

# Why Don't You Understand Me?

## A Look at Cross-Gender Communication

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**S**enario 1: Bette is a passenger in a car driven by her friend, Adrian. It's dark outside and the road signs are poorly lit. For half an hour they have tried to find an unfamiliar address. As they drive by the same gas station for the third time, Bette suggests stopping to ask for directions. Adrian insists the place is "just around the corner." They drive another 15 minutes as tension mounts. Bette again suggests that it would be logical to stop and ask someone who knows, but she is ignored. Silently fuming, Bette concludes that Adrian is irrational and hopelessly stubborn. She wonders how they ever became friends without her noticing this.

**S**enario 2: Newlyweds Julie and Mario are attending a friend's party. Julie, wearing her favorite silk dress, looks beautiful, and Mario says so. Minutes later, tragedy strikes. Another guest accidentally spills fruit punch on Julie's "dry clean only" dress.

She finds Mario on the other side of the room and wails, "I'm never going to get this huge stain out! And this is my favorite dress! It's ruined."

Inspecting the stain, which appears to be a bad one, Mario replies, "Don't worry, honey. It's not that big. It'll probably come out with a little baking soda or something." Julie gives him an incredulous look. Her eyes fill with tears and she rushes out of the room.

"What did I do wrong?" wonders Mario. "I didn't know she was so

hyper-sensitive!"

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It doesn't take much experience to notice that men and women often act, think, and talk differently than the other gender expects. Although we usually seem to understand each other, sometimes the opposite sex seems to have dropped to Earth from another planet.<sup>1</sup> At times, they react in ways so foreign to us that we invoke oversimplistic, destructive stereotypes or resignedly say "that's just the way they are."

Unfortunately, when we experience serious male-female miscommunication, rather than recognizing it as such, we often conclude that the other person is strange, illogical, crazy, or just plain wrong because he or she



Illustration by Nestor

feels, thinks, acts, or talks "that way." Rather than summarily declaring either men or women to be at fault, we need to view male-female communication as simply cross-cultural. To a certain extent, women and men belong to different subcultures. In the process of becoming adults, we have learned to communicate differently. Because of this, when men and women talk to each other, cultural miscommunication sometimes occurs, even when both parties attempt to be honest and to treat each other as equals.

Sociolinguists analyze the ways social variables such as age, socioeconomic status, and gender interact with language use. Discourse analysis and conversational analysis focus on linguistic interaction, the way human relationships are established, negotiated, and maintained.

Robin Lakoff's pioneering work in language and gender revealed certain linguistic features of American English that seemed to distinguish women's speech from that of men.<sup>2</sup> These included question intonation when declaratives would be expected, for example, tag questions ("It's hot today, *isn't it?*"); hypercorrect grammar, and very polite speech. While some of her conclusions have been debated, Lakoff's research has led to useful sociolinguistic inquiry. Although downplaying the role of power as emphasized by Lakoff, Deborah Tannen's exploration of male-female communication, on which

much of the material in this section is based, represents a continuation of this research.<sup>3</sup>

### Boys' and Girls' Talk

Interactional situations of males and females from birth through adulthood have been carefully studied by sociolinguists researching conversational and discourse analysis. Given the differences between the sexes that exist among adults, it isn't surprising that many studies have found significant differences in interactional styles beginning at an early age. Due to limited space, we will focus on differences between boys' and girls' same-sex interaction.

Research corroborates the layperson's observation that boys tend to play outdoors in large groups having a group leader and a clearly demarcated pecking order. Boys like to play games with detailed rules, clear winners and losers. They routinely boast about individual skill ("I can jump a hundred times higher than you can!"). Boys are aware of authority and typically seek to challenge it. They often use talk to impress peers or to defend themselves when their status is questioned.

Girls like to play in small, intimate groups, often preferring indoor games in which there are no clear winners or losers (e.g., "playing house"). Group leaders tend to phrase their orders indirectly as requests or suggestions ("Do you want to be the older sister?"). Girls rarely use force to impose their will on one another because, for them, being liked is more important than being obeyed. Girls usually comply with the requests of authority figures, often becoming "teacher's pets." For girls, talk serves as "the glue that holds relationships together."<sup>4</sup> In fact, girls often build friendships by sharing secrets.

### Independence vs. Intimacy

Not surprisingly, many aspects of the communicative styles learned by children carry over into adulthood. While not all of the generalizations in this article are true of *all* women or *all* men in every situation, they nevertheless describe tendencies and patterns that can be helpful in building understanding.

As adults, males tend to perceive the world hierarchically. Because of this, in conversations a man often focuses on his status relative to that of others: he is either in a superior or inferior position. Men continually attempt to establish and maintain their independence.

