

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Body language– female stereotype, male stereotype

Body language has many facets and is never silent. It involves the entire body, gestures, facial expression, eye contact, posture, our way of moving, use of space and manner of speaking, ... and conveys about two-thirds of all relevant social information, such as feeling, social status, self-image, sex – in the sense of gender, and is deeply rooted in society as well as the individual himself/herself (cf. Mühlen Achs 1993, 7f., 56).

Gender-specific body language results in the development of a gender culture which has an effect on all social interactions.

The manner of expression appears to be natural and it is not realised that it is not the character itself but only the isolated signals, subject to the respective situation, sent by the acting person and sensed by the observer, that are considered important. Mühlen Achs (1993) points out that "the image of mankind in the media" due to "its striking stereotypes and curtain-fire-like presence" leads to an "evidence-goldmine" "in order to prove the leadership-function of the gender-specific body language". Mühlen Achs 1993, p.59).



"The big brother" – Who affects (protects) whom?

Source: Steffl Trend Letter, 05/07

Postwurfsendung (Direct mail advertisement) 23. Nov. 2007, p. 7.

Mühlen Achs (1993) draws a distinction between "body coding" (simply the outward appearance) and "Genderlect" (i.e. viewing masculine and feminine styles of discourse as two distinct cultural dialects, ...) The standards about how women and men have to look and dress, reinforce the existing gender gap tendencies, which are mainly based on the cult of the beautiful and stereotypes about males and females.

The dress code

The dress code refers to the power definition of clothes. People are categorized and are or can be judged on the basis of their clothes. For men, clothes symbolically represent position, status, prosperity and masculinity; for women, first of all, their female attractiveness should be emphasized (often figure-hugging, revealing, and to some extent, uncomfortable and unhealthy such as high heels. Power and status are not symbolized.

Ideal body

The ideal body actually refers to the figure itself, not least of all because dress codes have increasingly softened. An almost unattainable ideal of beauty idea leads women to be permanently occupied with their bodies as well as unsatisfied with them and this thus negatively affects the core of a woman's identity. The ideal is often described as a lack of energy, strength, sovereignty, dominance, ... and is often defined from a male point of view (stylists, fashion designers, editors, ... and partner). The ideal male body is based on male qualities developed by the men themselves. They often joke themselves about their own shortcomings (beer belly, going bold, ...) and they are categorized on the basis of other qualities (professional or personal abilities, status, ...).

Size relation

A woman has to be smaller than a man – giving her no chance to challenge the balance of power. By symbolically making herself smaller (head submissively/meekly tilting one's head, looking up to someone, bending of the body and squirming) her hierarchical inferiority is emphasized.



"The big school classmate watches out (for her)."

Use of space

Male behaviour is characterized by freedom of movement, they claim more space in a room and symbolically occupy territory. They are more relaxed and adopt a casual posture, in contrast to a woman who has a space-minimizing behaviour, closes herself in and minimizes the energy-binding attitude of women. Also, dealings with women in public correspond to hierarchical behaviour whereby women always occupy the inferior position. Contact privileges remain the prerogative of a man. A woman may however have contact with a man, but purely of a nurturing nature, or to admire him or to support him.



"He controls the territory and determines who gets into the car"

Source: Peek&Cloppenburg,

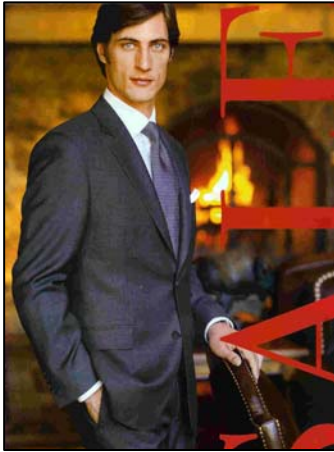
Postwurfsendung (Direct mail advertisement) of 21 Nov. 2007, p. 1.

Gestures

Male gestures are clear, decisive, insistent and competition-oriented. Power signals (a pointing index finger, a clenched fist – threatening or as a sign of victory in sports – and obscene gestures) are used. A man does not touch himself gently, but energetically and purposefully. Often women fiddle around with themselves (touching themselves i.e. smoothing out their clothes, fiddling with their hair; nervously moving their hands, clasping their knees, ...). Their behaviour is gentle, discreet and non-aggressive. Protruding one's throat as a gesture of submission is mainly practiced by women.

Eye contact

Only men are allowed to stare (distancing, represents power). If a woman stares, then often the eye contact is taken to mean an (erotic) interest. Only men can get away with avoiding eye contact as a show of their position of power. (a high ranking person in the hierarchy). Otherwise, it is only a sign of submissiveness. In contrast, a look of admiration is typically feminine: gazing at a man in rapt attention, smiling, nodding in agreement, ...



"Power and submission"

← Source: Peek&Cloppenburg, Postwurfsendung (Direct mail advertisement) of 5 Dec. 2007, p. 1.

Source: Peek&Cloppenburg, → Postwurfsendung (Direct mail advertisement) of 1 Dec. 2007, p. 9.



Facial expressions

Facial Expression conveys emotions as well as status and dominance. Stereotyped facial expressions control emotions (i.e. weaknesses, hurt feelings, mental anguish) by neutralizing them or hiding them. Masculine charisma is also achieved through rigorous self-control (raising one's eyebrow, eyes narrow, small mouth, positive stress, concentration, ...). Courteous friendliness is expected from women. They achieve this by nodding in agreement and constantly smiling, however not arrogantly, nor full of reproach nor superiority, but in an approving, encouraging, embarrassed, apologetic or sad manner, ...

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