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Chapter 15

Female–Male Interaction

The communicative styles of men and women are distinctively different in our society. Our stereotypic conceptions of men and women are clearly and consistently reflected in their contrasting communicative styles. Men are stereotyped as active, dominant, aggressive, and insensitive persons who dominate communicative interaction by virtue of their superior status. By contrast, women are perceived stereotypically to be passive, submissive, supportive persons, who are dominated as a result of their desire to adapt to men's needs, and to be accommodating. To a considerable degree, the stereotypes mirror the dominant characteristics of female–male interaction.

Sex-linked stereotypes are strongly reinforced by the use of sexist or exclusionary language, which relegates women to narrowly defined and dependent roles (Thorne & Henley, 1975). The basic differences in male and female communication styles are revealed in implicit nonverbal messages rather than through the use of language, however. Men rarely communicate their desire to dominate women by the words they utter. Similarly, women do not generally use verbal communication to make clear their desire to be interpersonally accommodating. Such messages are communicated most frequently and forcefully by nonverbal cues.

Sex-Role Stereotyping

Strong and enduring sex-role stereotypes have developed in our society; similar sex-role stereotypes have also developed in nations with strikingly different governing systems such as the Soviet Union (Gibson, 1988). Men are expected to assume the *proactive* role. The cultural norm dictates that the proactive person will be active, independent, self-confident, and decisive. Individuals who assume the proactive role place a high priority on accomplishing the task at hand. Women are expected to assume the *reactive* role. Reactive individuals respond to the contributions made by others rather than initiating contributions; they are emotionally expressive and sensitive to the emotional needs of the initiator, and they are interpersonally supportive and accommodating (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978).

The sex-role stereotypes reflected in those roles are quite detailed. The stereotype for women is more detailed than the stereotype for men, although it is less socially desirable. In spite of the fact that women tend to be stereotyped broadly as one large group, a woman's ethnicity may have an impact on the way that she is stereotyped. The stereotype for the black woman, for example, seems to be particularly detailed. The greater detail comes in part from the assumption that black women have suffered from "double domination" from a white society and from males in general (Reid, 1989). The following descriptive labels are typically used to identify the more negative portion of the female stereotype: "submissive," "dependent," "touchy," "moody," "temperamental," "excitable," "frivolous," "talkative," and "timid." The more positive portion of the female stereotype is identified by these descriptive labels: "affectionate," "considerate," "cooperative," "supportive," and "sensitive."

The stereotype for women has been quite resistant to change. Thus, Wood (1994) wrote that the societal view of "femininity in the 1990s is also relatively consistent with earlier views, although there is increasing latitude in what is considered appropriate" (p. 21). She stresses that

> *To be feminine is to be attractive, deferential, unaggressive, emotional, nurturing, and concerned with people and relationships. Those who embody the cultural definition of femininity still don't outdo men (especially their mates), disregard others' feelings, or put their needs ahead of others. Also, "real women" still look good (preferably very pretty and/or sexy), adore children, and care about homemaking. For all of the changes in our views of women and men, the basic blueprint remains relatively constant.* (p. 21)

Males are stereotyped in positive terms, such as "task-oriented," "rational," and "active." More specifically, males are stereotyped by these positive adjectives: "logical," "industrious," "sharp-witted," "shrewd," "confident," "forceful," and "dominant." Descriptive labels typically used to identify the negative portion of the male stereotype are "boastful," "stubborn," "arrogant," "conceited," "hardheaded," and "opportunistic" (Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Heilbrun, 1976).

As we shall see, men and women frequently do behave in ways that are quite consistent with their stereotype. The obvious question is *why*? Biological differences seem to have a relatively limited impact on the contrasting communicative styles of women and men. Some biological differences may, of course, affect communication. Women are usually physically smaller than men, and this difference could account, in part, for the fact that they *claim* less personal space than men. Because they are smaller than men, their vocal cords tend to be shorter, and their shorter vocal cords may help explain why women's modal pitch is significantly higher than men's. However, Thorne and Henley (1975) maintained that the female's characteristically higher pitch is more a function of social learning than of anatomical differences.

