in any face-to-face interaction unconsciously place themselves in negotiating positions" (Dumbrava, 2012, p. 74). In the same sense, the process by which primary frames of communication are 'transcribed' with variations required by different contexts is called *keying*, a kind of tuning of social interaction that turns individuals into efficient social actors. Thus, keying in business communication involves a precise 'scripting' process during which the primary frames of daily interaction are modeled according to spatial, temporal, language and behavior cues, as well as by virtue of gender, age and race determined roles, all meant to foster power relations. As we are going to show further, any flaw in the paradigm of these social cues means a breaching of the script, a keying error that generates relational deviations such as misunderstanding, conflict, intolerance, and discrimination.

2. COMMUNICATION AND GENDER

The approach to gender related issues in business communication calls for the acknowledgment of the social and cultural dimensions of gender identity. In her article *Sociology of Gender. Studying The Relationship Between Gender And Society*, Ashley Crossman defines gender identity as 'a mixture of biology and socialization', reiterating the distinction between the terms *sex* and *gender*. Thus, sex refers to biological identity, which stems from physical and physiological characteristics, whereas gender refers to cultural identity, pertaining to "socially learned expectations and behaviors associated with being male or female" (Crossman, 2011).

Therefore, it become obvious that gender identity emerges at the interface between the roles that society assigns the individuals on grounds of their sex and the self-perception of the individuals themselves. Crossman defines this interface as 'gender socialization', which is actually a feedback loop in which people become aware of the society's expectations associated with their sex and, in compliance with them, they adjust all their social responses, from self-image to perceptions of and relations with other people. Ultimately, this process of fine-tuning gender-related behaviors is a matter of keying that generates specific scripts and roles for each communication context.

It is now common knowledge that business communication is seriously affected by gender stereotypes, generically known as *gender gap,* which involves preconceived ideas and, therefore, distorted expectations regarding the interlocutor, making effective communication impossible. In its turn, gender gap has a negative impact on such organizational aspects as teamwork and marketing relations.

In her book *Gender Smart: Solving the Communication Puzzle between Men and Women*, specialist in gender communication Jane Sanders holds that the first step towards bridging the gender gap and increasing the effectiveness of our communication with the opposite sex is awareness and understanding of the following:

a) differences between men and women are desirable and arbitrary, not right or wrong;

b) differences in behavior and language styles usually trigger misperceptions and misunderstandings by the opposite sex;

c) regardless of the significant progress in gender related business communication issues, a certain amount of stereotype will always exist, and, therefore, effective workplace relations are a matter of how we manage it on different organizational levels (Sanders, 2006, pp. 18-19).

According to the author, the real danger lies not in the stereotypes themselves, but in their use, most of the times subconsciously, to prejudge people's abilities and competence and develop unfair and incorrect expectations. Actually, stereotypes derive their validity from observed behavioral generalities, according to which, for instance, women are usually more emotional than men, whereas men tend to be more outwardly competitive. The key point of her argument is that "... just because a woman may be emotional, too sensitive in certain situations, nurturing, and a good cook, does not preclude her from also being decisive, competent, intelligent, and driven. And just because a man might be decisive, aggressive, logical, and independent does not mean that he is not also nurturing, sensitive, gentle in certain situations, and a good cook" (Sanders, 2006, p. 87).

In other words, as long as they are not used mechanically to make assumptions about a person's capabilities or behavior and pass judgments, stereotypes remain useful social cues that constantly adjust human relations.

If the issue of gender gap is somewhat natural, and can be even stimulating when managed properly, such an extreme consequence of gender-related stereotypes as discrimination is a major problem that can have devastating consequences regarding organizational efficiency and equilibrium. Gender discrimination occurs "when there is a bias based on a person's sex that leads to defining the roles he/she should play in society." (Wolfe, 2011) Extended to organizational operation, social prejudice acquires the status of discriminatory policy, by virtue of which, for instance, female employees can be deprived of access to senior positions, higher income, or can be forced to choose between career and motherhood.

