

Medved studies communication at home and at work

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“Through language, through communication, we create our world. We come to understand who we are through relationships. How you come to understand who you are, it all happens through language and through communication.” That is how Dr. Caryn Medved answers when asked why she chose communications as an academic field.

Medved, a native of Toledo, Ohio, has had an interest in communications since she was young. She decided to pursue a bachelor’s degree in the subject at Michigan State University and later a master’s in labor-industrial relations at the same institution, not a bad choice since the university has one of the best communications programs in the country. She completed her studies with a doctorate from the University of Kansas. Today she is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College.

But why become a professor? “When I was at Michigan State, I found a number of professors who really made a huge impact on me. The biggest moments were the interactions I had with faculty members. It made me say, ‘This is what I want to do.’ Both the teaching and the research really came together. After I finished my master’s in labor industrial relations, which I loved, I wanted to keep going. For me, it was back to communications; that was my first love, and so I returned to it,” says Medved. That same enthusiasm is transmitted to her students. “I was in my office right before this interview, and Steven, one of the students I just had last semester, heard my voice, and we sat there and talked. I mean I love my research; I absolutely love what I do; but for me, when I’m there with the students and hear how they’re doing in five years or ten years, that makes it all worth it.”

Medved has also had personal experiences in her own family that give her some insights into human communication. “My brother, years ago, became a stay-at-home father. His wife then was the primary breadwinner for their family for a number of years. I saw them both very happy in that relationship. As



Dr. Medved at work.

someone who has always studied work and life issues with respect to communications, I started a project to interview 45 couples, which was fortunate enough to get funded by the Sloan Foundation, right when I first came to Baruch. In each couple, there was a stay-at-home father and a breadwinning mother. I looked at the women in these relationships. What are some of the challenges for them? How are they changing our notions of gender in marriage and in the workplace as well by how they actually do the job of being the breadwinners for their families, which is, as we know, a traditionally masculine role in the U.S.”

The geographic distinction is important because in many European countries there is much more support for working couples with children. “We only have the Family and Medical Leave Act. In France, they have a host of social supports for families,” explains Medved. “People don’t realize just how much of an

economic burden it is for both men and women to take that time off, not just for the birth of a child but also for other issues, as children and elder care is huge today. I was on GoFundMe the other day, and believe it or not, there are plenty of women out there who have GoFundMe pages for their maternity leaves, because their employers don’t provide them, and they can’t afford to take maternity leave.”

She has also looked at how gender roles have changed over time. “In gender roles, the place where we’ve seen perhaps the least change is in the home and in the way men participate in the home. I’m not saying there hasn’t been an increase in the amount of hours men spend on childcare in particular and also on domestic labor, but when you move a man into such a traditionally feminized role, it’s an opportunity for him to experience life in a whole new way, to feel empathy and to experience the kinds of work required

of someone in that role day in and day out,” says she.

She says that things started to change during World War II, when many women in the United States had to work while their loved ones went to war; however, after the war gender roles reverted to prewar practice. But then the 60s came along. “So many women saw other ways of living their lives, and that was really the beginning of that second wave of the feminist movement, so I think it had a phenomenal effect. It’s fun for the students to think about that because they grew up—especially the women in the class—thinking that everything has always been this way. If you don’t know the past, you don’t realize it can be different.”

Another big change has occurred because lesbian and gay couples are having children. “If you see two dads or two moms, this is your world, and this feels normal to you, and you were loved in that relationship. That becomes a way you see you can live or anyone can live. It may allow you to view the worlds of work and family differently, as you do if you have parents who come from different religious, ethnic or racial backgrounds.”

And she sees a better future based on her own experiences with students. “One of my favorite projects is to have the students do a work-and-family interview with people in their lives. So often they’ll interview aunts—the last time I assigned this project, a student interviewed four aunts, who are all from Pakistan. They come and they talk about their culture, and at Baruch you have every sort of opportunity to learn from each other, so they get a chance to see that all these different arrangements are normal. I think that one of the ways we change is through education, through getting people to have a moment when they have to listen and learn. You can decide that’s not for you; I always tell them my job is not to change their minds; my job is to give them the opportunity to listen and make informed choices in their own lives. I love that, that’s a lot of fun.”

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