

# SEX DIFFERENCES AND CONSUMER COMPLAINTS: DO MEN AND WOMEN COMMUNICATE DIFFERENTLY WHEN THEY COMPLAIN TO CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES?

Dennis E. Garrett, Marquette University  
Renee A. Meyers, Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Lee West, University of Iowa

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential effect that a consumer's sex may have on the communication that occurs between complaining consumers and customer service representatives. Two competing theoretical approaches in the communication discipline to the study of sex differences-- the "dual cultures" perspective and the "no differences" perspective-- are discussed. Content analysis of 531 complaint conversations showed no significant difference in the communication content spoken by female and male consumers in their interactions with customer service representatives. Also, this analysis revealed no significant differences in the communication content spoken by customer service representatives in their interactions with female and male consumers. These findings, supportive of the "no differences" perspective, suggest that consumer affairs managers may not need to consider the sex of consumers as a central variable in the design of complaint management systems.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, managers at progressive companies have increasingly encouraged customers to voice their complaints directly to company representatives. To facilitate this communication process, many of these companies have instituted toll-free "hot lines" staffed by specially trained service representatives who are responsible for responding to consumers' complaints (Garrett and Meyers 1996; SOCAP 1992, 1996). In theory, this complaint communication process should benefit both dissatisfied consumers and corporate consumer affairs managers. For consumers, complaining directly to company service representatives offers the opportunity to express dissatisfaction and hopefully receive appropriate redress. For corporations, receiving consumers' complaints provides the chance to collect valuable

information regarding problematic products and corporate procedures.

Despite these presumed benefits, however, research shows that consumers are satisfied with companies' responses to their complaints only about fifty to sixty percent of the time (Andreasen 1988). One of the major reasons for this relatively low effectiveness rate may be the inability of customer service representatives to understand and respond appropriately to the wide variety of communication messages and styles used by complaining consumers (Agin 1990; Fornell 1988).

## OBJECTIVE

Researchers in the marketing discipline have long considered consumers' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, racial background, sex) to be potentially significant determinants of complaining behavior (e.g., LaForge 1989; Cornwell, Bligh, and Babakus 1991; Mason and Himes 1973). Although limited in number and scope, research which explicitly examines the impact of a consumer's sex on the complaint process generally finds that women and men differ in the complaint channels they choose and their frequency of complaining (Bolfing 1989; Solnick and Hemenway 1992).

However, no previous studies have analyzed the potential effect that a complaining consumer's sex may have on the communication that occurs during interactions between complaining consumers and customer service representatives. This research issue has potentially important implications for customer service managers. If significant sex differences do exist in the communication used by complaining consumers, this may indicate that customer service representatives should be trained to communicate differently with male and female consumers in order to increase the likelihood for successful complaint interactions.

---

The importance of this study is further underscored by literature in the communication discipline regarding male and female communication. Two opposing camps have developed in the communication discipline concerning this area of research. The "dual cultures" advocates maintain that there are indeed fundamental and enduring differences in the communication used by females and males. They further argue that these communication differences affect the manner in which men and women conduct their lives and maintain their relationships with other individuals. Because of these differences, they would argue that customer service managers must train their service representatives to consider the sex of the complaining consumer as an important variable when responding to consumers' complaints. In sharp contrast, proponents of the "no difference" perspective in the communication discipline assert that there are few, if any, significant differences in the communication used by men and women. To bolster their stand, they point to several recent meta-analyses that conclude that the empirical evidence collected from hundreds of studies regarding male and female communication do not justify a claim of a significant sex impact on communication. Therefore, they would argue that customer service managers do not need to train their service representatives to adopt specialized communication messages for male and female consumers.

Given the potential importance of this topic to customer service managers and the current unresolved debate in the communication discipline, the objective of this paper is to examine if the sex of the complaining consumer may affect the content of communication that takes place during these interactions between consumers and service representatives. That is, do male and female consumers communicate their complaints differently when they interact with company service representatives? Also, because interactions between complaining consumers and service representatives are a dyadic process, it is important to evaluate the type of communication used by service representatives with male and female consumers. Thus, this study will also evaluate if service representatives communicate differently when they respond to complaining female and male

consumers.

Relevant research from both the communication discipline and the marketing discipline is reviewed next. Then the research questions addressed in this study are presented, followed by an explanation of the study's methodology. Finally, the results are presented and discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers in the communication discipline have extensively analyzed potential communication differences between women and men during the past several decades. Two dominant and competing perspectives are apparent in this literature--the "dual cultures" approach and the "no differences" perspective. Each of these two perspectives will be discussed in detail in this section.

### An Overview of the "Dual Cultures" Perspective

Much of the previous research on sex differences has adopted a "dual cultures" framework (Coates 1986; Coates and Cameron 1989; Eagly and Wood 1991; Johnson 1989; Kramarae 1981; Tannen 1990, 1994; Thorne 1993; Wood 1993, 1994, 1997). This view assumes that women and men grow up in gender-segregated worlds, and therefore adopt separate behaviors, strategies, and values (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1990, 1995). As Wood (1996, p. 150) states:

Although not all girls and boys are socialized into, respectively, feminine and masculine communication cultures, the majority of us are. Because children's activities tend to be sex-segregated, gendered patterns of interaction are learned early and may persist throughout life.

From this view, men and women are more different than similar, and are often viewed in juxtaposition. Tannen (1995, p. 140) suggests that "in every community known to linguists, the patterns that constitute linguistic style are relatively different for men and women....The result is that women and men tend to have different habitual

ways of saying what they mean, and conversations between them can be like cross-cultural communication.”

Some of the distinctions that researchers in the “dual cultures” approach have identified as characteristic of men and women include (a) men as competitive, women as cooperative (Berryman-Fink, Ballard-Reisch and Newman 1993; Maltz and Borker 1982); (b) men as autonomous, women as connected (Meyers, Brashers, Winston and Grob 1996; Tannen 1994; Wood 1994); and (c) men as self-oriented, women as other-oriented (Lesch 1994; Wyatt 1984, 1988).