The greatest difference between male and female communicative behaviors seems to be attributable to gender differences, as opposed to biologically determined sex differences. *Gender* is defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (Goffman, 1979). The fact that women and men do behave differently, then, might be largely a result of cultural norms that specify appropriate behavior. The characteristic domination of females by

males is a socially learned behavior, reinforced by a man's gender rather than by his sex. A man's primary sexual characteristics do not usually dictate that he behave in a particular way, but his gender is associated with well-developed social norms that specify how he should behave.

Gender behavior is clearly learned. Boys and girls are expected to behave in ways that are consistent with their gender. They are expected to conform. If they do not do so, their behavior will be branded deviant. Thus, Wood (1994) wrote that young girls are advised "Don't be selfish—share with others," "Be careful—don't hurt yourself," and "Don't get messy." In contrast, young boys are told "Don't be a sissy," "Go after what you want," and "Don't cry."

Goffman (1979) argued that the contrasting images of men and women have been strongly influenced by gender displays. *Gender displays* are conventionalized portrayals of those behaviors that society has defined as prototypically "masculine" and "feminine." The media have proved to be the strongest force in legitimizing and defining the gender displays that have become associated in the popular mind with so-called feminine and masculine behavior.

Umiker-Sebeok (1981) did the most detailed study of the ways gender displays are used to depict men and women in visual advertisements. She found that the image of women portrayed in magazine advertisements is one of "weak, childish, dependent, completely domestic, irrational, subordinate creatures, the producers of children and little else compared with men" (p. 211). More specifically, she maintained that body size and clothing style are used in magazine advertisements to associate females with smallness and subordination. Members of athletic teams are ordinarily portrayed as male, but females are pictured as primarily concerned with clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, hair products, and fragrances that can be used to enhance physical appearance.

In magazine advertisements, a young woman's high social status is frequently linked to her father's success, but a young man's success results from his own efforts; women are dependent and men are independent. The physical domination and subordination of the female is also frequently communicated clearly by the gender displays of the male. In the case of young lovers, it is the male who exhibits such stereotypic gestures as the "shoulder hold" and the "armlock"; it is the man who grasps the woman's upper arms, and it is the male who grasps the woman's hand, rather than vice versa.

Umiker-Sebeok (1981) indicated quite clearly that the advertising industry consistently portrays the male in the proactive role and the female in the reactive role. In the marriage ceremony, for example, the bride is "given away" and "carried over the threshold" of the couple's new home. Middle-aged women are pictured as "plump" and "passive," but the middle-aged man assumes positions of even greater authority, status, and power. Although Umiker-Sebeok's description of male and female gender displays in visual advertisements may be somewhat selective, it makes the point that the stereotypical images of women and men are deeply embedded in cultural values.

The origin of gender stereotypes is not so clear. In one sense, the notion of gender stereotypes almost seems to conjure up a chicken and egg argument. That is, we might ask whether gender stereotypes reflect the way women and men actually behave or whether men and women behave as they do to validate the stereotype. It seems unlikely that either men or women would behave consciously in a way designed to confirm the negative portion

of their stereotype. However, they might behave in ways that seem to affect their image negatively if their behaviors were affected by the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Sex-role stereotyping often forces women and men to make difficult decisions. Take the professional woman, for example. She is probably well aware that many of the personal traits that are associated with managerial success are also defining features of the male stereotype. The professional woman may, therefore, be caught on the horns of a dilemma. Should she exhibit some of the behaviors that are stereotypically associated with male leadership and sacrifice her femininity? Or should she emphasize behaviors stereotypically associated with femininity while disregarding the option of exhibiting selected masculine behaviors? No matter which choice she makes she may not escape criticism.

