

Constructing Gender Hesitation Theory

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The first months of 2017 contained discourse emphasizing the steadily evolving debate around gender issues in the United States and across the world. The Jan. 20, 2017 Women's March on Washington launched a new year with continued discussions of gender unfolding in the public consciousness. Its organizers stressed a need for intersectionality, naturally sparking further conversation about existing gender-constructs and the traditional gender-binary.

Gender non-binary studies' bloom as a focus was relatively recent, stemming from the women's liberation movement in the 1970s (Flanigan, 2013). From then on, its importance and relevance has only grown. In May 2013, the Australian New South Wales Court of Appeals affirmed that gender is not a binary construct. More importantly, the Court acknowledged that it is possible for individuals to identify as neither male nor female, but as a third gender category (Kennedy, 2013). While Australia and other nations around the world have made strides in recognizing and validating the identities of genderqueer individuals, knowledge of other factors impacting acceptance is lacking. Still, the current social climate is arguably safer than ever before for non-binary individuals to openly claim their identities. The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality included responses from 28,000 transgender individuals - four times the number of respondents for the 2008-09 U.S. National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafi, 2016), suggesting that comfort and openness are on the rise. Non-binary individuals (people who identify as neither male nor female) comprised more than one-third of the respondents for the USTS. While the numbers of open and "out" individuals continues rising, larger identifiable populations of people historically discriminated against and treated as minorities indicates an increased need for advocacy on behalf of those individuals (James et al., 2016).

While tolerance is more common today than in previous generations, understanding interactions between cisgender and non-binary individuals and reactions toward gender-neutral pronouns is an important step in understanding the levels and likelihood of acceptance. As the self-identified population of gender non-binary individuals continues to grow, it is important to understand why many cisgender people meet requests for non-binary conversational vocabulary with hesitation. That knowledge can provide a strong foundation to help communicators better prepare and adapt for future communication situations. Therefore, this paper synthesizes elements from muted group theory, genderlect theory, cognitive dissonance, cultivation theory, and social judgement theory, forming gender hesitation theory, which explains the frequent hesitation and reluctance cisgender people experience regarding non-binary pronouns.

In her discussion about the Australian court decision, Aileen Kennedy (2013) emphasized the humiliating nature of strict adherence to binary constructs that lack legal and social alternatives for people struggling with gender ambiguity. Many nations, including Germany, Sweden, and even some communities in the United States, are incorporating third gender pronouns such as “X,” “hen,” “co,” and “they” into mainstream society (Kennedy, 2013; Flanigan, 2013). Harvard University is one of many college campuses in the United States where conversations about inclusivity for genderqueer individuals thrives. Often, activists speak to students on campus about the need for gender-neutral vocabulary that increases the “visibility” of non-binary individuals by acknowledging the possibility of identifying outside of strictly “male” or “female” categories (Min, 2015; “The problem with pronouns...”, 2013).

Several previous studies explore why many cisgender people feel reluctant about non-binary vocabulary (Sanford & Filik, 2007; Sarrasin, Gabriel, & Gygax, 2012). Oriane Sarrasin, Ute Gabriel, and Pascal Gygax (2012) claim that acceptance of such language is dependent on

prevailing attitudes and previous exposure. After studying sample populations from the United Kingdom and French and German-speaking regions of Switzerland, Sarrasin et al. (2012) determined that populations exposed to gender-neutral language on a regular basis are more likely to accept genderless pronouns in common communication. However, different levels of sexist attitudes ranging from hostile, subtle, or subconscious also impact degrees of acceptance (Sarrasin et al., 2012).

Anthony J. Sanford and Ruth Filik (2007) used eye-tracking to study the way people process the singular pronoun “they/them,” aiming to better understand why many cisgender individuals experience confusion or discomfort when confronted with genderless pronouns. Sanford and Filik (2007) argue that tension might stem from the fact that “they/them” is most often used as a plural pronoun, intolerant of singular antecedents, causing difficulty for individuals processing the term as a genderless singular pronoun. While that observation is interesting, a comprehensive theory is necessary to help communicators better understand the hesitation and confusion cisgender individuals often experience when introduced to gender non-binary language.

Elements of muted group theory, genderlect theory, cognitive dissonance, cultivation theory, and social judgement theory offer insight into gender, dominance, socialization, power, discomfort, and degrees of acceptance in communication. Used together, salient aspects of each theory provide a solid foundation for gender hesitation theory, which addresses the hesitation felt by cisgender individuals confronted with gender-neutral vocabulary.

