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Reflecting on the Role of Gender and Race in Speech-Language Pathology

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https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_PERSP-22-00019

Abstract

Purpose: The presented work was invited following the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association SIG 19 Virtual Talk “Speech Science in Diverse Populations” that occurred on September 2, 2021. The purpose of this article was to introduce the historical and theoretical frameworks of gender and race from a decidedly North American (United States) perspective to an audience that may be less familiar with those topics as they relate to the practice of communication sciences and disorders. Race and gender are huge topics. Entire fields of study and lifetimes of work are dedicated to understanding these constructs. Therefore, it is hoped that this brief review of race and gender will prompt the reader to evaluate how the two constructs are used to categorize people and whether being a member of a marginalized or a minoritized group affects the person's access to or use of intervention services. A critical theoretical discussion of race and gender is beyond the scope of this text. In this limited space, this work presents an overview of current and historical discussions of gender and race and a challenge to the reader to accept that their perspective is indebted to a specific belief system. In the United States, that belief system often evaluates human differences into binary categories on a weighted continuum. Speech-language professionals often use that continuum to identify and measure difference into either acceptable variation or disorder.

Conclusions: The profession of speech-language pathology was established during a time when variation from middle-class White American communication norms was frequently defined as undesirable and sometimes as disordered. The communities and individuals we encounter deserve to be accepted as they are. We must resolve to expect and accept wide variation in human communication without pathologizing its existence, to expand our thinking about disorder in speech and hearing science, and to accept culturally competent communicators as competent communicators.





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