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In the past, men and women were believed to have highly different behavioral patterns. Researchers seemed to think that sex differences were similar to cultural differences, almost in the same way current bestselling novels claim men and women are from different planets (Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005). Although men and women do have behavioral differences, they do not vary as drastically as previous research sought to prove. In fact, women and men are shown to be more similar than they are different in multiple areas of research (MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, Dane, & Passalacqua, 2005). One of these areas is that of comfort communication. This area of communication studies does not receive enough attention compared to its importance in people’s lives. Comfort behavior, also known as emotional support, is prevalent in almost all types of interpersonal relationships. It can involve a care worker providing reassurances to a cancer patient, a friend listening to another friend’s recollection of a turbulent dating relationship, or one spouse cheering up the other spouse who had a stressful day at work. Also, comforting behaviors have been found to better emotional state, help people overcome illness and injury, and potentially lengthen a person’s life (Burleson, 2003). As long as people feel distress in their lives, a need for comfort will exist. However, comfort will vary by means of who is providing it and what comfort behaviors are being used. Relating this thought back to men and women, depending on which sex is giving support, comfort behaviors are likely to show a few distinct differences. The purpose of this paper is to show how men and women coincide and differ in their use of comfort behaviors. In order to examine comfort behaviors, studies that focus on the Attachment Theory, support interaction goals, and verbal person centeredness and nonverbal immediacy will be reviewed. The reviewed literature should display the differences in men and women’s provision of support and reveal the advantage women have over men when using comfort communication. What should also be revealed is the lack of research devoted to sex differences in comfort behavior. First, the different areas of focus in this review will be contextualized.

Before addressing the varying ways to study comfort behaviors, what comfort behaviors are should be addressed. In research articles, the term comfort behavior is used synonymously with emotional support. Emotional support consists of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that help someone effectively handle and reduce emotional distress (Jones & Wirtz, 2007). Attachment Theory looks at how inclined a person will be to issue support by categorizing people into four styles. These styles are secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). People develop attachment styles through interactions with caregivers during childhood. Depending on the level of responsive and understanding feedback given by the caregiver to the child in times of needing help, the child will internalize that feedback and incorporate it into an attachment style (Lemieux & Tighe, 2004). Secure individuals have a positive view of self and others. Dismissing people have a positive self and negative other perspective. Preoccupied individuals evaluate themselves negatively and others positively. Lastly, the fearful attachment style has negative perceptions of both self and others (Jones, 2005). These attachment styles will follow a child through adolescence and into adulthood. During adulthood, men and women’s attachment styles can fluctuate based on the types of close relationships they form (Sherry, Lyddon, & Henson, 2007). Therefore, sex differences in support behaviors will arise from both childhood and current close relationships men and women are engaged in.

Another way to gauge men and women’s comfort behaviors is to examine interaction goals. Interaction goals are the desired outcomes and the behaviors used to reach those outcomes in support situations (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002). There are two types of interaction goals. Affective goals involve listening to and helping a distressed person discuss his or her feelings. Instrumental goals employ the giving of advice and the use of problem solving to help a person move on with his or her life after a distressing incident (Kunkel, 2002). Four kinds of comfort strategies are regularly associated wit these two types of instrumental goals. Solace is an affective goal which deals with emotional support messages. Solve is an instrumental goal which is linked to solving problems. Dismiss and escape goals avoid both interaction goal types and pertain to reducing emotional involvement or completely disregarding participation in the support process, respectively (Bachman & Bippus, 2005). Lastly, when discussing about interaction goals of comfort situations, whether support is routine or strategic determines what is gained from giving comfort. A routine behavior is employed simply for the sake of maintaining normalcy in interpersonal relationships. Strategic behavior is enacted when the comforter wants to gain something tangible or intangible from the comfort interaction (Aylor & Dainton, 2004). In summary, the goal of the interaction will determine the types of support employed, which will be used to maintain relationships or gain resources.

The last areas of focus, verbal person centeredness and nonverbal immediacy, are factors used to determine how emotionally and physically close men and women are to the upset individual when comforting them. Verbal person centeredness, often shortened to person centeredness by researchers, is the degree to which empathy is expressed and the distressed person’s feelings are addressed verbally. Nonverbal immediacy is the use of behaviors that convey closeness to the comfortee, such as eye contact or a forward lean (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Three types of person centered messages can be used when comforting. High person centered messages legitimize the feelings of the person being comforted. Moderate person centered messages recognize feelings but do nothing further. Low person centered messages deny the feelings of the upset person (Jones, 2005). Nonverbal immediacy behaviors, such as posture and facial mimicry, usually go hand-in-hand with person centeredness. The higher the level of person centeredness, the more nonverbal immediacy is generally performed (Jones & Wirtz, 2007). Now that the different areas of focus have been clarified, a review of research findings on them will be provided.

