

# An Overview of Nonverbal Gender Differences

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The idea that one's biological sex plays a part in shaping one's communication patterns is fascinating yet somewhat deceptive, appealing but debatable. The study of sex and language, the proliferation of writings on nonverbal communication, and the growing interest in women's issues and roles account in part for the abundance of gender-linked communication-difference research that has taken place in the past decade.<sup>1</sup> The body of material on nonverbal gender differences is sometimes contradictory and certainly inconclusive. Even the working of the topic under consideration is debatable. Some writers prefer to use the term "sex differences", while others reserve that term for a purely physiological designation.<sup>2</sup> MacRae considers gender as characteristic of the body and sex as an activity.<sup>3</sup> Birdwhistell has divided the characteristics that differentiate between the two sexes as primary (whether a human produces ova or spermatazoa), secondary (anatomical), and tertiary (psychological). The first two are biological; tertiary sex, or gender, is learned.<sup>4</sup> And others argue that behavior has no gender. Bernice Lott states:

No teachable human behavior belongs exclusively to any one group of persons, and both women and men manifest individual differences along all behavioral dimensions. It is therefore both empirically and theoretically invalid to continue to genderize behavior categories.<sup>5</sup>

With full acceptance of the principle of androgyny, this writer will present a limited review of observed gender-linked nonverbal behavior differences and report some of the explanations given for the diverse manner in which males and females communicate nonverbally.

Numerous studies have shown that women demonstrate more sensitivity to nonverbal cues than men.<sup>6</sup> Accuracy in nonverbal detection is greater for women as demonstrated by their PONS (Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity) scores. PONS is a 45 minute sound motion picture with 220 two-second nonverbal behavior segments. In tests with over 10,000 females from third grade to middle age, females were reliably better than males at decoding the nonverbal messages.<sup>7</sup> The female advantage is most pronounced for facial cues, less pronounced for body cues, and least pronounced for vocal cues.<sup>8</sup>

Judith Hall\* offers several possible explanations for female nonverbal sensitivity. She includes innate and learned behaviors, empathy, attention, accommodation, and oppression. The maternal instinct to decipher children's needs and intentions is said to lead to woman's ability to interpret more quickly nonverbal cues. Whether innate or fostered by societal expectations of woman's nurturant role, this heightened sensitivity (woman's intuition?) definitely exists. Women report sharing others' moods vicariously more than men; they appear to be more empathetic. Women simply may pay more attention to others' behavior. The female is more willing to adapt and conform in order to fit in. And finally, the oppression of women could explain their greater need to observe all aspects of the environment in order to find ways to please.<sup>9</sup>

Interesting findings are reported from research on the different modalities of nonverbal communication. In studies of facial expression, males are found to be internalizers more often than females (i.e., males are more likely to inhibit overt expression of their feelings). Women are more often externalizers.<sup>10</sup> Emotions are more easily judged from women's faces than from men's faces, but female facial expressions do not necessarily represent felt emotions.

Women engage in more positive facial expression—smiling and laughing, but these expressions may have ambiguous meaning unless intention and context are considered.<sup>11</sup> Ekman and Friesen call the smile the most frequent qualifier added as a comment to any negative emotion. The smile is the most common emotional mask.<sup>12</sup> Smiles are used to placate, signal submission, and show nervousness. What Henley refers to as "a woman's badge of appeasement,"<sup>13</sup> the smile may be a habit acquired by observation. Women smile 89% of the time in social encounters while men smile only 67% of the time. And 26% of female-to-male smiles are not returned.<sup>14</sup> Smiling is a way of seeking approval, and when seeking approval, both sexes smile more often.

