

SPECIAL ISSUE: MALE VS. FEMALE BRAINS

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SPECIAL ISSUE

HIS BRAIN

How we're
different

Plus:

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Parenting**

Give Your Girl
a Truck

**Make Me
Laugh**

Humor and
Romance

Angry Men

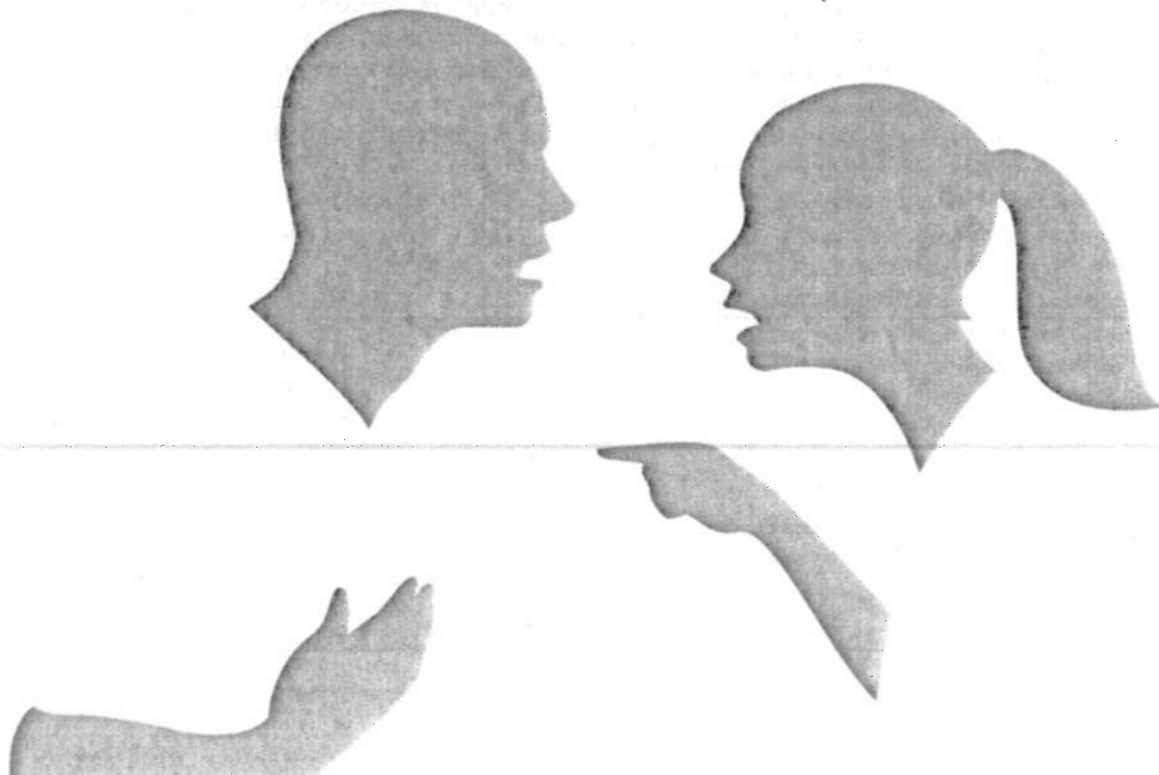
Is It Depression?

*You Still Don't
Understand
Men and Women Talk*
page 54

HER BRAIN



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HE SAID, SHE SAID

Women and men speak their own languages, but research reveals the conversational gender divide is not as stark as it seems

By Deborah Tannen

W

hy don't men like to stop and ask directions? This question, which I first addressed in my 1990 book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, garnered perhaps the most attention of any issue or insight in that book. It appeared on cocktail napkins ("Real men don't ask directions") and became a staple of stand-up comics as well as jokes that made the rounds: "Why did Moses wander in the desert for 40 years?" and "Why does it take so many sperm to find just one egg?"