Even in adulthood, females continue to see the world as a place where interpersonal connections are what really matter. Conversations are often used to negotiate involvement and support. In conversations, women tend to measure the emotional distance of their conversational partner: Is this person trying to become more involved or is he or she pulling away? Women's hierarchies relate more to intimacy than to power.

As Tannen observes, gender differences are often simply differences in focus or degree. This may be illustrated by the phenomenon known as nagging. When asked to do something by their mates, women usually comply, while men tend to resist slightly. When there is no visible response after a wife asks her husband to take out the garbage, she may assume that he hasn't understood that she really wants him to take it out right away, reasoning that in the same situation she would naturally comply. The man, however, may want to avoid the appearance that he is being ordered around, so he waits to take the garbage out "in his own good time." The more the wife asks, the

longer he waits to act. The result of this conflict of female and male styles of communication is the vicious cycle known as nagging.

Independence and intimacy needs conflict in Scenario 3: Lee and Jeanette are married. Lee's high school friend, André, calls him at work to say he will be in town for the weekend. Lee invites him to stay with them. Over Thursday night supper, Lee tells his wife of André's visit, and Jeanette becomes quite upset.

"How could you invite him to spend the weekend this late in the week without even asking me first?" she demands.

"Why do I have to tell you every single thing I decide to do?" retorts Lee.

This brief scenario illustrates a conflict between a couple's differing needs for intimacy and independence. For Jeanette, the intimacy of her relationship with Lee entails involvement in his life and he in hers; she assumes that spouses share their plans and make decisions by consensus. In addition, having an unexpected houseguest often requires extra cleaning up and cooking. Lee feels that checking with his wife before making any decision interferes with his independence: if she really understood him, he thinks, she wouldn't play control games with him.

In male-female interaction there is no single "right way" to communicate. Negotiation and flexibility by both sides are crucial to achieve successful communication. In addition, it is important to realize that when your usual style "just isn't working" it will do little good to do more of the same, just as speaking louder to someone who does not understand your language will rarely make him or her understand you better. In fact, doing more of the same often results in complementary schismogenesis, a term used by Bateson<sup>5</sup> to explain a situation where an exaggerated be-

havior provokes a more extreme opposing reaction from the other person, leading into a progressively out-of-control spiral. In the case of Lee and Jeanette, complementary schismogenesis could mean that the more Lee pulls away to preserve his independence, the closer Jeanette will try to get to preserve the intimacy she values.

### Different Viewpoints and Reactions

Because women and men sometimes see things from different perspectives, they may interpret the same act differently. For example, in a lab group composed of two women and two men, one of the women has been designated leader. She may try to reach a consensus on how to proceed before leading the group forward. The male group members may see this as a waste of time and ascribe the woman's unacceptable behavior to her insecurity or incompetence. However, the other woman in the group may be pleased with what she views as competent and considerate behavior, since that is the way she herself would have handled things had she been

appointed leader. Thus, due to differing styles of interaction, situations in which women believe they are demonstrating positive qualities may be perceived negatively by men, and vice versa.

Turning again to Scenarios 1 and 2 outlined above, we find differences in gender communication. In Scenario 1, although Bette and Adrian agree on the message they need to obtain (the directions), they focus on different metamesages (underlying meanings) created by the need for information. Because Bette tunes in to the metamessage of connectedness, she does not hesitate to interact with someone to ask for the needed information. In fact, women have been known to ask for directions even when they have a fairly clear idea of where they are going because it allows them to interact with locals.

On the other hand, Adrian focuses on hierarchy: "Since someone has the information I need and I am forced to ask for it, this will put me in an inferior position." He may further assume that if the person asked doesn't have the information, he or she will give erroneous information rather than admit ignorance. Bette assumes that if someone doesn't know, he

or she will be helpful enough to say so.

In order for progress to occur, both men and women must recognize their different styles of communicating and treat each approach as valid. The "best" style in Scenario 1 is not necessarily Bette's nor Adrian's: both need to be flexible and learn to adapt to the other's style while seeking a workable agreement.

Scenario 2 appears confusing: As Mario did, many males would have misunderstood Julie's request for sympathy. Instead of creating a sense of solidarity with her by commiserating about her ruined dress as a female friend might have done ("That's terrible, Julie! It looked so good on you, too. You know, that happened to me last year..."), Mario's attempt to help by offering a solution suggests to Julie that instead of their being alike and thus intimate, they are in reality different and distant. Mario's quick reassurance that the problem isn't as bad as it looks makes Julie feel that her emotions have been discounted. Thus, she responds negatively when Mario attempts to act in a way he thinks is caring.

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### Talkative Women, Silent Men?