Children respond differently to male and female smiles, attributing greater friendliness to male smiles than to female smiles. Since females smile more often when giving both positive and negative messages, children interpret male smiles as more sincere.<sup>15</sup> In actuality, females may smile more, but the interpretations of the smiles may be as varied as the reasons for the smiling.<sup>16</sup>

The functions and types of eye behavior are similar for both males and females, but frequency and duration of gaze are often different for the sexes. No sexual difference in eye contact is apparent until about the fourth grade. At about this time, boys begin to learn that it is less masculine for them to engage in mutual eye contact, but girls are encouraged to seek and keep the gaze of others.<sup>17</sup> This eye behavior continues through adulthood. Women establish eye contact more often than men do, hold gazes longer, and look more while speaking and being spoken to.<sup>18</sup> The fact that women look more seems to contradict the idea of the male's higher-status privilege of staring. Henley reasons that women's gazing can be interpreted as subordinate attentiveness.

...like all underlings of the animal world, they [women] must watch for cues from the powerful. Second, female looking could be due to the fact that women do more listening than men.<sup>19</sup>

While it is one of the most basic forms of communication, touch is also one of the "least researched and least understood areas of nonverbal communication."<sup>20</sup> American society is relatively nontactile as compared to other groups. Tactile communication studies conclude that females are touched more than males from infancy. Hall reports that adult women initiate more touch, but this is largely due to the fact that women touch other women more. Men touch women more than women touch men.<sup>21</sup> Touch is a status privilege; the higher one's status the greater one's license to touch. Major says that men and women interpret touch from an equal-status stranger in different ways. Men tend to perceive such touch as a "put-down" while women tend to perceive this touch as a friendly gesture.<sup>22</sup>

Our concern about space and its use is culturally dictated. The proximity with which we approach others is determined by cultural norms. In societies in which reading of pupil dilation occurs, the proximity of conversants is much closer than in our culture. But most of the literature on gender differences and the use of space in our culture deals with territoriality and the propensity to occupy space. Generally, studies of gender differences in use of space show that men stand or sit farther apart from each other than do women; opposite sex pairs tend to stand or sit closer together than do same sex pairs; and men and women both approach closer to a seated or standing female than they approach a male. Women are more cooperative and less aggressive than males in high density situations.<sup>23</sup>

Men are generally allotted more personal space than are women. Henley says that a woman's femininity is gauged by how little space she occupies. Males are more expansive in use of space around them (sitting with one foot on the other knee, using arm rests, gesturing with hands and arms away from body), while women condense themselves by crossing one knee over the other, holding arms to the sides, and using fewer broad and expansive gestures.<sup>24</sup>

Certain gestures are used more often (or at least differently) by men than women. One of these, the 'steeppling' gesture, is made by joining the fingertips and forming what resembles a church steeple. Birdwhistell, who coined the term, says steeppling shows confidence and pride. The more important one feels, the higher the hands are held while steeppling. Women who use this gesture modify it to a "covert, lower-steeppling" form (i.e., hands are held nearer the body and far from the face).<sup>25</sup> Although women are using the handshake more than they once did, the "aggressive" handshake (turning another's palm upward while keeping one's own palm downward) is generally reserved for men. A gesture that seemingly is predominantly communicative with females only is the gentle holding of both the hands of another coupled with congruous facial expressions. This is generally an expression of deep sympathy and is often followed by an embrace between women.<sup>26</sup>

Females show more direct shoulder orientation (angle at which people orient themselves toward another) in female pairs than do male pairs. In studies of body orientation of seated subjects, Mehrabian found that women had little orientation with intensely disliked partners, most orientation when interacting with partners about whom they felt neutral, and slight decrease in orientation for best-liked partners. Males had less direct body orientation for best-liked partners.<sup>27</sup>

Women are often shown in the media with tilted heads—a signal of coyness or submissiveness. The tilted or cocked head might be used as compensation for a general height difference between the sexes, but this gesture along with the slightly lowered head with upturned eyes is often regarded as a sign of submission. Schefflen suggests that American women are changing this behavior to a more nonsubmissive one, and that the lowered eyes-tilted head stance is being used less than it once was.<sup>28</sup>