The attention surprised me. I had not known how widespread this experience was, but I included the asking-directions scenario because it crystallized key aspects of a phenomenon that, I had discovered, accounts for many of the frustrations that women and men experience in conversation. I have spent more than three decades collecting and analyzing thousands of examples of how women and men interact and have found that men's talk tends to focus on hierarchy—competition for relative power—whereas women's tends to focus on connection—relative closeness or distance. In other words, a man and woman might walk away from the same conversation asking different questions: he might wonder, "Did that conversation put me in a one-up or one-down position?"

whereas she might wonder, "Did it bring us closer or push us farther apart?"

But wait! All conversations, and all relationships, reflect a combination of hierarchy and connection—the two are not mutually exclusive but inextricably intertwined. All of us aspire to be powerful, and we all want to connect with others. Since the publication of *You Just Don't Understand*, I have continued to investigate the nuances of women's and men's ways of speaking to clarify how their conversational styles are different ways of reaching the same goals. My newest work explores the context in which women's focus on hierarchy and men's on connection is most obvious and most intense: the family. In particular, sisters provide insight into relationships among women that are deeply

influenced by competition as well as connection.

So what does any of this have to do with asking for directions? The route to the answer may not yet be obvious, but read on and I promise to get you there.

"Mine's Higher" vs. "We're the Same"

My interest in the linguistic differences between women and men grew from research I conducted early in my career on conversations between speakers of different ethnic and regional backgrounds. These interactions often led to misunderstandings because members of each group had contrasting assumptions about what should be said and the appropriate way to say it. I sensed, and later showed, a parallel pattern in conver-

sations between women and men—a gender-based culture clash.

I often illustrate—and trace—this phenomenon using video clips of preschoolers at a day care center. In one scene, four little boys are sitting together, talking about how high they can hit a ball. “Mine’s up to there,” one small boy declares, raising his arm above his head. “Mine’s up to the sky,” a second responds, pointing higher. A third boy counters, “Mine’s up to heaven!” Then the fourth boy offers: “Mine’s all the way up to God.” These boys’ verbal exchange is obviously a game of hierarchy, as each one’s claim tops the preceding one.

I contrast this video clip with another from the same preschool: two little girls are sitting at a small table, drawing. One girl suddenly raises her head, looks at the other, and says (apparently referring to contact lenses), “Did you know that my babysitter, called Amber, has already contacts?” The second girl looks puzzled at first but quickly gathers herself together and announces, with ap-

Boys and men often try to top each other, a tendency that emerges in conversation as a kind of verbal sparring.

parent relish, “My mom has already contacts and my dad does, too!” The first girl laughs with glee at this echo response, which even matches the first girl’s odd syntax (“has already” rather than “already has”). After a pause, during

which both girls return to drawing, the first one exclaims with delight, “The SAME?!” Being the same is as pleasing to her as topping one another is to the boys.

Although the specific conversational moves—topping versus matching—are different, what these contrasting conversations have in common is that they are rituals: self-evident assumptions about how the conversations should go and what a reasonable remark or response should look



“Mine’s up to there,” one small boy declares. “Mine’s up to the sky,” a second responds, pointing higher.

like. As with cross-cultural communication, we do not recognize them as rituals until we talk to others who do not share our assumptions.

Parents tell me that recognizing these as gender-related patterns in their children helps them deal with otherwise baffling behavior. For example, a woman recalled overhearing three little boys—her son and two of his friends—talking in the backseat as she was driving. One boy said, “When we went to Disneyland, we stayed three days.” The second boy said, “When we went to Disneyland, we stayed four days.” Then her son said, “We’re going to move to Disneyland!” She was troubled to hear him utter an obvious untruth. Should she instruct her son not to tell lies? I assured her that the boys knew that her family was not going to move to Disneyland. But her son won that round.

A father told me about a similar confusion upon overhearing a conversation between his little girl and her friend. The friend had said, “I have a brother named Benjamin and a brother named Jonathan.” His daughter responded, “I have a brother named Benjamin and a brother named Jonathan, too.” But she didn’t. Her father wondered why she would say such a thing. I explained that she was simply offering a matching experience as a sign of goodwill, to reinforce the friendship.