In this regard I vividly recall overhearing the conversation of two corporate salesmen for General Electric a few years ago. They were discussing a young woman who had been selected as the national salesperson of the year for their division. Her photograph was featured on the front page of the corporate newsletter. On the one hand, these men both admired her great accomplishment and said so. On the other hand, one of them commented snidely to the other that "she dresses like a man." In terms of her own professional goals, this woman had made a proper decision in choosing her attire. Even though she succeeded professionally, however, she still found herself in a no-win situation from a perceptual perspective.

A recent study addressed this very dilemma (Johnson, Crutsinger, & Workman, 1994). The authors noted that women have often been advised to adopt a masculine appearance in order to communicate credibly in an executive role. Their study focused on the question of whether a woman can appear too masculine and consequently negatively affect both her professional credibility and her chances for promotion. In this instance, merchandising majors were asked to view three photographs of a middle-level female manager. Three head and shoulder color photographs were taken of the same female model. In one photograph the "female executive" was wearing a white shirt with a button-down collar and a navy blue jacket; in the second photograph the executive wore a square scarf tied in a flat knot that was placed under the collar; in the third photograph a man's necktie was placed under the collar and tied at the neck.

The female manager wearing either the necktie or the scarf was judged to possess significantly more managerial competence than the female wearing the open-collared shirt. The female executive wearing the necktie was judged as more likely to be determined than the one wearing the open-collared shirt. Importantly, the manager wearing the scarf was rated as significantly more likely to be promoted than the one wearing the necktie or the one wearing the open-collared shirt.

This research seems to suggest that the professional woman need neither dress like a man nor accentuate her femininity to succeed in a managerial positions. The authors concluded that

> *Preference for promotability may be given to females who wear adaptations or feminized versions of masculine symbols rather than the masculine symbol itself. One explanation of this finding may be that women are allowed to adopt some level of masculinity in appearance but not to the extent that their appearance is inconsistent with the gender role. When individuals adopt an aspect of dress that is inconsistent with gender role, they may violate expectations for appearance and question existing boundaries concerning what is masculine and what is feminine.* (Johnson, Crutsinger, & Workman, 1994, p. 30)

In any event, we continue to accumulate evidence that suggests that men and women do exhibit attitudes and behaviors that confirm the accuracy of at least part of their stereotypes. Thus, Townsend and Levy (1990) found that males are more willing than females to invest in a relationship simply because the heterosexual partner is attractive, and a man's willingness to become involved with a partner increases when the sexual potential of the relationship was emphasized. Women, in contrast to men, are more willing to make a high-level investment in a relationship and are less willing than men to enter a relationship that emphasizes the sexual component unless there is a high level of investment by the partner. Finally, although women see physical attractiveness as less important then men do, they prefer to associate with an attractive man and they agree on the physical features that make a man attractive (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990).

Differences in Nonverbal Communication of Women and Men

There are many distinctive differences in the nonverbal communication of men and women. In order to communicate more successfully with each other, men and women must become fully aware of the nature of those differences. They must also understand which nonverbal behaviors must be modified, and why they must be modified, if more successful communication is to result. Gender differences in nonverbal communication are manifested most clearly in contrasting communicative styles and in contrasting levels of encoding and decoding skills.

Nonverbal Profile of Female and Male Communicators

The vocalic communication of women and men is different in important respects. A woman's vocalic communication style is particularly important because it plays a central role in the way she is stereotyped (Kramarae, 1982). Contrary to the stereotype of women as *talkative*, men talk more than women (Mulac, 1989). Men's vocal dominance of women is not confined to the amount of talking they do, however. Men tend to dominate opposite-sex interactions because of the following: (a) the average duration of their talk-turns is longer, (b) the number and rate of their filled pauses is greater, and (c) they interrupt more frequently than women (Vrugt & Kerkstra, 1984).

Males' dominance of women in conversations is achieved in part by interruptions. The "interruption privilege" is one that men exercise frequently. LaFrance and Mayo (1979) emphasized that in same-sex conversations, interruptions, overlaps, and silences are almost evenly distributed between speakers. In male–female interaction, however, the following occurs:

1. Women are frequently interrupted by men.
2. Women are often silent for long periods after being interrupted.

3. Women are often prevented from interrupting men by the exaggerated lengths of mens' "ums" and "hmms."
4. It is unusual for a woman to protest being interrupted by a man.