One of the more prominent distinctions, however, that permeates much of the literature is the difference between men as task-oriented and women as relationship-oriented (Pearson, Turner and Todd-Mancillas 1991). Two decades ago, Baird (1976, p. 192) noted this distinction between men and women in a review of research on sex differences in communication:

Males, encouraged to be independent, aggressive, problem-oriented, and risk-taking are more task-oriented in their interactions, . . . more interested and capable in problem-solving, . . . and more likely to assume leadership in task-oriented situations. Females, taught to be noncompetitive, dependent, empathic, passive, and interpersonally oriented, typically are more willing to self-disclose, more expressive of emotions and perceptive of others' emotional states, . . . less interested and able in problem-solving, . . . and less likely to assume leadership.

Kramarae (1981, p. 145) echoed Baird's analysis, stating that “the ‘sex role differentiation hypothesis’--that men specialize in instrumental or task behaviors and women specialize in expressive or social activities--has been influential in communication studies of the past twenty-five years.” Similarly, Eagly and Wood (1991, p. 309) indicated that “women are expected to possess high levels of communal attributes, including being friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. Men are expected to possess high levels of agentic qualities, including being independent, masterful, assertive, and

instrumentally competent.”

More recently, Wood (1996) summarized this distinction by outlining these differences in women's and men's communication. She suggests men use communication to (a) achieve instrumental goals, (b) establish individual status and authority, and (c) compete for attention and power. Women, on the other hand, use communication to (a) build connections with others, (b) include others, and (c) cooperate, respond, show interest, and support others. Similarly, Tannen (1995, p. 140) suggests that boys (and subsequently, men) “learn to use language to negotiate their status in the group by displaying their abilities and knowledge, and by challenging others and resisting challenges.” Conversely, girls “learn to talk in ways that balance their own needs with those of others--to save face for one another in the broadest sense of the term.”

In sum, the “dual cultures” approach views men and women as culturally dissimilar and separate. Their behaviors and communication differ along many dimensions, one of the most prominent being task and relationship dimensions. Men are most often categorized as task-oriented, problem-solvers, and focused on instrumental goals. Women, conversely, are viewed as relationship-oriented, cooperative, and focused on maintenance goals. If the “dual cultures” perspective is correct, we should find differences in the type of communication used by female and male consumers when they express their complaints to customer service representatives. Likewise, we should also find differences in the communication used by service representatives to respond to female and male consumers during these complaint interactions.

### **An Overview of the "No Differences" Perspective**

A growing number of researchers are beginning to question the “dual cultures” approach to studying the impact of sex on communication interactions. Thorne (1993) suggests that there are many exceptions and qualifications that do not fit the “dual cultures” assumptions. Similarly, Inman (1996) suggests that in comparing women's and men's friendships, men and women are more alike than different. Inman (1996, p. 97) states that

men and women "are similar in what we seek and value in friends. We all want close, meaningful connections with others with whom we share interests, values, or goals."

Other researchers have argued that our view of sex differences is overshadowed by stereotypes regarding men's and women's behaviors (Canary and Hause 1993; Ragan 1989). That is, we may perceive differences to be greater, or more pervasive than they are, because we are viewing them through the lens of sex role stereotypes. For example, if we find differences between the sexes in our research, we are quick to attribute those differences to sex role stereotypes over other possible explanations. In addition, if we discover findings contrary to sex role stereotypes, we are quick to explain those differences within a stereotypical framework. For instance, if we find women to be as, or more, competitive than men, we try to explain that finding within a stereotypical lens by referring to the situation (an organizational setting where that behavior is necessary and more highly valued), or the task (a male-oriented task), or the age of the women (younger women today are more likely to be competitive). In short, we fail to interpret our findings objectively because we are working in the shadow of stereotypes and the "dual cultures" perspective.

In addition, recent critics of the "dual cultures" approach have argued that the polarization that occurs in this perspective creates inconsistent and value-laden conclusions (Canary and Hause 1993; Putnam 1982). They assert that establishing dichotomous or polarized distinctions between men's and women's communication often leads to claims of superiority/inferiority. At times, women's communication patterns are seen as "powerless" and therefore less than adequate. At other times, men's communication is seen as nonsupportive, and therefore not helpful. What is forgotten here is that all types of communication can be valuable in various situations, and that gradations of communication behaviors exist. For example, communication can be more or less (along a continuum) assertive, supportive, competitive, cooperative, or inclusive, among other attributes. By studying communication from a "dual cultures" approach, researchers are more likely to accept the extremes and to overlook the value of a variety of communication behaviors

regardless of the sex of the participant.

These criticisms of the "dual cultures" view recently have been supported by several meta-analyses that find few differences between women and men in communication behavior. Three of the most recent, and relevant, analyses are detailed here. Wilkins and Andersen (1991) looked at differences and similarities in men's and women's management communication using meta-analytic techniques. They found few differences between men and women in their communication practices. They state (p. 26):

Although the statistically significant results suggest that differences do exist, the variance accounted for was so small, that statistical significance appears to have little social value. It can be safely concluded that there is no meaningful difference in the communication behaviors of male and female managers based on current quantitative findings.

Wilkins and Andersen (1991) indicate that no meaningful sex differences were found in affect behavior, influence strategies, autocratic behavior, democratic behavior, negative affect behavior, communication facilitation, or leader emergence. They concluded by suggesting that future research "move away from attempts to identify gender differences between managers" (p. 30), and indicated that if we are to truly understand managerial communication, researchers "need to concentrate less on identifying differences or similarities and more on identifying the situational factors that affect behavior" (p. 30).