The contrasting focus on connection versus hierarchy also sheds light on innumerable adult conversations—and frustrations. Say a woman tells another about a personal problem and hears in

FAST FACTS

Genderspeak

- 1** Men’s talk tends to focus on hierarchy—competition for relative power—whereas women’s tends to focus on connection—relative closeness or distance.
- 2** But all conversations, and all relationships, reflect a combination of hierarchy and connection. The two are not mutually exclusive but inextricably intertwined. All of us aspire to be powerful, and we all want to connect with others. Women’s and men’s conversational styles are simply different ways of reaching the same goals.
- 3** The context in which women’s focus on hierarchy and men’s on connection is most obvious and most intense: the family. In particular, sisters provide insight into relationships among women that are deeply influenced by competition and hierarchy as well as connection.

response, "I know how you feel" or "the same thing happens to me." The resulting "troubles talk" reinforces the connection between them. (Indeed, some women feel they have to dig up problems to tell friends to maintain intimacy.) Because this is not a conversational ritual he is used to, a man may well misread her conversational gambit as a request for help solving the problem. The result is mutual frustration: she blames him for telling her what to do and failing to provide the expected comfort, whereas he thinks he did exactly what she requested and cannot fathom why she would keep

lack self-esteem if he has to throw his weight around like that.

Which takes us back to the woman and man in the car who have different assumptions about asking directions. From her point of view, asking directions means making a fleeting connection to a stranger and getting where you are going without losing anything. From his perspective, he would be putting himself in a one-down position to a stranger—an uncomfortable experience. He might even believe the effort is counterproductive because a stranger who does not know the way will be similarly motivated by a reluctance

to appear one-down and send them on a wild-goose chase. For both reasons, it makes sense to avoid this discomfort and spend 10 minutes—or 20 or 30—finding the way on his own.

Different Styles, Similar Goals

Despite these differences, women's and men's conversational

styles are more alike than they may appear. Although these styles may seem opposite, they can be used for similar purposes. Boys and men are also concerned with connection, and girls and women with power, even as they may have different ways of pursuing these goals.

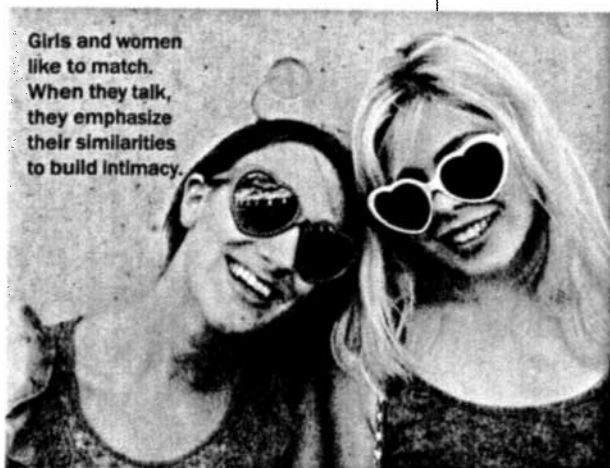
Verbal rituals that focus on connection often involve affirming sameness, as we saw in the little girls' exchange about contact lenses and in the familiar responses: "The same thing happened to me" and "I'm the same way." Yet the contrasting ritual, "That's nothing! Here's what happened to me...", which is typically associated with men—and interpreted as competitive—can also create connection, by implying, "You shouldn't feel bad about what happened to you, because what happened to me was worse." In other words, "topping" each other can be another way to commiserate.