No matter the comfort study, researchers made sure to immediately state that women provide more and better support than men (MacGeorge et al., 2005). This statement was commonly tied to beliefs that gender socialization allows feminine women to develop and express feelings in a larger range of contexts than masculine men (Samter, 2002). This finding also relates to research on attachment styles. Women classified themselves in the secure style more than men (Bippus & Rollin, 2003). The secure style was associated with using high person centered (HPC) messages and more affective behaviors than other styles (Lemieux & Tighe, 2004). Men and women expressed the importance of HPC messages (Jones, 2005) in times of comforting but showed preferences for using and receiving support messages of moderate person centeredness (MPC) (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). Men were most likely to use the dismissive attachment style. Their comfort behaviors were low person centered (LPC) and were lacking affective goals (Bippus & Rollin, 2003). Men and women of the preoccupied style were equally as likely to use HPC supportive behaviors as the secure style (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). This is most likely due to preoccupied individuals’ desires to be intimately accepted by others (Jones, 2005). Fearful men used more LPC behavior than fearful women. These findings all seem to suggest that women use more PC behaviors and pursue affective goals more than men. Men might be trying to save masculine face by preferring LPC messages and avoiding emotional interactions. The fact that both men and women see HPC messages as positive but prefer to use MPC messages could be due to averaging men’s and women’s behaviors. Since women showed association to HPC behaviors and men connected with LPC behaviors, the MPC category might have evened out the extremes of both support behavior types to create a workable medium (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). Nevertheless, women’s greater skill at comforting carries over to interaction goals in support situations.

Women in the interaction goal studies preferred affective goals more than men. Researchers thought men would use more instrumental goals than women, but this was not the case (MacGeorge et al., 2005). Women were found to provide more affective and instrumental support than men (Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007). This seems to indicate that women are the primary support givers in interpersonal relationships. In terms of the four types of comfort strategies, men used dismiss with other men. Women preferred to use solace with both men and women. Men were found to use escape goals with women (Burleson et al., 2005). Because men were using dismiss and escape goals, their comfort behaviors were LPC. Women using the solace goal had HPC support skills. Surprisingly, both women and men perceived solace as the most desirable goal type and HPC messages as the most effective for comfort behavior (MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003). These findings held similar conclusions to the attachment style research. Men and women both preferred HPC messages, yet once again, women primarily employed them. Men preserved masculinity by using dismissive and escape goals that utilized LPC messages. This correlates with research stating that men are socialized to preserve masculinity in comfort situations (Samter, 2002). In the last area of interaction goals, the use of routine and strategic behaviors, men and women’s behaviors were again consistent with previous research. Women were found to use routine behaviors more than men while men used strategic behaviors more than women (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). These findings show that women provide routine comfort to maintain relationships and men use comfort mostly to obtain something (Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). So once again, women’s comfort behaviors were more emotionally centered than men’s comfort behaviors.

The final research that was reviewed concerns person centeredness (PC) and nonverbal immediacy (NVI). PC support behaviors were first examined under the context of major issues and daily issues. Men and women provided comfort on similar PC levels when the upset person had a major issue. When a daily issue was involved, the comfort given by women had more PC messages than the comfort given by men (MacGeorge, Clark, & Gillihan, 2002). Unlike Guerrero and Bachman’s (2006) study of person centeredness, Kunkel’s (2002) study found men and women to not prefer MPC support. Both men and women still saw HPC comfort as the best kind to receive, but this time women preferred to offer HPC over MPC comfort to men and women. Men had no problems giving HPC comfort to women, but only provided LPC comfort to men (Kunkel, 2002). When NVI was tested with PC, women used higher amounts of NVI and PC in their comfort messages than men. Men and women sought comfort with HPC and high NVI, but men were found to use LPC and low NVI. Women’s NVI was at its highest when comforting other women and at its lowest when comforting men. Men’s NVI was consistently low when comforting both men and women (Jones & Wirtz, 2007). Men once again evaluated empathic comfort as desirable, but chose to not perform such behavior.

After examining research in the areas of Attachment Theory, interaction goals, and PC and NVI, women are clearly more adept at producing comfort behaviors that are desired by both sexes. Women are more likely to incorporate HPC messages, affective goals, and high levels of NVI into the comfort they provide (MacGeorge et al., 2002). What seems to puzzle researchers is the lack of correlation between men’s positive appraisals of the comfort behaviors mentioned above and their lack of emulating such behavior. As mentioned earlier, masculine stereotypes learned during childhood might prevent men from using feminine emotional support behaviors that men consider a part of women’s territory (MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004). Another important point to emphasize is the lack of areas of comfort behavior research currently in existence. All of the studies in this report were conducted in the United States. Although it is wonderful to learn how American men and women comfort each other, comparing this data to other cultures could reveal which behaviors are culturally specific and which ones are sex specific. This type of study along with a gender role study could explain why men avoid effective comfort behaviors.

H1: Women will use high person centered behaviors, affective interaction goals, and

more nonverbal immediacy than men when offering comfort to others.

H2: Masculine gender norms prevent men from using effective and desirable comforting

behaviors because such behaviors have feminine connotations.

RQ1: How do the comforting behaviors of men and women differ across cultures?

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