

A LINE ON LIFE

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Gender Biases in Communication *

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In *My Fair Lady*, Professor Higgins asks, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" However, the question could just as easily be reversed, "Why can't a man be more like a woman?" Answering either question is difficult, because each gender has biases in communication. This is the topic of Deborah Tannen's book, *You Just Don't Understand* (1990).

According to Tannen, both men and women use communication to achieve status and avoid failure on one hand — and to establish intimacy and avoid isolation on the other. However, men are much more likely to communicate in an attempt to gain control and status. With this purpose, communication becomes a "win-lose" situation with men. For women, their communication is more of an attempt to establish emotional closeness, to confirm and support others, to reach consensus — essentially a "win-win" situation. Unfortunately, many women meet the needs of others by ignoring their own needs. This makes for a "win-lose" situation, with the women as the losers. For men, emotional closeness can be threatening, because it leads to vulnerability by allowing others some control.

In her book, Janet Hyde (1991) identifies more specific biases. Women are more likely to use **tag questions** — short phrases that change statements into questions. While a man might say, "That was hard," a woman is more likely to say, "That was hard, wasn't it?" To men, questioning makes the statement seem weak and uncertain. To women, it expresses a greater concern for the opinion of others.

In conversations, men are twice as likely to interrupt speakers — regardless of their gender. It could be an expression of power and dominance on the part of men. On the other hand, tag questions and other aspects of women's communication allow others to jump into the conversation.

In our culture, we assume that women talk more than men. Hyde found that — as far as total talking time is concerned — *men talk more than women!* In mixed-gender groups, men are more likely to dominate the conversation.

There are also gender differences in **nonverbal** aspects of communication. Hyde found a difference in **intonation patterns**. Women use a wider range of pitches, especially the higher ones. These higher pitches suggest various emotions, like cheerfulness, politeness and surprise. Men tend to see this as "overly emotional."

Women **smile** more than men. One explanation is that women are *expected* to smile — it is part of the stereotypical feminine role in our society. Unfortunately, many men

interpret a friendly smile as an indication of sexual interest. Hyde suggests another interpretation for smiling women. With their lower status, smiling might be an "*appeasement gesture*" on the woman's part. Rather than an indication of happiness or friendliness, it might indicate negative feelings like fear.

With **interpersonal distance**, Hyde found that women stand and sit closer to others, while men prefer greater distances. Women might be trying to establish emotional closeness. Unfortunately, many men also mistakenly interpret this as sexual interest.

Men **touch** women more than the other way around. This could be related to their relative status. The higher status person in any interaction is more likely to *initiate* touching. Since men are more likely to have the higher status, this might explain the difference.

Knowing about the gender biases makes it easier to accept these differences without placing blame. Rather than one style being better, they are merely different. Knowing the differences allows us to rephrase our statements for clearer understanding. On the receiving end, we can test our assumptions by giving the speaker **feedback** — telling the speaker what we think has been communicated ("*What I heard you saying is that....*") If we are correct, the speaker will say so. If not, the speaker can modify the message to make it clearer. Either way, communication has been improved.

* Adapted from Curtis Byer and Louis Shainberg's *Dimensions of Human Sexuality*, Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1994, pages 65-67.