In order to best understand the reactions cisgender people experience during communication with gender non-binary individuals, an understanding of the existing communication between dominant genders is necessary. Muted group theory and genderlect not only provide information

about how each gender communicates, but also about how perceptions and dominance are influenced during communication.

Founded by Edwin Ardener, muted group theory explains the silencing of less dominant groups in society. Muted group theory addresses the question of whether everyone in society is empowered to participate equally in the generation of ideas and formulation of cultural discourse (Ardener, 2005). Ardener always held that muted groups were not limited to women. He used himself as an example of the silencing of sensitive boys (Ardener, 2005). Ardener's example illustrates Cheris Kramarae's (2005) later observation that predominant language practices were formed by men in order to relate their experiences, thereby muting women and other marginalized groups.

Ardener (2005) argues observable social phenomena depict the means through which culture is expressed. Groups are not just muted on interpersonal levels, but through the manner in which societies encode data and structure discourse, meaning that because the dominant cultural narrative acknowledges only two genders, genderqueer individuals are muted by omission. That repression does not only take place in interpersonal communication, but also on a systemic, political level.

Wall and Gannon-Leary (1999) connect the social and political spheres, arguing that men are dominant in society because they tend to dominate politically, making their speech (their genderlect) the dominant mode of expression. Although male-dominant expression confirms that women are subjugated in relation to men, it follows that gender non-binary individuals, who are not yet mentioned in the discourse around muted group theory, are subjugated in relation to both men and women. Muted group theory further suggests that groups maintain dominance by repressing and belittling the speech and ideas of those categorized as "outside" of the privileged

group (Kramarae, 2005), indicating that whether consciously or subconsciously, men and women are socialized to ignore the existence of gender non-binary culture from childhood.

Additionally, muted groups are urged to see representations of themselves included in the dominant discourse (Kramarae, 2005). Instead of expecting the dominant groups in society to make space for genderqueer individuals, the common expectation is that such individuals will instead conform to the aspects of mainstream society that they can and do identify with. However, Kramarae (2005) also argues that recognizing the obstacles faced by marginalized groups aids the resolution of social problems and creates a better society for everyone. Therefore, gender-neutral language is important for drawing cisgender individuals' attention to subjugated gender identities, but does not solve the problem of dominant language practices silencing genderqueer individuals.

As part of a muted group, gender non-binary individuals lack the language necessary for reaching the dominant gender groups in society: males and females. When confronted with language that does not conform to recognizable modes of expression, misunderstanding and confusion are inevitable (Tannen, 1990). Tannen (1990) argues that men and women, specifically, need to familiarize themselves “cross-culturally” with the genderlect of the opposite sex in order to foster effective communication. Genderlect Theory revolves around the idea that men and women use different language to express themselves. Adelaide Haas (1979), suggests that although male and female speech does not always coincide, both forms contribute to the development of sex roles and impact overall communication. Ann Burnett, Jody L. Mattern, Liliana L. Herakova, David H. Kahl, Cloy Tobola, and Susan E. Bornsen (2009) provide an example related to campus date rape. They hypothesized that in incidences of campus date rape, female voices are muted, which contributes to the perpetuation of campus rape culture. Notably,

the results suggested that while date rape is a concrete event, the lack of a clear definition silences women in their ability to clearly articulate what occurred (Burnett et al., 2009). Such an example highlights the divide that results from misunderstanding between dominant and repressed groups due to a lack of clear, recognizable vocabulary.

Haas (1979a) further contends that stereotypes about male and female speech contribute to the maintenance and development of sex roles. Based on the content of their speech, women are stereotyped as submissive, non-assertive, and tentative, while men are stereotyped as coarse, direct, and dominant. Christopher J. Zahn (1989) suggests that if people do, in fact, stereotype based on sex during conversation, then those perceptions are a product of internalized sex-role stereotypes. In the dominant societal narrative, sex and gender are used synonymously. However, when a person falls outside of the traditional gender binary structure, there are no internalized stereotypes to fit that sex-role, and their genderlect goes unrecognized. Cisgender individuals then “otherize,” and feel even more hesitant, distant, or uncomfortable during interactions with groups whose language they cannot recognize.