After decades of one-sided approaches that invariably identified male prejudice as the unique source of women's discrimination, specialists in workplace relations have come to the conclusion that a more balanced perspective is not only more revealing in terms of pinpointing causes, but also more efficient in terms of analyzing effects and finding solutions. Therefore, a change in the perception of gender determined social roles calls for two considerations, namely:

- stereotypes are constantly reinforced from both parts;
- as a direct consequence of the above, social attitudes, both in the workplace and in society at large, can change only starting with a change of values, mentality and attitude centered upon the respect for and acceptance of diversity, whether of gender, age, or race, because "...the real enemies behind gender stereotypes are ignorance, intolerance, and stagnant societies that resists change" (Wolfe, 2011).

3. COMMUNICATION AND AGE

Like gender, age is a biological parameter which, due to its heavy load of stereotypical perceptions, becomes a major social parameter able to undermine efficient communication both in everyday life and in the workplace. As retirement has been more and more delayed over the past decades, nowadays, an organization is likely to bring together people with as much as 50 years age difference between them. This phenomenon has raised the issue of generational stereotypes and their impact on the work environment.

In their book *Putting Diversity to Work,* Simma Lieberman, an expert in gender communication, and Kate Berardo, an intercultural relations trainer, use the significant age difference between themselves to emphasize that disparate ages do not necessarily mean difficult collaboration; on the contrary, as the two authors confess, their own solid partnership in organizing trainings and writing books is pertinent proof that teamwork can be enriched precisely due to the variety of experiences and perspectives put in by representatives of different generations.

The authors start from the premise that people are products of their history, environment and personal experiences, which shape different ways of thinking, and diverse systems of values and goals. Therefore, in order not to end up in stereotypes, the issue of bridging age gaps should be viewed in a holistic manner, taking into account all the dimensions of diversity and individuality.

In this context, the book leads to the conclusion that the concept of generation gap should not be overrated, since the bridging of age difference and generational stereotypes is achievable by meeting two requirements, namely: suspending our assumptions and judgments, and engaging in dialogue across generations (Lieberman & Berardo, 2003, p. 156).

The most obvious manifestation of generational stereotypes is what we call *age discrimination,* that is the biased attitude towards an interlocutor based on preconceived, age-related ideas and expectations regarding the respective person. Like in the case of gender discrimination, which prevents women from advancing in rank according to their competence, knowledge and skills, age discrimination becomes an invisible barrier in front of older workers in terms of advancement or a job change within a company.

Another similarity between gender and age discrimination is that they are both based rather on emotional response than on conscious, logical judgment. On the other hand, since it never comes as a straightforward statement or explicit reaction, but rather as a subtle, insinuating message underlying the interviewer's discourse, it is also difficult to prove and to fight. Age discrimination, therefore, is never admitted or declared verbally. It is only strongly and painfully felt by the older persons when their promotion is long due, or during job hunting interviews, when their anger and frustration is proportional to their eroded self esteem and confidence.

Virginia Bola is a Doctor in Psychology who has dedicated her research to the emotional effects of such social issues as unemployment, aging and overweight on the individual, suggests in her first book, *The Wolf at the Door: An Unemployment*

Survival Manual, the following approaches to be considered by older persons in order to obtain a more rational response from a younger employer or interviewer:

1. Put the age issue forward in a positive, objective manner, meant to trigger an unemotional response and inhibit interviewer defensiveness.
2. Acknowledge age as a source of valuable experience for any employer, and emphasize your ability to adapted organizational changes over the years and to embrace new ideas and technical progress into your work performance.
3. Acknowledge common misperceptions about older age, such as hard-to-break habits, lack of flexibility, technological ignorance, and distrust of young authority, especially if young, and shatter those myths one by one with convincing examples.
4. Once you have demolished the myths of age, emphasize its strengths: reliability, mature judgment, lack of impulsivity, timeliness, a strong work ethic, and the ability to perform without outside distractions such as personal relationship problems, child commitments, and social responsibilities (Bola, 2003, pp. 80-81).