In contrast to men, women use reactive intonation patterns that may make them seem to be more emotionally expressive. Thus women, when surprised, characteristically use the "high-low down-glide" (as in "Oh, how awful!") and women often answer questions with declarative statements that end with a rising inflection. Those rising inflections can make women seem more emotional than men, but also more uncertain and indecisive.

Women do ask more questions than men and more frequently use justifiers, that is, they justify the statements they make by providing supportive evidence or reasons for their statements. The fact that women, in comparison to men, ask more questions, use more justifiers, more frequently employ intensive adverbs ("I *really* like him") and more frequently begin sentences with adverbials ("Surprisingly . . .") suggests that women use vocal communication as a way of exercising social control by indirect means. In contrast, men use their voice so assertively that they try to exercise direct control over others via the sound of their voice (Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988).

Hall (1984) summarized some of the more salient differences in the vocalic communication of women and men when she wrote:

> *Females' voices are more fluent, softer, slower, higher pitched, and perhaps more variable in pitch; women also talk less in mixed groups, and interrupt less, overall, than men do. . . . It also seems to be the case that for the more sex-typed variables—such as loudness and rated dominance—men also receive more of the same kind of behavior that they themselves engage in.* (pp. 139–140)

Finally, it is important to note that women laugh significantly more than men, both when speaking and listening; the total time spent laughing is almost twice that of men. Excessive laughter or out-of-context laughter is frequently interpreted in our society as a sign that a person lacks self-confidence (Frances, 1979; LaFrance & Mayo, 1979).

The visual communication of men and women also differs in important respects. Oscar Wilde reportedly said, "A man's face is his autobiography; a woman's face is her work of fiction." There is limited evidence to support the view that women are more likely than men to control their facial expressions consciously in order to avoid displeasing the person with whom they are communicating.

The fact that women smile almost twice as much as men, and that they smile more frequently when listening, seems to support the inference that female smiles are not always completely genuine. The gender difference in smiling represents an important communicative phenomenon although authorities do not agree as to why women smile more or what the impact of the smiling may be. This finding may or may not be related to the fact that stereotypically women are thought to smile more than men (Briton & Hall, 1995). Hall (1984) suggested that women may smile more than men because they are conforming unconsciously to their sex-role stereotype. To explain the finding that women smile more than men, Vrugt and Kerkstra (1984) wrote that

> *we may perhaps conclude that smiling in women has a different motivational basis from smiling in men. For men, smiling could be associated with feelings of friendliness, affiliation, and comfort. For women, it could also be an expression of feelings of uneasiness, socially desirable (stereotypical) behavior, and reconciliation.* (p. 19)

Finally, Henley and LaFrance (1984) identified another function of smiling when they wrote that "ethologists have also suggested another function, and that is to signal appeasement and submissiveness. . . . In this sense, smiles are designed to ward off possible competition or assault by indicating that no threat is intended" (p. 364).

Women maintain eye contact with their partners for longer periods of time when listening than when speaking; low-status females sustain eye contact for significantly longer periods of time when listening than do high-status females (Ellyson, Dovidio, Corson, & Vinicur, 1980). Women appear to suffer severe perceptual penalties because of their excessive smiling and visual attentiveness. They not only reinforce their stereotypic image as status inferiors, but also raise doubts about the genuineness of the emotions they appear to be experiencing.