Wall and Gannon-Leary (1999) suggest that if they desire a voice in society, women must neglect their own modes of communication in favor of the dominant (male) mode of expression. This forces women, as a muted group, to become bilingual, acquiring fluency in their own genderlect and that of men. Genderqueer individuals must learn both the genderlect of women and men, while their own remains unacknowledged in hegemonic structures of interaction. Therefore, gender nonconforming individuals must achieve trilingual abilities, while their own genderlect remains repressed in the dominant social structure.

Haas (1979a) claims that communication is a possible microcosm of human behavior, and that the characteristically dominant nature of male speech and less assertive female speech

(while not decisively attributed to gender alone) holds significant implications for the power structure and thinking between sexes. Power structure includes the discourse in society that often renders forms of sexism invisible, until less privileged groups expose such actions or language (Haas, 1979a). The pervasive nature of the male and female genderlects, combined with the silencing and subjugation of genderqueer individuals, is exactly the discourse that renders sexism against gender non-binary individuals invisible. In order to understand how social interactions are impacted by internalized sexism and hegemonic attitudes, this developing theory must be supplemented by knowledge of the factors that influence perceptions and acceptance during communication. Cognitive dissonance provides some explanation for the perceptions of cisgender individuals during communication events that call for a break with cisnormative language practices.

Cognitive dissonance is often caused by mixed signals (Timming & Perrett, 2016). Timming and Perrett (2016) conducted a study where Christian participants held preconceived notions that tattooed individuals were less trustworthy and tattoos were unacceptable. However, when participants perceived a tattooed person as Christian, they resolved feelings of dissonance through self-assurance. For example, some participants claimed that a person with a Christian tattoo was more like them and, therefore, more trustworthy (Timming & Perrett, 2016). Such examples suggest that when cisgender individuals are confronted with gender non-binary individuals in communication settings, they likely have preconceived notions that the individual identified as either “male,” or “female.” When a genderqueer person requests the use of gender neutral pronouns, it triggers feelings of dissonance in the cisgender participant. Then, the cisgender participant adjusts his or her position accordingly, in order to relieve the

tension. However, the desire to reduce dissonance depends on the intensity and number of ideas that are dissonant with the initial perception (Mills, 1999).

Further complicating the likelihood of adaptation, people tend to avoid information that causes dissonance (Mills, 1999). This action is called “selective exposure to information,” meaning, when people have the option and are confident in their position, they will only seek out information that supports that position. Therefore, cisgender people likely feel uncomfortable when confronted with gender neutral pronouns because those are not messages that they would normally expose themselves to, or would normally be exposed to. However, Festinger (1999) contends that the main avenues of dissonance reduction are attitude and behavior change, which opens the possibility that cisgender individuals might adjust pre-existing attitudes and behaviors to accommodate gender-neutral language after experiencing initial discomfort.

In 2016, Brian Ray studied the marketing and advertising of ‘BIC Cristal for Her,’ a line of pink and purple pens designed for the hands of women. Through stylization of genderlect, many comedians introduced cognitive dissonance to expose the innate sexism in BIC’s product development and marketing (Ray, 2016). Ray’s (2016) example also points to the extent to which citizens are inundated with messages that not only reinforce gender stereotypes, but the gender binary itself.

The analysis of cognitive dissonance experienced as a result of media messages sent by cultivation theory addresses persistent media messaging, media exposure, and social construction of reality (Gerbner, 1999). In the context of gender, especially, cultivation theory emerges as a means of understanding the pervasive nature of the binary construct. Tony Kelso (2015) explains that children that identify outside of a traditional gender binary construct are both under- and misrepresented on television. This points to the function of media as a tool for

reinforcement of the status quo, especially when looking at Kelso's (2015) observation that general audiences have limited exposure to gender variance in television programming, which prevents any disruption in traditional beliefs about how girls and boys should behave. Kelso (2015) expresses concern that media is the main channel through which children learn about and can explore their budding gender and sexual identities. For example, Hetsroni (2013) has drawn a correlation between television and intimate relationship behaviors like flirting.

Ashton Gerding and Nancy Signorielli (2013) explored results that indicate "tween" viewers might develop narrow conceptions about their potential in the world based on gender role portrayals in teen scene and action-adventure genres. The study identifies "tweens" as individuals ages 8 to 12, a very malleable age in terms of gender identity exploration and development of social schemas (Gerding & Signorielli, 2013). Gerding and Signorielli (2013) conclude that cultivation theory is a primary contributor to the construction of people's social realities. For children, many of whom (aged 7-14) spend between five to seven hours per day watching television, the "real world" might be experienced and perceived in a way that closely matches what they see on television. Such studies confirm Haas's (1979b) findings that if pointed differences in the language of men and women exist, that distinction likely began in childhood.