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Speaking of communication, what about the widely held notion that "women talk too much"? Interestingly, at meetings, in mixed-group discussions, and classrooms, research has shown that men talk more than women! The basic differences lie in the topic of the conversation and its location. For women, talk is used to establish and negotiate relationships; thus, women tend to talk more in private situations, often recounting events in detail to establish connection with their "significant others." Gossip also falls into the category of topic differences. Women tend to exchange information about people. Men may also be said to gossip, although the topics of their talk are often politics, policies, power in institutions, and sports.

In public, men often offer opinions and "hard facts," thus establishing their status. For many men, talk is mostly a way to exchange information. When they relax in private situations, many men feel comfortable talking much less just when women want them to talk more.

An illustration of male-female attitudes toward private conversation often occurs when parents call their adolescent or adult children who are away at school. Mom may want all the details, while Dad often limits himself to a few well-chosen comments and questions about finances, exams, and grades.

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### Trouble In Paradise

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In a chapter of her book *Gender and Grace*,<sup>6</sup> psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen explores an interesting possibility about the origin of these seemingly global gender differences. Although an

admitted amateur in theological matters, Van Leeuwen sets an intriguing biblical scenario.

Act 1: *Created in God's Image*. Van Leeuwen focuses on two aspects of what it means for humans to be created in God's image: sociability (a concern for relationships and community) and accountable dominion, or responsible rule over all creation.

Act 2: *Trouble in Paradise*. It was here, in the pristine Garden of Eden, Van Leeuwen suggests, that our gender differences began. Although commanded not to abuse of their dominion by "deciding the nature of good and evil," nor to abuse of their sociability as husband and wife by persuading the other to violate God's commands, Adam and Eve did exactly that. According to Van Leeuwen,

the effects of Genesis 3:16 reflect the peculiar way in which each party sinned in the Garden. The man and the woman were equally created for sociability and dominion. But in reaching out to take the fruit, the woman overstepped the bounds of accountable dominion. As a consequence, her sociability was mixed with the problem of social enmeshment, which continues to hamper the proper exercise of her dominion in the world at large. By contrast, the man, in accepting the fruit from his wife, overstepped the bounds of human social unity. As a consequence, his legitimate, accountable dominion became laced with the problem of domination, which has been interfering with his relationships—to God, to the creation and to other people, including women—ever since.<sup>7</sup>

Speaking from her perspective as an experienced psychologist, Van Leeuwen asserts that this account provides a reasonable explanation for the as-yet clinically unaccounted-for tendency of women "to

avoid developing self-sufficiency for the sake of preserving even pathological relationships with the opposite sex" as well as for the tendency of men to exercise domination rather than dominion.

Although the author does not provide a clear explanation of why the abused attribute in Adam (men) and Eve (women) was not the one that was affected (e.g., Adam abused his sociability but was affected in his dominion), her explanation nevertheless provides a view compatible with the findings of sociolinguists and other gender researchers who describe women as "intimacy-attuned" and men as "hierarchy-attuned," while adding a spiritual and biblical dimension to the discussion.

Van Leeuwen does not conclude her model with the disruption caused by the Fall. Acts Three to Five: *Redemption and Renewal*, speak of Jesus' work to reverse the effects of Adam and Eve's tragic mistake by attempting to raise the status of women (for example, in Matthew 28:1-11 we see that they are the first witnesses to His resurrection) and on other occasions by rebuking socially enmeshed behavior (for example, in Luke 10:38-42 Jesus chides Martha for tending to the kitchen rather than listening to precious truths).

Van Leeuwen concludes that although we still suffer from sin's consequences, we have been liberated through Christ's death and in time all things, including the damaged communication between men and women, will be restored to their original perfection.

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### What Can We Do About It?

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Women and men *do* communicate differently. Unfortunately, there seems to be no quick fix for improving gender miscommunication. To achieve optimal communication, we need flexibility and

openness to listen, talk, and understand in a way that may seem a bit different from our usual style. Understanding the causes of miscommunication allows us to deal with situations that perplex us, make us feel uncomfortable, offended, or hurt because we may erroneously assume that the other person intended this to occur.

In learning to see things from a different perspective and tuning in to the possible reasons behind our misunderstandings, we take an important step in promoting good communication. And in the spirit of Romans 12:10, Christ-like considerateness in our daily dealings is not far behind.

#### NOTES

1. I have chosen to use the terms *sex* and *gender* interchangeably, although these are often differentiated (*sex* being a biological attribute and *gender* being a characteristic which is learned through the process of socialization).

2. Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

3. Deborah Tannen, *That's Not What I Meant!* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986); *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990).

4. Tannen. *You Just Don't Understand*, p. 85.

5. Gregory Bateson. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972).

6. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

7. Stewart Van Leeuwen, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

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