

Car Talk: Gender-specific Observer Communication at the Kansas State Fair Nostalgic Car Show

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Abstract. The Kansas State Fair (KSF) Nostalgic Car Show provides an environment where both male and female observers can showcase their communication style. The focus of this research was designed to address the research question: “What are the gender differences or similarities in communication among observers at the Nostalgic Car Show?” Grounded theory [2] and Boyatzis’ method of thematic analysis [3] were used to yield insights into the similarities or differences in communication among male and female observers at the car show. Findings indicated that male initiated communication is more technical and female initiated communication is more aesthetically based. The data implies that context is not an important factor in influencing gender and communication style. However, females and males at the KSF Nostalgic Car Show communicated in stereotypical manners consistent with research on general biological sex differences in communication.

Introduction. Distinctions between the sexes, in the significant areas of role, temperament and status have cultural rather than biological bases. [4] Gender plays a role in developing communication style and female and male communication styles are more acute based on context. [1] On Sunday, September 20, 2009 the Communication 802 graduate class in qualitative research methods observed events at the Kansas State Fair. This research focused on the communication within the KSF Nostalgic Car Show.

Experiment, Results, Discussion and Significance.

The KSF Nostalgic Car Show ran from 10:00 a.m. to 5 p.m. The length of time allowed for optimal observation and data collection. There was a total of five hours of observation.

The first observation took place from 10:00 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. During this time, I sat on a bench south of “car row”, two rows of 11 cars and observed the communication between car owners and car observers. The naturalistic, unobtrusive observation reduced corruption in the data. After several hours, I began to walk through “car row” where I further observed interactions.

The second observation took place from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. During this time, I walked through “car row” and observed communication among car observers. The observer’s gender, estimated age and rough communication content were documented in a binder.

After conducting research, an hour was dedicated to expanding the field notes. Any observations or implications

that were not documented earlier were written down in the field notes.

Gender-specific patterns in communication emerged from the grounded research; two main themes included male initiated communication and female initiated communication.

Using Boyatzis’ method of clustering and code development, raw data was reduced into understandable and manageable pieces for comparison and analysis. For example, data was reduced to the most relevant material, i.e. observer to observer communication. Common patterns emerged from the data, the most obvious theme being observer group size. Furthermore, three clusters emerged: group communication, which was three or more people, couple communication and single communication. Initially these were the emergent clusters, or groups containing items with similar qualities. The initial clusters were further explored and two main themes emerged: male initiated communication and female initiated communication. Under the main themes, subthemes were also identified. For example, a subtheme under male initiated communication was male to male communication. A code was then created based on these emergent themes. A list of the themes I identified became a tool to test the validity of the themes against the data. The code was used to direct the rest of my data.

Using the determined themes and cluster code, all observations were typed, cut into slips of paper and sorted into theme piles. It became clear that gender was more relevant as a cluster than group size. The main clusters then became male initiated and female initiated communication. Many subthemes were appropriate under the umbrella of gender. In further analysis, what emerged as important for males was with whom they were speaking. Under the male initiated cluster there was, male to female, male to male, and male to child communication dynamics. On the other hand, the conversation partner didn’t change female communication style and regardless of their conversation partner they communicated in three distinct ways. The female initiated cluster consisted of different themes, such as: questions, emotional ties and aesthetics.

The first main theme is male initiated communication. Most of the observers were males and they were mostly alone while walking through “car row”. However, when they were walking with other people there was a wide range of communication content. During the study, males discussed the mechanical specification of a car, the car

mechanics of car mechanics, taught people in their group about a car, and/or would talk about the aesthetics of a car.

The first subtheme is male to female communication. During the observations men asserted a dominant role in communicating with women. Males conversed in a teaching manner. Also, male observers would tell a story about their connection to a car or discuss their desire for a car. An example of a teaching moment in my data was a conversation between a male and female around the age of 50. The male said to the woman, "Look at that boiler." Based on the latent content, the male was showing that he knew it was a boiler and he wanted his wife to know that he knew it was a boiler. Another example, was between a male and a female, the male said to the female, "That's a Firebird right there." In this example, the male observer conveyed a "lesson" to the female observer.

The second subtheme is male to male communication. After examining how males communicate their knowledge of cars to their female counterparts, the second subtheme emerged focusing on how males would communicate that knowledge to one another. The data illustrated that male to male communication was more egalitarian and conversation topics consisted of discussing car mechanics, car history or car aesthetics. The most talked about was car mechanics. An example of car mechanics is when a group of about 3 men, around the age of 45, stood around a car and talked about the specific car's engine. The second style of communication is car history. An example of the style is when a clump of three men, ages ranging from 45-70, discuss the history of the Firebird and how the car changed over time. The third style of communication is car aesthetics. An example of male to male communication about car aesthetics is when two males, both around age 35, talked about a black car. One male said, "Looks like they forgot to put a clear coat on that one...I don't like it." The one male made a statement indicating he knew about the different types of car finishes.

The third subtheme is male to child communication. From the data, father figures appear to feel they have a duty to pass on their knowledge of cars to their children. Male to child communication involved "teaching moments" about the history or car mechanics of a car. They would also engage in storytelling about their connection to a car. An example of the connection between male, child and car is when a grandson, age 12, asked his grandfather about the Model T, in the nostalgic car show. The grandson asked, "Do you remember this one, grandpa?" and the grandfather responded by telling him the history of the car.

The second main theme was female initiated communication. With the perception that males hold the most knowledge of cars, it was interesting to see there were emergent patterns in the female communication. In fact, females initiated conversation with questions in which the communication was emotional and females generally talked about aesthetics rather than the mechanics of a car. The

first subtheme observed was that many female initiated conversations began with a question, such as, "What do you think of that car?" or "What type of car is that?" To show how often questions were used, out of the 28 conversations I placed in the female initiated theme, questions were used in 11 conversations.

The second subtheme consists of emotional communication women use when they initiate conversations. "Emotional communication" occurred when women initiated conversation by using words like "like" or "love" or related the car to a personal memory rather than talking about the car and its mechanics. For example, a woman, age 50, was discussing her memories of the car with a man, age 50. She said, "My parents had this car when I was 13." She also said, "I sure loved that car." This shows that she has an emotional tie to the car that males didn't express in the research. The females in my study were more connected to the cars emotionally. They were less interested in how a car worked and more in how a car made them feel.

The third subtheme centers on female discussion of aesthetics. Study results indicated that females communicated more about how the car looked than about emotional connections or asking questions. Women made statements about the aesthetics of the car rather than the mechanics which men emphasized. For example, one woman, age 35, told her family, "Oh that one looks nice." In another example, a female, age 25, told her male companion, age 25, about the color of a certain car. In this research, the statements or questions women made were more superficial and the statements men made tended to be more complex including explanation and justification.

Conclusion. Based on these findings, context was not an important factor in influencing gender and communication style. In the KSF Nostalgic Car Show, males communicated more about the mechanical or technical aspect of cars while the communication of females was more aesthetically based. Based on the findings of this research, females and males at the KSF Nostalgic Car Show communicated in stereotypical manners consistent with research on general biological sex differences in communication.

[1] Moir, A., & Jessel, D. (1992). *Brain Sex: the Real Difference between Men and Women*. New York: Dell Publishing.

[2] Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company

[3] Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

[4] Millet, K. (2000). *Sexual Politics*. University of Illinois Press,