If the construction and exploration of gender identity begins in childhood, and children are exposed only to images that positively promote a strict gender binary, their social reality is constructed as one which contains only the gender binary. Even when news programs reference gender non-binary children, they tend to evoke pity, thereby "otherizing" them (Kelso, 2015). Therefore, natural tendencies cause children, then adolescents, then adults, to react, consciously or subconsciously, with confusion or hesitation when confronted with someone who is not

represented in their social reality. Gender is not presented as a spectrum through media exposure in any part of development, so by the time children reach adulthood, they are only conscious of two acceptable gender identities. Therefore, the concept from cultivation theory that people's social realities are constructed and reinforced by persistent media messages partially explains cisgender preconceptions when interacting with individuals who deviate from the accepted "norm." Elements of social judgement theory bring the eventual reactions from cisgender individuals into clearer focus.

Social judgement theory explains and predicts the likelihood of assimilation or contrast when one is confronted with societal norms, conflicting opinions, or acceptable opinions (Sherif, 1960). Carolyn Sherif and Norman Jackman (1966) define assimilation as the displacement of another's attitude toward one's own position. Contrast is defined as an exaggerated version of the discrepancy between the perceptions of one individual and another (Sherif & Jackson, 1966). Within a norm, the expected or desirable range of behaviors are classified as the "latitude of acceptance" (Sherif, 1960). Outside of that spectrum, behaviors are deemed objectionable, or reside within the "latitude of rejection" (Sherif, 1960). Statements that are mildly critical or alternative are judged as more hostile by those with extreme perspectives than those with neutral attitudes (Hovland & Sherif, 1952). When an individual feels neutral or indifferent to a position, that message likely falls into the "latitude of noncommitment," (Sherif, 1960) where the strongest persuasion occurs (Siero & Doosje, 1993).

Sandi W. Smith, Charles K. Atkin, Dennis Martell, Rebecca Allen, & Larry Hembroff (2006) concur in their findings about changing undergraduate alcohol consumption norms. According to Smith et al. (2006) the introduction of new norms that fall close to or within latitudes of noncommitment causes the most successful movement of perceptions. Another

important factor is ego-involvement, or how important an issue is to an individual or group. High ego-involvement narrows the latitude of acceptance, or the number of positions one is willing to accept, and affects the perception of a message as true or false (Sherif & Jackson, 1966) This argument is vital to the conversation about cisgender acceptance of gender non-binary language.

Cisgender individuals make up their own societally dominant group. Because individuals are committed to the norms established by the groups to which they belong, it is clear that cisgender individuals have high ego-involvement when it comes to the question of whether gender is a binary structure or a spectrum. Part of the hesitation toward genderqueer populations (or resistance in cases where gender-neutral pronouns fall into latitudes of rejection) might be caused by a perceived threat to the cisgender majority (Sherif, 1960). Interacting groups negotiate norms, but if those norms result in one group gaining and the other losing, intergroup norms become unfavorable, or potentially hostile (Sherif, 1960). While the possibility of a perceived threat appears unlikely when suggesting gender non-binary pronouns, the practice disrupts hegemonic gender constructions, requires adjustment, and breeds initial resistance or pushback.

Due to the high level of ego-involvement in maintaining the established gender binary, cisgender individuals have a naturally narrow latitude of acceptance for alternative gender identities. The less cisgender individuals perceive a genderqueer person like themselves, the greater the chance that they will reject that individual and/or gender-neutral pronouns. Additionally, Carl I. Hovland and Muzafer Sherif (1952) argue that when individuals experience strong personal involvement regarding a particular issue, they are more inclined to see issues in binary terms, and are less likely to pay attention to nuance. Cisgender individuals are more likely

to view gender identities as black and white, ignoring or minimizing the differences that make non-binary gender identities unique and in need of their own identifying pronoun.

Muted group theory, genderlect theory, cognitive dissonance theory, cultivation theory, and social judgement theory all provide partial reasoning and explanation for cisgender perceptions of genderqueer individuals and gender-neutral language in social interactions. Elements of each, combined, present a new theory, referred to as gender hesitation theory, which provides a better understanding about the confusion and hesitation that many cisgender people experience in the face of requests to use gender non-binary pronouns.

