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Gender Issues: Communication Differences in Interpersonal Relationships

Cynthia Burggraf Torppa, Ph.D., Extension Educator, Family and Consumer Sciences, Morrow County, Heart of Ohio EERA, Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University

A lot of media attention has been devoted to the idea that women and men communicate very differently—in fact, it is sometimes stated that women and men communicate so differently from one another that they must come from different planets! Although at times differences in women’s and men’s communication styles seem to be constant and overwhelming, they are really quite minor. For example, both women and men can be nurturing, aggressive, task-focused, or sentimental. What is important to think about, however, is that women and men sometimes perceive the same messages to have different meanings. In fact, it may be as a result of the differences in message interpretation that the “battle of the sexes” occurs.

Studies indicate that women, to a greater extent than men, are sensitive to the interpersonal meanings that lie “between the lines” in the messages they exchange with their mates. That is, societal expectations often make women responsible for regulating intimacy, or how close they allow others to come. For that reason, it is argued that women pay more attention than men to the underlying meanings about intimacy that messages imply. Men on the other hand, to a greater extent than women, are more sensitive to “between the lines meanings” about status. For men, societal expectations are that they must negotiate hierarchy, or who’s the captain and who’s the crew (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 2009).

These differences in emphasis on interpersonal vs. status implications of messages typically lead women to expect relationships to be based on interdependence (mutual dependence) and cooperation. Women more frequently emphasize the similarities between themselves and others, and try to make decisions that make everyone

happy. In contrast, it is more typical for men to expect relationships to be based on independence and competition. Men more frequently emphasize the differences between themselves and others, and often make decisions based on their personal needs or desires.

How are these differences seen in marriage? In the ways women and men communicate! Women tend to be the relationship specialists and men tend to be task specialists. Women are typically the experts in “rapport talk” which refers to the types of communication that build, maintain, and strengthen relationships. Rapport talk reflects skills of talking, nurturing, emotional expression, empathy, and support. Men are typically the experts in task accomplishment and addressing questions about facts. They are experts in “report talk,” which refers to the types of communication that analyzes issues and solves problems. Report talk reflects skills of being competitive, lacking sentimentality, analyzing, and focusing aggressively on task accomplishment.

These differences can create specific, and commonly experienced, misunderstandings. Here are three examples:

Misunderstanding #1

He: I’m really tired. I have so much work to do—I don’t know how I’m going to get it done!

She: Me, too. There just aren’t enough hours in the day!

He: There you go again! You never think my contributions to this marriage are good enough!

In this conversation, she is trying to communicate something like “We’re partners and share similar experiences.” Her intended “between the lines” message is: “I

understand what you're going through; you're not alone." The "between the lines" message he hears emphasizes competition for status: "What are you complaining about? You aren't any better than I am!" or "Your contributions to our marriage aren't any more significant than mine!"

Misunderstanding #2

She: I'm really tired. I have so much work to do—I don't know how I'm going to get it done!

He: Why don't you take a day off and rest, if you're so tired?

She: (sarcastically) Thanks a lot! You think my contribution to this household is so trivial that I can do nothing and the difference won't even be noticed?

Here, he is trying to communicate something like "Oh, you need advice and analysis? I'll focus on the details and facts, and offer a solution." His intended "between the lines" message is: "I will help you solve your problem because I think I know something that might help." The "between the lines" message she hears him saying: "I don't want to understand your feelings; I'm different from you and I know what you should do."

The problems here result from some subtle differences in the ways that women and men approach problems. Women *sometimes* deal with problems (especially emotional concerns) by talking about them, sharing their feelings, and matching experiences with others. This can be frustrating to men, who *more typically* deal with problems by focusing on the facts and seeking an immediate solution. Occasionally, men perceive women to be ungrateful for the advice and solutions they offer and ponder in frustration why women don't want to resolve their problems! Similarly, when men offer a solution, rather than talking about a problem, women may feel hurt, dissatisfied, and put-down by the lack of empathy men show.

Misunderstanding #3

She: Call me when you get there and let me know you made it safely.

He: That's ridiculous! Nothing bad is going to happen, so just trust that I'll get there safely! If something bad *does* happen, I'm sure you'll hear about it!

In this final example, she is trying to communicate something like, "We're connected and I care about you and your safety." Her intended "between the lines" message is: "You are loved and important to me." The "between the lines" message he hears her saying is: "You had better check in with me! I want to know where you are, who you are with, and what you are doing at all times."

The misunderstandings in these examples probably result from differences in the ways that women and men show affection. It is more common for women to show affection through talking, but it is more common for men to show affection by doing things—either doing things together or doing separate things within the same physical space. Sometimes not talking—not having to talk—is a sign of trust and intimacy for men.

What does all this mean to us?

Understanding differences is the key to working them out. When we misunderstand one another, we often think that the other's motives are not reasonable, are mean spirited, or worse! But by knowing that women and men sometimes see—and hear!—things through different filters, we can begin to share with one another the distortions we experience, and thereby find our way to clarity.

So, the next time you feel surprised, disappointed, or angry with someone's response to something you have said, ask yourself if he or she may have "misheard" you. Is the other responding to your problems with a solution, when you wanted to receive sympathy? Is the other responding to your message of affection with a message of status? If so, you will be able to help the other to understand the source of your miscommunication, and avoid the hurt feelings and conflicts that sometimes follow.

References

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Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868