In general, men exhibit more bodily movements, they are more open, and they appear to be more relaxed than women. Women exhibit a disproportionate number of the gestures and postures that were identified in Chapter 4 as cues to nonassertiveness and powerlessness. Eakins and Eakins (1978) highlight fundamental differences in the bodily communication of males and females:

> *Communicators in general are more relaxed with females than with males. They show less body tension, more relaxed posture, and more backward lean. By their somewhat tenser postures, women are said to convey submissive attitudes. Their general bodily demeanor and bearing is more restrained and restricted than men's.* (p. 161)

Men also use space as a means of asserting their dominance over women, as in the following:

1. They claim more personal space than women.
2. They more actively defend violations of their territories, which are usually much larger than the territories of women.
3. Under conditions of high density, they become more aggressive in their attempts to regain a desired measure of privacy.
4. Men more frequently walk in front of their female partner than vice versa.

The characteristic differences of men and women in their tactile behavior has already been treated in detail in Chapter 6. In general, the male is the toucher and the female the touched. Males use the touching privilege to touch females much more frequently than they are touched by them. Women touch others more frequently than men only when they are interacting with children. This is not surprising, considering the stereotypical view that men

are emotionally unexpressive individuals who have difficulty in providing comfort and reassurance, but that women excel in this familiar familial role.

The gender differences in the tactile behavior of women and men is quite pronounced. Although males tend to take liberties in touching women, they seem inhibited when it comes to touching each other. Derlega, Lewis, Harrison, and Costanza (1989) have gone so far as to suggest that homophobia, the fear of appearing or being homosexual, accounts for the limited amount of touching among males. They found that men avoid touching that is suggestive of physical intimacy, that certain types of tactile contact—such as men hugging each other or walking around with their arms around each other's waist—are evaluated as inappropriate, and that such types of male touching lead to an inference of sexual involvement.

Much of the nonverbal profiles for women and men focus on the relational dimension of dominance/submission. The other important relational dimension where the nonverbal profiles of women and men is of central importance is intimacy. In fact, many of the readers of this book may be particularly interested in which nonverbal behaviors of males and females are functional as opposed to dysfunctional in the initiation of a heterosexual relationship. A recent study (Simpson, Gangestad, & Biek, 1993) addressed this topic in a stimulating way.

The authors maintained that *sociosexuality* is a concept of most central importance. This construct concerns "the extent to which individuals require closeness, commitment, and strong emotional bonds prior to having sex" (p. 437). Individuals with an *unrestricted sociosexual orientation* require little closeness and commitment before engaging in sex and, hence, they enter relationships where sex and intimacy occur soon after the initiation of the relationship. In contrast, individuals with a *restricted sociosexual orientation* require more commitment and closeness prior to sex. In this type of relationship, emotional bonds must have formed before sex occurs.

This study produced nonverbal profiles that give some indication as to how men and women with unrestricted and restricted sociosexual orientations behave during initial heterosexual encounters. Males with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation smile more, laugh more, gaze downward less often, and display flirtatious glances more frequently compared to males with a restricted sociosexual orientation. Relatedly, men who are not unrestricted in sociosexuality but who were highly extroverted and self-monitoring were rated as more socially engaging, dominant, and phony. Unrestricted women are more likely to lean forward and cant their head than restricted women.

Results such as these are particularly intriguing because they document that individuals who share social and personality traits or qualities do behave nonverbally in ways that are consistent and predictable. Not surprisingly the nonverbal behaviors exhibited by males and females with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation almost without exception communicated their "contact readiness." The interpretations of individual nonverbal behaviors such as head canting by females is of course not always a simple matter. Interestingly, the authors (Simpson, Gangestad, & Biek, 1993) concluded that

> *Forward lean also accentuates the impact of other nonverbal cues that emanate from the head and face (e. g., smiles, head cants) by drawing interactants closer together. It has been proposed that head canting may function as a flirtatious gesture designed to signal "coy" sexual interest without affect in heterosexual interaction.* (p. 455)

Most of the research done to date has attempted to classify the kinds of nonverbal behaviors that are characteristically exhibited by men in contrast to women. Little attention has been given to how these characteristically "male" or "female" behaviors may be modified as a result of the reaction of the person with whom we are interacting. Weitz (1976) maintained that the sex of the message receiver, as well as the sex of the message sender, affects communicative behaviors in opposite-sex interactions.