Gender hesitation theory not only provides an explanation for the feelings experienced during the initial interaction, but also for the preconceived notions that inevitably influence the interaction. Due to intense societal devotion to the gender binary, particularly in the United States, citizens are entrenched in such thinking from a very young age. Persistent media messages and cultural stereotypes reinforce the gender binary from birth through adulthood, as illustrated by cultivation theory and genderlect theory. The lack of representation for alternatives in media further reinforces the subconscious narrative that such options do not exist, or are so rare that they do not warrant attention in the cultural discourse. Media messages that consistently present narratives focusing primarily on cisgender characters constructs a social reality that asserts cisgender dominance and otherizes alternative identities.

Genderlect's perpetuation of the narrative that men and women communicate differently further reinforces the partition between two distinct gender categories. The cultural narrative reinforced by the flux of media messages promoting binary-thinking and the socialization of men and women to communicate differently is cemented by the establishment of a gender hierarchy, where male expression silences female expression. However, the concept of muting applies most

to the groups of society that are nearly denied existence, particularly people who fall outside of the gender binary. A dominant population that is deeply invested in the gender binary has not been exposed to the vocabulary of the muted genderqueer population on an interpersonal or a cultural level, due in large part to cultural hegemony and selective messaging. Therefore, upon first contact, cisgender individuals lack the vocabulary and cultural foundation necessary for effective communication and true understanding.

While preconceived notions, cultural experiences, and social realities impact perceptions prior to and during the communication event itself, the reaction to the messages sent during the conversation also affects understanding. Because cisgender individuals are rooted in gender binary thinking, their initial assumption is that the person they are communicating with is also cisgender, and therefore, similar to them. When that person then requests the use of gender non-binary pronouns, cisgender individuals experience a feeling of dissonance, partially because this deviates from the expectation, and because the request threatens cisgender hegemonic norms. To resolve those feelings of dissonance, cisgender participants in the communication event must decide whether the message of gender-binary pronouns fits within their latitude of acceptance, noncommitment, or rejection. If it falls within their latitudes of noncommitment or acceptance, cisgender individuals will ignore their subconscious assumptions, or will overcome their hesitation, utilizing the requested pronoun. If the message falls into the latitude of rejection, cisgender participants might resolve the dissonance by completely leaving the interaction, and it might take gradual exposure over time to change perceptions and create acceptance.

Cisgender individuals are highly invested in the maintenance of the gender binary as a dominant group. Therefore, their latitudes of acceptance are narrow regarding gender non-binary identities, increasing the likelihood of confusion or hesitation when confronted with requests for

gender non-binary language. That suggests that some extent of the likelihood of acceptance or rejection of the message depends on the construction of the message by genderqueer communities and individuals. However, because most cisgender individuals meet the request for gender non-binary pronouns with confusion or hesitation, it is plausible that they are not consciously reacting to the identity itself, but to dissonance they experience as a result of the language proposed (Sanford & Filik, 2007). For example, in the United States, the pronouns “they/them” are popular gender non-binary alternatives. However, in the common vernacular, “they/them” are plural pronouns, intolerant of singular antecedents, which causes dissonance for individuals unacquainted with “they/them” as a singular pronoun. Therefore, cisgender individuals experience difficulty processing and utilizing the terms as genderless singular pronouns (Sanford & Filik, 2007). Still, in this scenario, cisgender individuals decide whether the message falls into latitudes of acceptance, rejection, or noncommitment, which determines whether or not they will implement the language during interactions with genderqueer individuals.

In recent years, many publications have attempted to address the increased acknowledgement of gender-neutral pronouns. Opinion pieces, blog posts, and articles share advice about using gender-neutral pronouns, explain their importance, and share stories about experiences with gender-neutral pronouns. A closer reading of such pieces often illustrates the exact processes that cisgender individuals experience when first confronted with gender nonconforming pronouns. For example, in 2014, “The Washington Post” Style section published an online column by civilities columnist Steven Petrow. In “Gender-Neutral Pronouns: Why ‘they’ doesn’t identify as male or female,” (2014), an anonymous reader submitted the following question:

Dear Civilities: Recently, a young woman I know explained to me that she now considers herself to be “genderqueer,” which is a new phrase for me. My first question is: What does she mean by that? I also understand that she no longer uses female pronouns to refer to herself (i.e., “her” and “she”) but prefers “they,” “them” and “their” because, as she told me, they identify her as a person, not as either a man or a woman. She has asked her friends to adopt that language, too, but maybe I’m old school, because I find it odd and grammatically incorrect to say something like, “Oh, they went to the movies this afternoon,” in reference to one singular person. What is the right thing to do, and say, in this circumstance?” — Name withheld, Washington, D.C. (Petrow, 2014, 1).