Similarly, in a meta-analysis of sex differences in self-disclosure communication, Dindia and Allen (1993) analyzed 205 studies published between 1958 and 1989, and found that there was very little difference in self-disclosure behaviors of men and women. They concluded that (pp. 117-118):

The results of this meta-analysis . . . indicate that sex differences in self disclosure are small . . . . Thus, using the average effect size found in this meta-analysis, if approximately 45% of men would disclose a particular item, approximately 55% of women would disclose the same information.

Dindia and Allen (1993, p. 118) suggested that "sex differences in self-disclosure are not as large as self-disclosure theorists and researchers have suggested. It is time to stop perpetuating the myth that there are large sex differences in men's and women's self-disclosure."

Finally, Canary and Hause (1993) reviewed and summarized fifteen representative meta-analyses of sex differences that included over 1,200 studies. They concluded that there are few, if any, differences in the manner in which men and women communicate. Canary and Hause (1993, p 140) state:

The hundreds of studies represented in the meta-analyses indicate that sex differences in social interaction are small and inconsistent; that is, about 1% of the variance is accounted for and these effects are moderated by other variables. Given this research, we should not expect to find substantial differences in communication.

Thus, in direct contrast to the "dual cultures" approach, the "no differences" view suggests that men and women may be more similar than different. Hence, from this perspective, it is unlikely that there will be significant differences in the communication used by female and male consumers when they complain to company service representatives. Also, service representatives are likely to use the same type of communication to respond to both female and male consumers.

### **Summary**

As this review shows, there are two dramatically different perspectives present in the communication literature regarding the potential role that participants' sex may play in communication interactions. Researchers from the "dual cultures" perspective argue that women and men are basically different and this is evident in their communication. Diametrically opposed, researchers from the "no differences" perspective strongly believe that there are few, if any, significant differences in the communication used by men and women.

In the next section, previous research in the marketing discipline regarding complaining

behavior of female and male consumers is reviewed.

### **MALE AND FEMALE CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR RESEARCH**

Studies in the marketing discipline comparing male and female consumer complaining behavior have been limited in both quantity and scope. In fact, few studies have explored the issue of sex differences directly. Instead, in most cases sex is merely "added on" as an additional demographic variable (among a set of variables) to analyze. Moreover, theoretical frameworks for guiding these investigations are rarely discussed.

Much of the research on sex differences and consumer complaining behavior focuses on the frequency with which men and women complain and the channels which they choose to express their dissatisfaction. Research on the frequency of complaints filed by men and women offers inconsistent results. Some research indicates that women and men are equally likely to complain (Granbois, Summers, and Frazier 1977; Hemenway and Killen 1989; Liefeld, Edgecombe and Wolfe 1975), but other research suggests that women are more likely than men to complain (Duhaime and Ash 1980; Schwartz and Overton 1987; Solnick and Hemenway 1992). Although interpretation of these findings is difficult, some researchers have surmised that women (especially those who do not work outside the home) may have more time to register complaints than men, and therefore are likely to be the official "complainer" for the household.

The research regarding channel selection indicates that women are more likely than men to pursue a direct form of complaining action (i.e., complain directly to the company) or use negative word-of-mouth communication when dissatisfied with certain products (Bolfing 1989; Duhaime and Ash 1980; Solnick and Hemenway 1992). In addition, it appears that women have less experience than men do complaining through third party channels (e.g., consumer protection agencies, lawyers, mediators), but perceive greater value than men in complaining via these channels (Singh 1989). Also, women are less likely than men to use litigation to sue doctors (Brown and Swartz 1984).

It is important to highlight that, while sex has been recognized as a potentially significant determinant of consumer complaining behavior, none of these prior research studies specifically addressed the role of sex differences in the complaint communication process. Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine if the sex of complaining consumers has a significant effect on the type of communication spoken by consumers and service representatives during complaint interactions.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first research question that will be examined in this study is:

Are there significant differences in the types of communication used by dissatisfied female and male consumers when they interact with company service representatives?

If the "dual cultures" perspective is correct, we should see significant differences in the types of communication used by female and male consumers during these interactions. If this is true, this may indicate that customer service managers should train their service representatives to alter their communication messages given the sex of the complaining consumer. However, if this study finds that there are, in fact, no significant differences in the communication used by female and male consumers in these complaint interactions, this will be added support for the "no differences" perspective. In this case, this finding would suggest that customer service representatives may not need to alter their communication according to the sex of the complaining consumer. Instead, there are probably other variables that are more critical for understanding how to resolve consumers' complaints more effectively.

Complaint communication is a dyadic process in which dissatisfied consumers interact with company service representatives. Therefore, in addition to analyzing the communication used by female and male consumers, we also are interested in determining if service representatives communicate differently with male and female consumers. If we find that male and female

consumers communicate differently and service representatives communicate differently with male and female consumers, this is additional support for the "dual cultures" perspective. In contrast, if no differences are found in both the communication of female and male consumers and the communication used by service representatives, this would lend credence to the "no differences" perspective. Thus, the second research question that will be addressed in this study is:

Are there significant differences between service representatives' communication with male and female consumers in complaint interactions?

### METHODOLOGY

In this section, we discuss the methods used to answer this research question, including the data collection process, data unitizing procedures, content analysis system, and coding procedures.

#### Data Collection Process

Because many companies treat complaints as "bad news" (Fornell and Westbrook 1984), they are often reluctant to allow researchers to analyze their complaint management procedures. Fortunately, a regional telephone service company permitted us to tape record telephone complaint interactions (i.e., conversations) between their customer service representatives and dissatisfied customers. This company maintains a telephone system in which dissatisfied consumers with service complaints can talk directly to trained customer service representatives. Service representatives in this company agreed to participate in this research project, but they were not aware of when they were actually being recorded.

From a total of 27 service representatives employed by this company, 17 were selected for recording, based on the match between their work schedules and our authorized hours of access to company facilities. As is typical in this industry, most of the service representatives employed by this company are female (15 females, 2 males). In addition, most of the service representatives were high school educated and full-time employees.