In spite of the visible progress that has been made in the past years in terms of organizational behavior and employment policy, there are still numerous cases of age discrimination both at the workplace and in recruitment policies. Consequently, there emerged a massive body of literature dedicated to the subject, either providing the major cues of age discrimination or offering legal or psychological consultancy. For instance, in her article *Nine Signs of Age discrimination*, employment lawyer Donna Ballman enumerates the top signs of age discrimination, so that employees should be able to realize when they are subjected to discriminatory treatment:

- Biased comments, which are the most obvious and offensive, consist of such appellations as "grandma" or "old man", when the boss asks an employee about retirement plans, or tells him/her the company needs a younger image.
- Comparisons, as a result of which an employee notices that he/she is treated differently than the others in such situations as layoffs.
- Disparate discipline, when the older employee is disciplined for something that younger employees do without consequences.
- Promotions, when the older employee is not chosen for a promotion that he/she applied for in favor of a younger, less qualified co-worker.
- Favoritism, if younger employees are given the assignments and equipment, and older employees are excluded from key meetings, or socializing events.
- Hiring or promoting young, less qualified employees, to the detriment of older, more or equally qualified ones.
- Sudden negative performance reviews from the management after a certain age.
- Harassment, in cases when the employee senses that the boss presses him/her to quit the job by bad treatment, offensive jokes or contemptuous attitude (Ballman, 2012).

In any of these cases, the employees who are the targets of discrimination are advised gather evidence and to report the specific situations and to consult an employment lawyer.

In the US, the major example of democracy in every area of social life, employees can address these issues to the Supreme Court, or even file a charge of discrimination with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Moreover, the American legal system has issues such documents as the *Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967*, and *The Older Workers Benefit Protection Act of 1990*, meant to protect employees over 40 against age related abuse from companies, both in the workplace , and as far as recruitment procedures are concerned.

4. COMMUNICATION AND RACE

Of all the discriminations that disagree with politically correct behavior, the race related prejudices prove to be the most aggressive in manifestation and the most resistant to social change. Although the efforts to eliminate workplace racism began as early as in the 60's of the last century, and progress has been made in this area to the extent to which it is considered inacceptable in most developed countries, there are still individuals whose thinking and corresponding behavior remain so racially prejudiced that they can create and maintain an uncomfortable working environment. Racist attitude is the more disruptive when cultivated by the senior management in an organization.

However obvious it may be that racism is not to be tolerated under any circumstances, the issue of how we should deal with it remains complex and delicate.

Specialists in communication agree upon the necessity to react promptly and firmly to such attitudes because, otherwise, the message we convey is one of tacit agreement or acceptance.

Like in the case of gender and age discrimination, race related discriminatory treatment refers to the company's failure to hire or promote an individual on account of their race. Typical cases of race discrimination are the following:

- ethnic related questions included in a job interview, as long as they affect hiring decisions.
- hiring or promoting a less qualified individual to a position targeted by an employee or applicant of another race.
- involuntary discrimination, when a company displays hiring procedures or workplace policies that have a greater effect on certain races.

In the US, any form of racial discrimination in society or at the workplace is strictly prohibited and sanctioned by a number of federal and state laws.

The primary body of federal laws that address racial discrimination in the workplace and secures the citizens equal employment opportunities is *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*. This document basically prohibits employers from:

- failing or refusing to hire an employee based on their race;
- firing or disciplining an employee because of their race;

- paying an employee less or providing them fewer benefits on account of their race;
- failing to provide benefits, promotions, or opportunities, to an employee because of their race;
- improperly classifying or segregating employees or applicants by race.

In the same context, employment agencies cannot make decisions on referrals or work assignments based on an individual's race, and labor unions and representatives cannot refuse membership or expel individuals because of their race.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As we have shown, there is a well-defined legal context meant to accommodate social interaction, whether in society or at work. However, taking into account that human communication is culturally-determined, its malfunctions can be most efficiently dealt with by adjusting the patterns of thought and behavior that underlie them. Thus, genuine, long-term change of social relations can be achieved only by an evolution in the individual's system of values and mentality. Only such steady development can eventually produce what we call socially and culturally literate individuals who:

- possess a sense of personal, social and cultural identity;
- understand continuity and change in a global context;
- show interest in the immediate and wider world;
- communicate effectively;
- make informed decision and take social action;
- understand diversity and empathize with people in other cultures (*The Economy of Culture in Europe*, p. 218).

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