Women, but not men, seem to adapt their nonverbal behaviors to make them compatible with the personality traits and attitudes of their opposite-sex partners. Men tend to remain inflexibly committed to a proactive communicative style, but women do modify their nonverbal communicative behaviors. They adapt to meet their male partner's perceived needs, rather than to meet the distinctive requirements of a particular kind of communicative situation, however.

Weitz (1976) found that women are nonverbally adaptive when interacting with a dominant male partner, during the first phase of female–male interaction. Similarly, women exhibit less nonverbal warmth when interacting with a male partner who shows strong affiliative tendencies. In short, women interacting with men seem to adjust their nonverbal behaviors in such a way as to "create an equilibrium in the interaction which would result in maximum interpersonal comfort (especially for the male) in the interaction" (p. 179). In contrast, women who are interacting with other women (in the early stages of interpersonal interaction) do not seem to adapt their nonverbal behaviors in order to be compatible with the dominant personality traits of the female partner.

A similar pattern emerges in male–female interactions as they spend more time together. Women modify their nonverbal behaviors when interacting with a male partner to make their behaviors more compatible with the male's personality characteristics, but men do not make a complementary effort—they do not modify their nonverbal behaviors in order to make their female partner more comfortable. Women's greater willingness to be accommodating to males may be attributable in part to the finding that individuals in general experience significantly more anxiety when interacting with a male than with a female.

Whether they are motivated by a desire to relieve their anxieties or by a desire to be accommodating, women do seem to adjust their nonverbal behaviors when they interact with a male. Females exhibit a higher focus of attention on their male partner and show significantly more sexual interest in him than vice versa. Moreover, career-oriented women communicate significantly more nonverbal warmth when interacting with a male than do family-oriented women. This adjustment in nonverbal behavior may involve an attempt to counteract the stereotypic conception that career-oriented women are colder and less emotionally expressive than their family-oriented counterparts.

Weitz (1976), therefore, emphasized that a woman's nonverbal communication is affected not only by sex-role stereotyping but also by a desire to be supportive and interpersonally accommodating. She noted that

> *[the] finding of a possible female monitoring mechanism shown by the complementary relationship between female nonverbal style and male personality traits reinforces this idea of greater female responsiveness to the other person in the interaction. Of course, one can see this as a positive quality as well, except if this*

responsiveness is done at the expense of the assertion of the women's point of view, which it perhaps might be. (p. 183)

Gender Differences in Nonverbal Skills

We know very little about the relative ability of women and men to encode nonverbal messages. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that women communicate the basic emotions more clearly via their facial expressions than do men. Whereas women seem to be better at encoding negative emotions such as dislike, men are better at communicating positive emotions such as happiness (Wagner, Buck, & Winterbotham, 1993). These differences in encoding performance could be related to the fact that women smile so much more than men. Negative emotions are conveyed by facial expressions that are in striking contrast to the smile so often found on the face of a woman (LaFrance & Mayo, 1979). When men and women communicate more specialized kinds of emotional meaning, it appears that they exhibit comparable levels of encoding skill (Leathers & Emigh, 1980).

Women's decoding skills have consistently proved to be superior to men's, however. An exhaustive review of studies that compared the accuracy with which women and men decode nonverbal messages indicates quite clearly that women are superior decoders. Women's advantage in decoding nonverbal cues is greater when the message contains both visual and auditory cues than visual cues alone (Hall, 1981). The superiority of women over men as decoders has also proved to be greater when they are decoding visual messages rather than vocal messages. Because women spend so much more time looking at men than vice versa, it is not surprising that they decode visual cues with particular skill. In fact, these decoding data support the view that women use the visual channel as their primary nonverbal source of information about others.

Women's decoding superiority is most pronounced whenever they are decoding messages that have been intentionally communicated by the message sender. Women are very good at determining the meanings of messages they believe are intended for them. However, women seem reluctant, or unwilling, to determine the implicit meanings of messages that are not intended for them.