They had an average of ten years experience with this company.

Approximately 80 hours of conversations between this company's service representatives and complaining consumers were recorded. Because it would be too expensive to transcribe this entire set of recordings, a sample of complaint interactions was selected for transcription (approximately 34 hours). An "interaction" was defined to be a complete conversation between a complaining consumer and service representative that began when the service representative answered the consumer's call and ended when the two parties concluded that conversation. Any interactions were removed that did not explicitly involve consumer complaints (e.g., inquiries regarding other services offered by the company). This yielded a total of 531 interactions between complaining telephone customers and company service representatives in the final data set for this study.

#### **Unitizing the Data**

Unitizing is the process of dividing large blocks of communication content into smaller units so that independent judges may more easily code them into categories (Folger, Hewes and Poole 1984). After considering a variety of unitizing possibilities commonly used in communication research (e.g., individual words, sentences, turns-at-talk, and complete conversations), sentences were selected as the most appropriate unit of analysis because people typically talk in sentence form in telephone conversations. Unitizing rules were then developed to define complete sentences as well as other conversational segments that did not fit the conventional definition of a sentence (a copy of the unitizing rules is available from the first author).

Using these unitizing rules, two members of the research team practiced unitizing on transcripts extraneous to this study. When an acceptable reliability level was reached in practice, the two coders then independently unitized 50 complaint interactions from this study's final data set. Unitizing reliability was computed on these 50 interactions (approximately 2200 units) using Guetzkow's (1950) formula and was found to be .004, indicating greater than 99% agreement.

Because reliability was so high on this sample, it was deemed appropriate to allow just one coder to complete the rest of the unitizing task. The total number of units contained in the 531 complaint interactions was 17,792 units (sentences).

#### **Content Analysis System**

Although some researchers argue that consumers do not necessarily have to be dissatisfied to register a complaint with a company (Jacoby and Jaccard 1981; Oliver 1987), most researchers agree that complaints are generally based on consumers' perceptions of dissatisfaction with a purchase experience (Andreasen 1988; Fornell 1976; Singh 1988). Thus, the communication content of complaint interactions should reflect closely consumers' bases of dissatisfaction. While a variety of explanations for consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (CS/D) formation have been advanced, we based our category system on four frequently researched bases of consumer dissatisfaction: expectations, performance, equity, and attribution (Oliver 1993; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Yi 1990). We briefly review these four concepts next, and then provide formal definitions for our category system.

**Expectations.** Consumers often form beliefs about the products or services they are considering purchasing (Boulding et al. 1993; Oliver and Winer 1987). Current academic debate in this domain concentrates on whether consumers' expectations are based on what consumers believe will happen or should happen (Boulding et al. 1993), and whether consumers compare performance to expectations or norms when forming satisfaction judgments (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins 1987). Despite these unresolved issues, researchers generally agree that unfulfilled expectations can be an important source of consumer dissatisfaction.

**Performance.** Some researchers have demonstrated that product or service performance itself, without any comparison to expectations, may be a strong predictor of CS/D in certain consumption situations (Bolton and Drew 1991; Tse and Wilton 1988). Tse and Wilton (1988, p. 210) suggest, "because expectation and product

---

performance appear to assume distinctly different roles in CS/D formation, the effect of perceived performance on CS/D should be modeled separately."

**Attribution.** A third explanation focuses on consumers' perceptions of the causes for product performance problems, typically using components of stability, locus, and controllability (Bitner 1990; Folkes 1990). As Folkes (1990, p. 150) notes, "Product failure is the kind of negative and unexpected event that has been shown to prompt causal search." By engaging in causal search, consumers seek to identify who (consumer or company) is responsible and then choose an appropriate complaint response option.

**Equity.** Finally, a fourth explanation for understanding CS/D is based on equity theory (Goodwin and Ross 1992; Oliver and Swan 1989). Equity theory posits that consumers form satisfaction/ dissatisfaction judgments by assessing the fairness of their exchange relationship with the product's producer. If consumers perceive that their outcomes are not equitable or the processes used to settle conflicts are not appropriate, they are likely to be dissatisfied.

Therefore, we believe communication between complaining consumers and service representatives will focus on consumers' expectations for product/service performance, descriptions of product/service performance problems that the consumer is experiencing, analysis of likely causes (attribution) of these problems, and alternative procedures that may be used to equitably resolve the consumer's complaint.

Using these four bases of consumer dissatisfaction, we developed category definitions appropriate for content analyzing verbal communication between complaining consumers and company service representatives. In addition to the four categories previously described, a fifth category identified as "other" statements was added to our category scheme. This final category was necessary because complaint interactions contain a variety of statements which are not explicitly related to complaints. Such statements include greetings ("Hello, this is Susan. How may I help you?"), information inquiries during the telephone conversation ("What is your phone

number?", "What is your address?"), closings at the end of the conversation ("That's it, OK.", "Bye-bye.", "We'll call you back."), conversational maintenance terms ("Uh-huh.", "Umm.", "I see.", "Well, you know."), and casual conversation ("How is the weather today?").

The five categories that comprise our category system then are formally defined as follows:

**Expectations:** Communication that concerns the anticipated, predicted, or expected performance of a product or service.

example: "I thought my phone was supposed to be turned on by five o'clock today."

**Performance:** Communication that describes or explains how a customer's product or service performs, including the types of problems a customer is experiencing.

example: "Every time I try to call out I get a loud buzzing noise in my phone."

**Attribution:** Communication that attempts to determine why a problem occurred or the causes of a problem.

example: "My computer shows that our repair people are working to fix a broken telephone line that is disrupting all of the service in your area."

**Equity:** Communication that addresses the fairness of the relationship between a customer and a company, including each party's responsibilities.

example: "If the problem is in the line leading up to your house, you will not be charged for the costs of the repair."