Women and men walk differently in our culture, but the difference may not be entirely anatomical. The American male moves his arms independently of his trunk and uses a slight right and left movement involving a twist of the rib cage. American females, who appear less relaxed when walking than their male counterparts, present the entire body as "a moving whole" from neck to ankle. Females walk with their legs closer together and their arms close to their sides. Similar walking behaviors are found among males in other societies.<sup>29</sup>

In studies concerning paralanguage, women's voices were found to be more variable in pitch, more musical, and more expressive. Contrary to popular belief, studies show that men generally talk faster than women. Women have been shown to have more precise pronunciation and more fluid speech than men. Men's speech produces more disturbances in the forms of errors (repetitions, omissions, intruding sounds) and filled pauses (uh's).<sup>30</sup>

What accounts for the differences in the ways in which men and women communicate nonverbally? There is no simple answer to this question. Although many theorists (such as Birdwhistell) would insist that sex differences are learned within a culture, others would argue that biology explains some of the differences. Dianne McGuinness is one of the latter.

McGuinness is a research psychologist and one of the few scientists working exclusively in the field of male versus female behavior. In support of her theory of innate biological behaviors, she points to the thousands of observations and tests she has made in the last decade. McGuinness says that some sex differences appear very early, others after puberty, and the differences seem to be independent of culture. The differences include women's greater sensitivity to touch and better fine-motor coordination. Men and women do not gather information nor

solve problems the same way. She points to female superiority in language skills (e.g., fluency, verbal reasoning, and reading). Girls are more sensitive to sound and are comforted by speech more than boys are.

Male infants, according to McGuinness, respond to lights and objects in their environment while girls respond to people. Boys play with objects and draw objects; girls draw people.<sup>31</sup> These differences occur extremely early and could explain the female's greater sensitivity to nonverbal cues.

The work of McGuinness and her colleagues, Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, has shown wide statistical differences between human males and females in the brain. Sex differences found in human brains is receiving much attention with conflicting findings. The one mental difference between men and women that experts can agree on is that women are generally superior at verbal tasks and men at spatial tasks.<sup>32</sup>

Females develop faster than males. At birth, girls are four weeks ahead of boys; they talk earlier, walk earlier, and reach puberty and maximum growth earlier. Because they mature faster, females generally have reduced lateralization of the brain. Women tend to rely less strongly on a single hemisphere of the brain than do men.<sup>33</sup> For example, since language seems to be more adaptable in both hemispheres of the female brain, damage to the left hemisphere (language dominant side) causes less aphasia in women than in men.<sup>34</sup> The hemispheres of the female brain have been likened to two generalists while the halves of the male brain work as two specialists.<sup>35</sup> This greater specialization (lateralization) is due to slower maturation of the male nervous system.

Doreen Kimura, psychology professor at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada, challenges the idea that women's brains are more diffusely organized than men's. She concludes from her studies of male/female brains that brain organization patterns are more variable from person to person and more dynamic than once realized. "We strain to look for differences," she says, "and, of course tend to emphasize the few we find."<sup>36</sup>

The research being conducted on the differences in male and females brains may add credence to the theory of nonverbal innateness as well as supplying evidence for gender differences. Some writers will continue to argue that sex differences in nonverbal communication are really power differences, that the nonverbal behavior of women is typically subservient and submissive due to the power and privilege that exists for males. For these theorists, nearly every gender difference can be explained by the 'oppression' theory. And still another group of dedicated nonverbal scholars will contend that gender differences reflect cultural norms.

For each argument suggesting that human beings are programmed with certain nonverbal characteristics, some refutation exists to demonstrate our learned nonverbal traits. How or why we adopt the nonverbal communication patterns we do is open to question. But the fact remains obvious that men and women differ genetically, physiologically, and psychologically, and it is very difficult to explain these gender differences. Hall says:

Because maleness and femaleness are complex mixtures of biology, tastes, attitudes, personality traits, and social behavior, investigators' inability to experimentally manipulate these many factors means that there is no certain way to ascertain which factor or factors "cause" a given sex difference.<sup>37</sup>

But with the full knowledge that a "cause" for sex differences may not be immediately identifiable, researchers will continue to observe and record the nonverbal phenomena which characterize males and females with the intention of better understanding all human communication.