Similarly, for girls and women, what

Recognizing these gender-related patterns can help parents deal with baffling behavior in their kids.

appears on the surface to be aimed at connection can also be a way to exert power. Linguist Amy Sheldon of the University of Minnesota has investigated this process by videotaping preschool children playing in same-sex groups of three. She found that both boys and girls pursued their own goals, but whereas the boys she taped were obvious about thwarting another's goals, the girls often did so in ways that appeared to honor the other girls' goals as well. In one example, two girls, Eva and Kelly, were not eager to include the third girl, Tulla, in their play. Instead of telling Tulla outright that she could not play, they included her but assigned her a role that precluded her participation: "You can be the baby brother, but you aren't born yet." Sheldon emphasizes that this is a highly assertive move, even as it maintains the appearance of accommodating Tulla's wish to be part of the game.

In this instance, the children's behavior is not a clear on-or-off application of hierarchy or connection but a blending of both. We could say that Eva and Kelly exercised power to keep Tulla from participating but also honored the connection by assigning her a role. In contrast, Sheldon observed that when boys played, they tended to insist more overtly on their own goals and even to



talking about a problem if she does not want to do anything about it.

Similar scenarios play out at work, where mutual misinterpretations may have career-altering consequences. For example, if a woman's boss overhears her telling a subordinate, "Could you do me a favor and get me a copy of that report?" he may think she lacks confidence. It appears to him as if she does not feel she has a right to ask her subordinate to do something. But the truth is probably the exact opposite. She knows the subordinate has to do what she asks. Her locution "do me a favor" is simply a way of not flaunting the power she obviously has—and thus saving face for the subordinate. If men often mishear women's ritual indirectness as lacking confidence (or even competence), women often misinterpret less indirect rituals as overbearing—and also lacking in confidence. Her thinking goes: he must really

(The Author)

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threaten physical force. For example, when one boy, Nick, wanted to cut a plastic pickle that another boy had, he screamed, "I *have* to cut! I want to cut it! It's mine!" Sheldon stresses, however, that although boys and girls tended to use more of one strategy or another, the difference was not absolute but of degree. Boys did sometimes attempt to compromise, and girls did at times attempt physical force to get their way.

In a typical casting setup for a family play, an older sister might say, "I'll be the princess; you be the frog."

Sheldon's research reminds us that patterns, no matter how real, are never absolute. Again, the asking-directions example is instructive. I didn't realize how common that scenario is because my husband does stop and ask directions, whereas I am the one who says, "I'd rather find it myself on the map." In this respect, he and I are not typical, as many of us are not typical of our genders, cultures, regions or any other group to which we belong.

Gender differences are a matter of relative *focus* on connection and hierarchy, as we all want to accomplish both goals to some extent. We are always engaged in negotiations over connection and relative power. Eva and Kelly served both goals when they included Tulla—and kept her from participating. Similarly, the boys who verbally competed about how high they could hit a ball also created connection by agreeing on the type of verbal game to play. To understand gender patterns, then, rather than asking, "Does this way of speaking serve hierarchy or connection?" we need to ask, "How does this way of talking reflect the

interplay of connection and hierarchy?" And nowhere can this interplay be better explored than in the context that is both universal and fundamental: the family.

Family Ties

Family comes with built-in hierarchy as well as built-in connection. The hierarchy between parents and children is self-evident, but the same is true of siblings. Even though we use the phrases "like sisters" or "like brothers" to describe friendships that are close and equal, actual sibling relationships are defined not only by the connection of shared family but also by the hierarchy of birth order. I have been particularly intrigued by sisters—not only because I have two, but, most important, because in sisters we see a relationship between women that is deeply competitive and hierarchical.

In *Having Our Say*, the Delany sisters' 1993 best-selling memoir, Bessie Delany is quoted as saying, "Sadie doesn't approve of me sometimes. She looks at me in that big-sister sort of way." When she said this, Bessie was 101, and Sadie was 103. Elsewhere in the book, Sadie says, "If she lives to 130, I'll just have to live to 132, so I can take care of her." Their relationship was shaped more by the two years separating them than by the century they had lived.