Rosenthal and DePaulo (1979) examined the comparative ability of women and men to decode messages that were communicated through channels that varied with regard to their "leakiness" (i.e., the probability that meanings were being communicated unintentionally). From the least to the most leaky, the channels used were facial expressions, bodily cues, tone of voice, and inconsistent messages (visual-auditory channels combined). Results indicated that women decoders lost their superiority over men when they were asked to decode messages transmitted over increasingly leaky channels. The diminution in decoding performance may be traced to a conscious decision on the part of women not to decode the meanings of messages transmitted through the leakier channels rather than to a relative lack of ability to decode such messages.

Subsequent research suggests that women recognize that it is not in their best interests to be too good at decoding the leaky, or unintended, nonverbal cues. They may simply not wish to know or to acknowledge that their male partner is deceiving them or is becoming unbearably anxious. Women might recognize intuitively that if they are to be supportive and interpersonally accommodating, they should refrain from decoding the meanings of messages

that were not intended for them. In our society, the more accommodating a woman is nonverbally, the more likely she is to experience satisfactory interpersonal outcomes (Blanck, Rosenthal, Snodgrass, DePaulo & Zuckerman, 1981).

In short, women's nonverbal skills are superior to men's in a number of important aspects. When decoding messages are sent with a high level of awareness and intentionality by the message sender, women's superiority over men as decoders is quite striking. The fact that women exhibit no greater accuracy than men in decoding the meanings communicated through leaky channels should not be interpreted as evidence that women *cannot* decode such messages, and at high levels of accuracy. The plausible explanation seems to be that women choose not to decode certain unintended messages because they are difficult to cope with in ways that are socially appropriate. In these cases, the desire to be polite and accommodating seems to override the desire to utilize effectively their superior decoding skills.

Dysfunctional Male and Female Nonverbal Behaviors

A careful inspection of the nonverbal communicative behaviors that characterize male–female interaction reveals that many of those behaviors are dysfunctional. They are dysfunctional for the following reasons: (a) many link females and males directly to some of the most negative features of their respective stereotypes, (b) they are not consciously modified to meet the varying requirements for successful communication in different contexts, and (c) they often serve as barriers to satisfying interpersonal outcomes.

Men's nonverbal communicative behaviors seem to change little from one type of communication situation to another. Whether a man is trying to sell himself, to conduct an interview, or to run a business meeting, he exhibits a propensity to cultivate the proactive role. As we have seen, males talk more and for longer periods of time than females, and they inhibit immediate feedback by using long, filled pauses. By their visual inattentiveness, their exercise of the touching privilege, their familiar forms of address, and their bodily relaxation, men also indicate that they perceive themselves as status superiors who can legitimately exercise the right to dominate heterosexual interaction. Even though men may not be aware of the implications of their nonverbal communication, their characteristic nonverbal behaviors serve to legitimate the gender-related image traits that are attributed to them (i.e., forcefulness, dominance, confidence, status, power, insensitivity, and inflexibility).

Women, in contrast to men, are nonverbally adaptive and supportive. Their adaptive and supportive behaviors are frequently dysfunctional, however, because they are misdirected. Rather than adapting their nonverbal behaviors to meet the distinctive requirements of specific communication contexts, women adapt to meet the perceived needs of their male partner. In their self-deprecating efforts to please, appease, and placate their male partners, they frequently lend credibility to the stereotypic terms that are used to describe their actions (i.e., *reactive, submissive, dependent,* and *inferior*).

The nonverbal behavioral profile of males is dysfunctional for three more specific reasons: (a) males become inflexibly committed to a single, unchanging communicative style; (b) males come to accept their unexpressive, nondisclosing, and insensitive communication as the norm; and (c) males cultivate a self-directed intrapersonal orientation that is incompatible with successful female–male interaction.