**Other Category:** Basic communication that is used to conduct the conversational interaction, including greetings, closings, exchange of basic background information, and conversational maintenance terms.

example: "Could you please give me your name and telephone number?"



### Coding Procedures

Six coders (who were not part of the research team) content analyzed the 17,792 units (sentences) in the final data set. These coders were provided with necessary background information regarding the company and its complaint management system, but were not told the study's research questions. The coders were trained regarding the definitions of the five categories. When an acceptable level of reliability was reached in practice coding sessions involving transcripts extraneous to the final data set, the coders were given the 17,792 content units to code. Given the large volume of data to content analyze in this study, the coders were divided into three teams of two coders per team, with each team analyzing approximately one-third of the data. The coders were instructed to work independently and not discuss their coding decisions with any other coders. The coders were directed to resolve any differences in their coding decisions by consensus when all coding was finished. If they could not reach consensus regarding the correct coding decision for any units, they were told to consult with one of the authors for a final decision.

Intercoder reliability was calculated for each team of coders for their entire data sets using both Cohen's kappa (1960) and Perreault and Leigh's statistic (1989). Cohen's kappa revealed scores of .89, .96, and .94 for each of the three teams of coders, while Perreault and Leigh's statistic yielded scores of .95, .98, and .97. While there are presently no universally accepted standards of acceptability for intercoder reliability results (Hughes and Garrett 1990), Krippendorff (1980) suggests that results above .80 are generally acceptable.

### RESULTS

The 17,792 communication units in the data set were split into the 8,655 units spoken by consumers and the 9,137 spoken by service representatives. To answer the first research question, the consumers' communication units were then further divided into those spoken by the 346 female consumers (5494 units) and the units spoken by the 185 male consumers (3161 units), as shown in Table 1. The Pearson's chi-square

statistic for the data in this table is not significant ( $X^2(4) = 3.06, p > .05$ ). Therefore, we can conclude from this data that there are no significant differences in the types of communication spoken by female and male consumers when they complain to service representatives in this company.

Table 1 points out that male and female consumers were fairly consistent in the pattern of communication messages produced. A large proportion of the communication for both males and females fell into the "other" category (47.2% of all messages produced by males and 48.4% of all messages produced by females). Equity issues and performance issues were the next most frequently voiced messages for both sexes. Females produced slightly more equity statements (19.4% of all messages produced by females) than performance statements (17.9% of all messages produced by females). Males produced approximately the same number of equity statements (19.1% of all statements spoken by men) and performance statements (19.2% of all statements spoken by men). Attribution statements were the fourth most frequently voiced message for both men (13.6% of all statements spoken by men) and women (13.3% of all statements produced by women). Finally neither female or male consumers voiced many expectation messages (1.0% of all communication spoken by women and 0.9% of all communication spoken by men).

Although there were no statistical differences in male and female consumers' communication across these five categories, it is interesting to note that almost twice as many females ( $N = 346$ ) called in to complain as did males ( $N = 185$ ). This result supports some earlier findings that suggest women may complain more frequently than men (Duhaime and Ash 1980; Schwartz and Overton 1987; Solnick and Hemenway 1992). However, of course, this may be partially due to a greater incidence of women not working outside the home, and thus accepting responsibility for reporting problems with their family's telephone service.

To answer the second research question regarding service representatives' communication with female and male consumers in complaint interactions, the 9,137 units spoken by service representatives were divided into the units spoken

**Table 1**  
**Communication by Female and Male Consumers in Complaint Interactions**

Categories of Communication						
	Other	Performance	Attribution	Equity	Expectations	
Female Consumers						Row Total
Number Of Units	2660	983	730	1066	55	5494
Row %	48.4	17.9	13.3	19.4	1.0	100.0
Male Consumers						
Number Of Units	1493	608	429	603	28	3161
Row %	47.2	19.2	13.6	19.1	0.9	100.0
Column Total	4153	1591	1159	1669	83	8655
Column %	48.0	18.4	13.4	19.3	1.0	100.0

Pearson chi-square = 3.06      significance = .547

**Table 2**  
**Service Representative Communication With Female and Male Consumers**

Categories of Communication						
	Other	Performance	Attribution	Equity	Expectations	
With Female Consumers						Row Total
Number Of Units	2787	206	1047	1849	9	5898
Row %	47.3	3.5	17.8	31.3	0.2	100.0
With Male Consumers						
Number Of Units	1594	114	531	994	6	3239
Row %	49.2	3.5	16.4	30.7	0.2	100.0
Column Total	4381	320	1578	2843	15	9137
Column %	47.9	3.5	17.3	31.1	0.2	100.0

Pearson chi-square = 4.34      significance = .362

in conversations with female consumers (5,898 units) and the units spoken in conversations with male consumers (3,239 units), as presented in Table 2. The Pearson's chi-square statistic for the data in this table is not significant ( $X^2(4) = 4.34$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Again, an examination of the row percentages for each of the five categories reveals that service representatives utilized similar communication messages when talking to both male and female consumers when they called to complain. Therefore, we can conclude that there is no significant difference in the manner in which service representatives in this company communicate with male consumers and female consumers.

## DISCUSSION

In this section the limitations of this study are acknowledged first. Then we discuss our results and the potential significance of our findings. Finally, directions for future research regarding the potential effect of a consumer's sex on communication in consumer complaint interactions is presented.

### Research Limitations

Although a large sample of complaint interactions was analyzed in this investigation, it must be emphasized that this data was from one company in one specific industry (telephone service). Because industries and individual companies vary widely in their customer service practices, a single company obviously cannot be considered representative of the entire population. In addition, because consumers have different marketplace experiences with various products and services, complaints to a telephone repair service cannot be considered representative of complaints that might be made concerning other services or products. Therefore, these results must be viewed as preliminary findings that should be compared to future studies that investigate complaint communication involving other companies in other industries.