This question is layered with meaning. However, a few simple phrases reveal this person’s discomfort with the pronoun “they.” Particularly, the need to reach out to another cisgender person for explanation and validation, and the use of the term “odd” suggest that the terms “genderqueer” and “they” as a singular pronoun are strange for this particular individual. (Petrow, 2014, 1).

The anonymous inquiry is revealing regarding cisgender reactions to gender-neutral language. The fact that the anonymous reader needed to reach out for help, in and of itself, suggests a high level of confusion and discomfort. Rather than simply accepting “they” as a singular pronoun because a friend requested it, the anonymous reader felt the need to reach out for additional guidance - to a cisgender writer. Petrow, while deploying sound advice, admits his own confusion and discomfort with “they” as a genderqueer pronoun (Petrow, 2014). He also admitted that he did not understand gender-neutral pronouns until he received more exposure and had open communication with more genderqueer people (Petrow, 2014). While both participants credit the confusion and discomfort to the use of “they” as a singular pronoun, that is a superficial reading of this communication. Gender Hesitation Theory offers a deeper and more complete understanding of what lies at roots of the anonymous reader’s perceptions.

First, it is clear that the anonymous reader does not understand, and has not been exposed to the genderlect of genderqueer individuals. In the question itself, and even though the person

they are referring to asked for “they/them/their” pronouns, the user repeatedly refers to the friend as “she, herself, woman, her,” resisting, rejecting, or subconsciously avoiding the use of “they/them.” Through this, she is openly admitting a lack of understanding (Petrow, 2014). Additionally, by only using the dominant modes of expression to relate experiences with this friend, and appealing to another member of the dominant group for affirmation of the friend’s identity and request, the anonymous reader silences ‘genderqueer’ as a valid identity. These aspects of the reaction are likely subconscious, especially since the user seeks knowledge and understanding in order to accept and understand the identity of this friend. Additionally, the social reality of this person is one where the gender binary exists as the sole gender structure, illustrated by the fact that they have never heard of genderqueer-identifying individuals. It follows that media messages played a role in the construction of this social reality, as the anonymous individual reached out to a mass medium for affirmation and explanation for a notion that conflicted with their existing social reality.

Further, the reader felt it was necessary to seek more information to alleviate both the dissonance experienced due to the unexpected encounter with a previously unknown gender, and the use of a predominantly plural pronoun in a singular context. Alleviating that dissonance affects the likelihood of acceptance, rejection, or indifference the anonymous user will reach regarding their friend’s identity and pronouns. Because the reader is seeking more information and wants to understand, it is likely that gender-neutral pronouns are currently within their latitude of noncommitment. However, gender hesitation theory does not address the likelihood of adaptation, assimilation, or contrast. The letter to the “Washington Post” encapsulates the type of cisgender reaction to gender non-binary language addressed by gender hesitation theory.

Gender hesitation theory provides explanations for the hesitation experienced by cisgender individuals during interactions with gender non-binary individuals requesting the use of gender-neutral pronouns. Borrowing elements from muted group theory, genderlect theory, cognitive dissonance theory, cultivation theory, and social judgement theory, this new theory provides important insight for communicators seeking to comprehend the reactions of cisgender individuals during interactions with genderqueer individuals. The manner through which the dominant, acknowledged groups of society mute the groups rendered invisible by exclusion from the dominant modes of expression preserves the invisibility of the genderqueer community. Media, as a tool for maintaining the status quo, “otherizes” and underrepresents alternative gender identities, while providing persistent narratives about cisgender characters, relationships, and interactions, further subjugating genderqueer individuals. Cisgender individuals then hold this subconscious perception, pervasive in culture and society, from childhood through adulthood, which informs interactions with genderqueer individuals. As stated by Kramarae (2005), there are no neutral participants, and everyone brings biases and personal experiences to an interaction that inform the nature of the communication event.

When cisgender individuals realize that genderqueer participants deviate from the hegemonic gender structure, they experience feelings of dissonance, which prompt them to consider their position on gender neutral pronouns. An explanation for the feelings of confusion and hesitation experienced during such interactions, and the factors that inform those feelings, is an important step in understanding and improving communication across all genders. Gender hesitation theory synthesizes elements of existing, well-constructed theories in order to foster the understanding necessary for building more effective communication in the future.

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