\*Hall's **Nonverbal Sex Differences** (1984) reviews the descriptive research on this topic in what is probably the most exhaustive study to date.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Judith A. Hall, *Nonverbal Sex Differences* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 2.
- <sup>2</sup>Marianne LaFrance, "Gender Gestures: Sex, Sex-Role, and Nonverbal Communication," *Gender and Nonverbal Behavior*, Eds. Clara Mayo and Nancy M. Henley (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981), p. 129.
- <sup>3</sup>Donald G. MacRae, "The Body and Social Metaphor," *Body As A Medium Of Expression*, Eds. Jonathan Benthall and Ted Polhemus (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), p. 66.
- <sup>4</sup>Mark L. Hickson and Don Stacks, *Nonverbal Communication* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1985), p. 151.
- <sup>5</sup>Bernice Lott, "A Feminist Critique of Androgyny: Toward the Elimination of Gender Attributions for Learned Behavior," *Gender and Nonverbal Behavior*, p. 179.
- <sup>6</sup>Hall, p. 13.
- <sup>7</sup>Mark L. Knapp, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, 2 ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 417.
- <sup>8</sup>Loretta A. Malandro and Larry Barker, *Nonverbal Communication*(Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1982), p. 157.
- <sup>9</sup>Hall, pp. 31-44.
- <sup>10</sup>Malandro and Barker, p. 157.
- <sup>11</sup>Marianne LaFrance and Clara Mayo, *Moving Bodies: Nonverbal Communication in Social Relationships* (Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 158-159.
- <sup>12</sup>Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, *Unmasking the Face* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 102.
- <sup>13</sup>Nancy M. Henley, *Body Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), p. 175.
- <sup>14</sup>John Leo, "Is Smiling Dangerous to Women?" *Time* (January 14, 1985), p. 82.
- <sup>15</sup>Malandro and Barker, p. 157.
- <sup>16</sup>Hall, p. 71.
- <sup>17</sup>Malandro and Barker, p. 168.
- <sup>18</sup>Hall, p. 80.
- <sup>19</sup>Henley, p. 163.
- <sup>20</sup>Brenda Major, "Gender Patterns in Touching Behavior," in *Gender and Nonverbal Behavior*, p. 15.
- <sup>21</sup>Hall, p. 117.
- <sup>22</sup>Major, pp. 31-33.
- <sup>23</sup>Hall, pp. 85-105.
- <sup>24</sup>Henley, p. 38.
- <sup>25</sup>Gerard I. Nierenberg and Henry H. Calero, *How to Read a Person Like a Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), pp. 93-95.
- <sup>26</sup>Nierenberg and Calero, pp. 39-42.
- <sup>27</sup>Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: Aldine/Atherton, 1972) pp. 117-119.
- <sup>28</sup>Albert E. Schefflen, *Body Language and Social Order* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 19.
- <sup>29</sup>Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 45.
- <sup>30</sup>Hall, pp. 129-130.
- <sup>31</sup>Jo Durden-Smith and Diane deSimone, *Sex and the Brain* (New York: Arbor House, 1983), pp. 59-61.
- <sup>32</sup>Richard A. Harshman, "Sex, Language, and the Brain: Adult Sex Differences in Lateralization," *Conference on Human Brain Function*. Eds. Donald O. Walter, Linda Rogers, Joyce M. Finzi-Friend (Los Angeles: Univeristy of California, 1976), p.27.
- <sup>33</sup>Thomas R. Blakeslee, *The Right Brain* (New York: Berkley Books, 1980), p. 48.
- <sup>34</sup>Doreen Kimura, "Male Brain, Female Brain: The Hidden Difference," *Psychology Today*, 1985, 19 (1), p. 54.
- <sup>35</sup>Blakeslee, pp. 99-102.
- <sup>36</sup>Kimura, p.58.
- <sup>37</sup>Hall, p.14.