In addition, this study focused specifically on the content of communication that occurs during complaint interactions. No attempt was made to analyze the style of communication (e.g., emotion,

rate, pitch) that was used during these interactions. Therefore, while no differences were found in the communication content used by female and male consumers, future research may find that female and male consumers use significantly different communication styles to express their dissatisfaction to service representatives.

### Interpretation of Results

The fact that no significant sex differences were detected in this study of complaint communication regarding telephone service may be attributable to two factors. First, as discussed earlier, recent research studies in the communication discipline are reporting fewer sex differences than earlier research studies detected (Canary and Hause 1993; Dindia and Allen 1992; Wilkins and Andersen 1991). Hyde and Linn (1988) argue that this may be the result of changing sex roles in society. As more women and men have abandoned traditional female and male roles, they assert that actual sex differences in behavior have gradually diminished. The results of this study lend support to this general hypothesis, and the "no differences" approach to the study of sex differences, at least in terms of consumer complaint interactions.

Second, these findings may be a result of the type of service interactions that occurred. Service interactions vary in terms of their degree of personalization (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). That is, some service interactions are highly routinized while other interactions are highly personalized. The company in this study uses a service approach in which representatives are trained to follow a specific series of steps when communicating with each and every dissatisfied consumer. Thus, this more routinized process may "drown out" any potential sex differences in complaint communication. In contrast, in less routinized contexts it may be possible that sex differences in communication may be evident. Supporting this view, a recent study by Ayres (1991) showed that for automobile purchase negotiations (a considerably less routinized process than telephone service complaints), salespeople communicated significantly differently with female and male customers.

### Implications of Findings

These findings have both theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, these findings lend support to those researchers in recent years who have called for the abandonment of the "dual cultures" approach to studying sex differences. Perhaps there are fewer differences in communication practices between men and women than previously thought. If so, we do a disservice to both women and men when we perpetuate the myth that large differences exist. By conducting research and theorizing within a "dual cultures" perspective, we consciously look for differences between the sexes that may not actually exist.

From a managerial perspective, one of the primary motivations for this study was to determine if consumer affairs managers in the corporate world should consider the sex of consumers as an important variable in the design of their complaint management systems. Based on the results in this study, it appears that the sex of dissatisfied consumers may have no discernible effect on the type of communication content used by either consumers or service representatives in complaint interactions, at least as measured by this content analysis system. Therefore, we can cautiously conclude that service representatives probably do not need to be trained to communicate differently with male and female consumers. Instead, what is more important is that all service representatives be trained to deliver competent and courteous service to all customers. Recent research in the marketing discipline regarding service quality stresses this very point (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Garrett, Meyers and West 1996; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1990).

### Directions for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, we see three important directions for future research. First, as noted earlier in the limitations section, this study only investigated sex differences in complaint communication in one specific industry (telephone service) with one specific company, in which service representatives use a fairly routinized service interaction process. Therefore, before we can safely conclude that there are no sex

differences in complaint communication, similar interactions in highly dissimilar industries, using companies in which service representatives use more personalized interaction styles, must be analyzed.

In particular, it might be important to look at complaint communication in situations where men and women may have different levels of marketplace experience with products or services. Men's and women's experience with telephone repair (as investigated in this study) may be highly similar. But, even if traditional female and male roles are becoming less distinct, it is possible that men's and women's marketplace experiences with some products/services (e.g., automobiles or childcare) still may be more varied. This would mean that their complaints about these products/services may also be more differentiated along sex lines. If so, these industries may wish to consider training service representatives to address men's and women's complaints differently.

Secondly, there is a pressing need to examine the style of communication that is used by female and male consumers when they express their dissatisfaction to company service representatives. For example, do men and women express the same degree of emotion in their interactions with service representatives?

Finally, to more fully understand the complaint process from the consumer's point of view, it seems important to determine how participants in these communication interactions perceive the complaint process, and their satisfaction with that process. Because of management's concerns for consumer privacy, we were not able to contact this company's consumers to determine their perceptions of the complaint process. Future researchers might consider interviewing complaining consumers to determine if women and men have different reactions to the communication process in complaint interactions. For instance, are men and women equally satisfied with their experiences during these communication encounters with service representatives? Also, do women and men have similar preferences for service representatives' interaction styles (i.e., highly routinized vs. highly personalized)? Such issues of perception and satisfaction may be vitally important in the success of the complaint process as well.

## CONCLUSION

In this study we analyzed potential sex differences in complaint communication from two competing theoretical approaches. As measured by our content analysis framework for this particular industry (telephone service), there was no significant difference between female and male consumers' communication during complaint interactions. Also, there was no significant difference in the communication used by service representatives in their interactions with female and male consumers. As such, these results add support to the "no differences" approach that suggests that traditional male and female roles are less distinct than the "dual cultures" approach has claimed.

However, as we suggested earlier, we believe our results clearly indicate that there are some important issues that should be studied before we can prudently dismiss sex differences as irrelevant to communication in complaint interactions. These issues include investigation of potential sex differences in complaint communication in other companies and industries, analysis of communication style, as well as an examination of female and male consumers' preferences for communication interaction styles. Hence, we view this investigation as a stepping stone to additional study in this area rather than as a concluding statement about the role that a consumer's sex may play in complaint interactions.