These centenarians' comments reflect dynamics I heard from many of the more than 100 women I interviewed about their sisters for my book *You Were Always Mom's Favorite!: Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives*, as well as comments I have heard about brothers: older siblings were often seen as protective but also judgmental. After all, these qualities are two sides of the same coin. "Judgmental" means you see how others can improve themselves and their lives—and tell them. We all often think of ways our friends, relatives and even strangers could do things better. But we usually don't tell them what we think—unless we feel responsible for them. Parents often come across as judgmental to children because they feel

it is their right, if not their obligation, to make sure their children's lives go as well as possible, which means letting them know the ways they can improve. Such offers of advice, however, no matter how well-meaning (in other words, focused on connection), are typically heard as criticism—and therefore as put-downs. The giver of advice is one-up, superior in knowledge and, by virtue of exercising the right to tell the other what to do, also superior in rank.

Similarly, many older sisters speak to younger siblings with commanding and unambiguous authority—ways of speaking that are more often associated with boys and men. One woman told me when she was small, she and her older sister played a game they called "mop." She was the mop. Her sister would grab her by the feet and drag her around the house, her long hair sweeping the floor like a mop. Several other women recalled their older sisters organizing and directing plays. A typical casting setup was:

"I'll be the princess; you be the frog." In my own family, my father overheard me ask my sister,

Older sisters often act dominant to younger sisters, speaking to them in ways more often expected of boys and men.



Sisters may compete about who knows more personal information. Brothers may compete about who knows more facts.

Men may resist asking for directions because the act puts them in a one-down position to a stranger.



when I was about four and she about six, “Mimi, can I play in your backyard?” Clearly, I did not question the authority that my older sister had assumed in her dealings with me.

At the same time, closeness is the holy grail of sister relationships, as it tends to be for girls and women in other contexts as well. When speaking to women about their sisters, I often heard “I wish we were closer,” but never “I wish we weren’t so close.” Their comments also generally reflected the assumption so common among women that troubles talk is critical for intimacy. Women told me they were deeply hurt to learn that a sister had kept important personal information secret. Whereas a brother (or a father) might say, “He told us when he was ready,” sisters (like mothers) often feel, “I thought we were closer than that.”

A powerful rivalry often accompanies sisterly ties—but it can take the form of competition for connection. Sisters often feel acutely competitive about who knows what about family members’ secrets—or who knows what first. The

20/20 correspondent Juju Chang, in a segment of the show based on my book, explained that she and her three sisters have learned that if one of them has important personal information to impart—news of an engagement or a pregnancy, for example—they must set up a conference call so all three sisters will learn the news at the same time. Otherwise, the sister who is called first will seem to be favored, and the others will feel slighted.

Thus, sisters are often very competitive, and hierarchy is built into their relationship by virtue of birth order. And brothers are often very close and have

connection built into their relationship by virtue of shared family. Sisters and brothers tend to vie, however, for dominance in different arenas. Sisters may compete about who knows more personal information about family members, whereas brothers may compete about who knows more facts about impersonal information such as computers or history.

Family relationships make clear that closeness is not opposite or even distinguishable from hierarchy and competition. Indeed, one reason that older sisters feel so comfortable bossing younger ones around and giving them advice is precisely because there is a strong connection between them. In addition, the deep love between older and younger siblings, like that between parents and children, results in part from the acts of caretaking and the experience of being taken care of that these roles entail.

Listening in on conversations among family members reveals a unique blend of authority and intimacy in talk among women as well as among men. It highlights the ways in which gendered conversational patterns can be different routes to the same goal: finding the right balance of closeness and distance while simultaneously negotiating relative power. **M**

(Further Reading)

- ◆ **That’s Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships.** Deborah Tannen. Ballantine Books, 1992.
- ◆ **Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work.** Deborah Tannen. Harper Paperbacks, 1995.
- ◆ **You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation.** Deborah Tannen. Harper Paperbacks, 2001.
- ◆ **I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs and Kids When You’re All Adults.** Deborah Tannen. Ballantine Books, 2002.
- ◆ **You’re Wearing THAT? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation.** Deborah Tannen. Ballantine Books, 2006.