## REFERENCES

- Agins, Teri (1990), "Customers, 800-Lines May Not Connect," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 20, B1 and B7.
- Andreasen, Alan R. (1988), "Consumer Complaints and Redress: What We Know and What We Don't Know," in *The Frontier of Research in the Consumer Interest*, E. Scott Maynes, ed., Columbia, MO: American Council on Consumer Interests, 675-722.
- Ayres, I. (1991), "Fair Driving: Gender and Race Discrimination in Retail Car Negotiations," *Harvard Law Review*, 104, 817-872.
- Baird, J. E., Jr. (1976), "Sex Differences in Group Communication: A Review of Relevant Research," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62, 179-192.
- Berryman-Fink, C., D. Ballard-Reisch and L. H. Newman (eds.) (1993), *Communication and Sex-Role Socialization*, New York: Garland Publishing Inc.
- Bitner, Mary Jo (1990), "Evaluating Service Encounters: The Effects of Physical Surrounding and Employee Responses," *Journal of Marketing*, 54, April, 69-82.
- Bitner, Mary Jo, Bernard H. Booms and Mary Stanfield Tetreault (1990), "The Service Encounter: Diagnosing Favorable and Unfavorable Incidents," *Journal of Marketing*, 54, January, 71-84.
- Bolting, Clair P. (1989), "How Do Customers Express Dissatisfaction and What Can Service Marketers Do About It?" *The Journal of Services Marketing*, 3, 2, Spring, 5-23.
- Bolton, Ruth N. and James H. Drew (1991), "A Longitudinal Analysis of the Impact of Service Changes on Customer Attitudes," *Journal of Marketing*, 55, 1, January, 1-9.
- Boulding, William, Ajay Kalra, Richard Staelin and Valerie A. Zeithaml (1993), "A Dynamic Process Model of Service Quality: From Expectations to Behavioral Intentions," *Journal of Marketing Research*, XXX, February, 7-27.
- Brown, Stephen W. and Teresa A. Swartz (1984), "Consumer Medical Complaint Behavior: Determinants of and Alternatives to Malpractice Litigation," *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 3, 67-84.
- Cadotte, Ernest R., Robert B. Woodruff and Roger L. Jenkins (1987), "Expectations and Norms in Models of Consumer Satisfaction," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 24, August, 305-314.
- Canary, D. J. and K. S. Hause (1993), "Is There Any Reason to Research Sex Differences in Communication?" *Communication Quarterly*, 41, 129-144.
- Coates, J. (1986), "Gossip Revisited: Language in All-Female Groups," in J. Coates and D. Cameron (eds.), *Women in Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*, New York: Longman, 94-122.
- Coates, J. and D. Cameron (eds.) (1989) *Women in Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*, New York: Longman.
- Cohen, Jacob (1960), "A Coefficient of Agreement for Nominal Scales," *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20, Winter, 37-46.
- Cornwell, T. Bettina, Alan David Bligh and Emin Babakus (1991), "Complaint Behavior of Mexican-American Consumers to a Third-Party Agency," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 25, 1, 1-18.
- Dindia, K. and M. Allen (1993), "Sex Differences in Self-Disclosure: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 106-124.
- Duhaime, Carole and Stephen B. Ash (1980), "Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior: A Comparison of Male and Female Consumers," in *Refining Concepts and Measures of Consumer Satisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, H. Keith Hunt and Ralph L. Day, eds., Bloomington, IN: Indiana

- University School of Business, 102-111.
- Eagly, A. H. and W. Wood (1991), "Explaining Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Perspective," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17, 306-315.
- Folger, J., D. E. Hewes and M. S. Poole (1984), "Coding Social Interaction," in B. Devin and M. Voigt (eds.), *Progress in Communication Sciences*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 115-161.
- Folkes, Valerie S. (1990), "Conflict in the Marketplace: Explaining Why Products Fail," in *Attribution Theory: Applications to Achievement, Mental Health, and Interpersonal Conflict*, Sandra Graham and Valerie S. Folkes, eds., Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 143-160.
- Fornell, Claes (1976), *Consumer Input for Marketing Decisions: A Study of Corporate Departments for Consumer Affairs*, New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Fornell, Claes (1988), "Corporate Consumer Affairs Departments: Retrospect and Prospect," in *The Frontier of Research in the Consumer Interest*, E. Scott Maynes, ed., Columbia, MO: American Council on Consumer Interests, 595-619.
- Fornell, Claes and Robert A. Westbrook (1984), "The Vicious Circle of Consumer Complaints," *Journal of Marketing*, 48, Summer, 68-78.
- Garrett, Dennis E. and Renee A. Meyers (1996), "Verbal Communication Between Complaining Consumers and Company Service Representatives," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 30, 2, Winter, 444-475.
- Garrett, Dennis E., Renee A. Meyers and Lee West (1996), "Comparing the Communication Characteristics of High Competence and Low Competence Customer Service Representatives," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 9, 64-74.
- Goodwin, Cathy and Ivan Ross (1992), "Consumer Responses to Service Failures: Influence of Procedural and Interactional Fairness Perceptions," *Journal of Business Research*, 25, 149-163.
- Granbois, Donald, John O. Summers and Gary L. Frazier (1977), "Correlates of Consumer Expectation and Complaining Behavior," in R. L. Day (ed.), *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 18-25.
- Guetzkow, H. (1950), "Unitizing and Categorizing Problems in Coding Qualitative Data," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 6, 47-58.
- Hemenway, D. and A. Killen (1989), "Complainers and Non-Complainers," *Journal of Ambulatory Care Management*, 12, 19-27.
- Hughes, Marie Adele and Dennis E. Garrett (1990), "Intercoder Reliability Estimation Approaches in Marketing: A Generalizability Theory Framework for Quantitative Data," *Journal of Marketing Research*, XXVII, May, 185-195.
- Hyde, J. S. and M. C. Linn (1988), "Gender Differences in Verbal Ability: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, 104, 53-69.
- Inman, C. (1996), "Friendships Between Men: Closeness in the Doing," in J. T. Wood (ed.), *Gendered Relationships*, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co, 95-110.
- Jacoby, Jacob and James J. Jaccard (1981), "The Sources, Meaning, and Validity of Consumer Complaint Behavior: A Psychological Analysis," *Journal of Retailing*, 57, Fall, 4-24.
- Johnson, F. L. (1989), "Women's Culture and Communication: An Analytical Perspective," in C. M. Long and S. A. Friedley (eds.), *Beyond Boundaries: Sex and Gender Diversity in Communication*, Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 301-316.
- Kramarae, C. (1981), *Women and Men Speaking*, Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- Krippendorff, Klaus (1980), *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- LaForge, Mary C. (1989), "Learned Helplessness as an Explanation of Elderly Consumer Complaint Behavior," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 8, May, 359-366.
- Lesch, C. L. (1994), "Observing Theory in Practice: Sustaining Consciousness in a Coven," in L. Frey (ed.), *Group Communication in Context: Studies of Natural Groups*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 57-82.
- Liefeld, J. P., F. H. C. Edgecombe and Linda Wolfe (1975), "Demographic Characteristics of Canadian Consumer Complainers," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 9, 73-80.
- Maltz, D. N. and R. A. Borker (1982), "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication," in J. J. Gumperz (ed.), *Language and Social Identity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 196-216.
- Mason, Joseph Barry and Samuel H. Himes, Jr. (1973), "An Exploratory Behavioral and Socio-Economic Profile of Consumer Action About Dissatisfaction with Selected Household Appliances," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 7, Winter, 121-127.
- Meyers, Renee A., Dale E. Brashers, L. Winston and L. Grob (1996), "Sex Differences and Group Argument: A Theoretical Framework and Empirical Investigation," paper presented to the International Communication Association conference, May, Chicago.
- Oliver, Richard L. (1987), "An Investigation of the Interrelationship Between Consumer (Dis)Satisfaction and Complaint Reports," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 14, 218-222.
- Oliver, Richard L. (1993), "Cognitive, Affective, and Attribute Bases of the Satisfaction Response," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20, December, 418-430.

- Oliver, Richard L. and Wayne S. DeSarbo (1988), "Response Determinants in Satisfaction Judgments," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, March, 495-507.
- Oliver, Richard L. and John E. Swan (1989), "Consumer Perceptions of Interpersonal Equity and Satisfaction in Transactions: A Field Survey Approach," *Journal of Marketing*, 53, April, 21-35.
- Oliver, Richard L. and Russell S. Winer (1987), "A Framework for the Formation and Structure of Consumer Expectations: Review and Propositions," *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 8, 469-499.
- Pearson, J. C., L. H. Turner and W. Todd-Mancillas (1991), *Gender and Communication*, (2nd ed.), Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.
- Perreault, William D., Jr. and Laurence E. Leigh (1989), "Reliability of Nominal Data Based on Qualitative Judgments," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 26, May, 135-48.
- Putnam, L. L. (1982), "In Search of Gender: A Critique of Communication and Sex Roles Research," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 5, 1-9.
- Ragan, S. L. (1989), "Communication Between the Sexes: A Consideration of Sex Differences in Adult Communication," in J. F. Nussbaum (ed.), *Life-Span Communication: Normative Processes*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 179-193.
- Schwartz, L. R. and D. T. Overton (1987), "Emergency Department Complaints: A One-Year Analysis," *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, 16, 857-861.
- Singh, Jagdip (1988), "Consumer Complaint Intentions and Behavior: Definitional and Taxonomical Issues," *Journal of Marketing*, 52, January, 93-107.
- Singh, Jagdip (1989), "Determinants of Consumers' Decisions to Seek Third Party Redress: An Empirical Study of Dissatisfied Patients," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 23, 2, Winter, 329-363.
- SOCAP (Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business) (1992), *SOCAP 800 Number Study: A 1992 Profile of 800 Numbers for Customer Service*, Alexandria, VA: Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business.
- SOCAP (Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business) (1996), *A Landmark "Consumer Loyalty Study"*, Alexandria, VA: Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business.
- Solnick, Sara J. and David Hemenway (1992), "Complaints and Disenrollment at a Health Maintenance Organization," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 26, 1, 90-103.
- Surprenant, Carol F. and Michael R. Solomon (1987), "Predictability and Personalization in the Service Encounter," *Journal of Marketing*, 51, April, 86-96.
- Tannen, D. (1990), *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, New York: William Morrow.
- Tannen, D. (1994), *Gender and Discourse*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1995), "The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why," *Harvard Business Review*, Sept./Oct., 138-148.
- Thorne, B. (1993), *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Tse, David K. and Peter C. Wilton (1988), "Models of Consumer Satisfaction Formation: An Extension," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 25, 204-212.
- Wilkins, B. M. and P. A. Andersen (1991), "Gender Differences and Similarities in Management Communication: A Meta-Analysis," *Management Communication Quarterly*, 5, 6-35.
- Wood, J. T. (1993), "Enlarging Conceptual Boundaries: A Critique of Research in Interpersonal Communication," in S. P. Bowen and N. Wyatt (eds.), *Transforming Visions: Feminist Critiques in Communication Studies*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 19-50.
- Wood, J. T. (1994), *Who Cares: Women, Care, and Culture*, Carbondale, IL: SIU Press.
- Wood, J. T. (ed.) (1996), *Gendered Relationships*, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.
- Wood, J. T. (1997), *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture (2nd ed.)*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Wyatt, N. (1984), "Power and Decision Making," in G. M. Phillips and J. T. Wood (eds.), *Emergent Issues in Human Decision-Making*, Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 50-60.
- Wyatt, N. (1988), "Shared Leadership in the Weaver's Guild," in B. Bate and A. Taylor (eds.), *Women Communicating: Studies in Women's Talk*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 147-176.
- Yi, Youjae (1990), "A Critical Review of Consumer Satisfaction," in *Review of Marketing 1990*, Valarie A. Zeithaml (ed.), Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, 68-123.
- Zeithaml, Valarie A., A. Parasuraman and Leonard L. Berry (1990), *Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations*, New York, NY: The Free Press.

**Send correspondence regarding this article to:**

Dennis E. Garrett  
 Marketing Department, 432 Straz Hall  
 Marquette University  
 P.O. Box 1881  
 Milwaukee, WI 53210-1881 USA