In one sense, the unchanging "male" style of nonverbal communication seems to have some desirable features in business situations. In a business world dominated by males, the unyielding attachment to the proactive role might seem to be desirable. This seems particularly true for leaders and those who aspire to leadership. Individuals who initiate most of the contributions, control communicative interactions, and enhance perceptions of dominance and status by their nonverbal cues might be thought to have the edge. However, this is also an age that values participative management and quality circles, which puts a premium on a communicative style that encourages flexibility and interaction, minimizes status differences, and accents the uniqueness and intrinsic value of each individual. In the new business climate, the male who remains inflexibly committed to a single, domineering communicative style is at a severe disadvantage.

This is also an age that values the ability to express emotions openly and to read and respond with sensitivity to the feelings of those with whom we communicate. Although "women have been socialized to display their emotions, their thoughts, and ideas" (Thorne & Henley, 1975, p. 209), men continue to be verbally unexpressive, nondisclosing, and insensitive. Men's lack of expressiveness frequently means that their true feelings and emotions remain a mystery in female–male interaction. Their insensitivity is reflected, in part, in their inattentiveness to their female partner. This inattentiveness seems to be linked directly to the fact that men are much less skillful decoders of nonverbal messages than women. Men cannot respond to women emotionally until they have developed the capacity to determine more precisely the nature of their female partners' emotional needs.

Finally, men's characteristic nonverbal communicative behaviors are dysfunctional because they perpetuate a preoccupation with self. Whereas women communicate their concern for others nonverbally, men exhibit a primary concern with self-assertion and self-protection; their preoccupation with short-term sexual relationships is a good example (Townsend & Levy, 1990). Men's nonverbal behaviors focus on a set of goals that are frequently important only to them, but women's nonverbal behaviors focus on their desire to facilitate interpersonal outcomes that are satisfying to *both* the male and female interactants. Until men become less preoccupied with the importance of their own talk, and work actively to solicit the feedback of their opposite-sex partners, men's dysfunctional intrapersonal orientation will continue to be a barrier to successful female–male interaction.

In one sense, the nonverbal communicative behaviors that seem to be prototypically female are desirable. In a family setting, the emotionally sensitive and supportive woman has no peer in providing the comfort and emotional support that is so essential to the development of the cohesive family unit. The intrapersonally oriented father, in contrast, may be as likely to brood about his own concerns as to be concerned about the emotional needs of family members.

In contemporary society, however, women must function effectively in many contexts outside of the home. Whenever they do so, their nonverbal behavioral profile can be dysfunctional because (a) females frequently display nonverbal behaviors that invite the attribution of unflattering image traits, (b) females display adaptive nonverbal behaviors that raise questions about their motivations, and (c) females do not fully utilize their impressive nonverbal communication skills.

Skillful impression managers try to associate themselves with favorable images and dissociate themselves from unfavorable images. Women seem to associate themselves with unfavorable images due to some of the nonverbal behaviors they most frequently display. The fact that women smile and laugh twice as much as men clearly implies that their anxiety is high and their self-confidence is low. Women's polite forms of address, the small amount of personal space they claim as theirs, their visual attentiveness to men, the disproportionate amount of touching they receive, and their constricted and tense bodily postures almost assure that they will be perceived as persons of inferior status and power (Henley, 1977).

Women's repeated efforts to be emotionally supportive and to adapt their behaviors to meet men's need to be made comfortable might seem desirable, in one sense. But a woman's efforts to be interpersonally adaptive and supportive could raise questions about her motivations. How likely is it that a man will interpret a woman's smile as being genuine when it is displayed so frequently? What motivation is a man likely to attribute to a woman who becomes noticeably submissive when interacting with a dominant male? Excessive smiling, laughter, and eye contact seem to invite inferences that a person is insincere, manipulative, and deceptive. Because these nonverbal behaviors are such prominent features of the nonverbal profile for women, it is not surprising that they sometimes reinforce doubts about the wholesomeness of women's motivations in a female–male interactions.

Finally, women do not fully and effectively exercise their ability to decode nonverbal messages. In order to be polite, supportive, and accommodating, women apparently choose not to decode the meanings of messages they believe their male partners did not wish to send. In view of the great informational potential of unintentional messages, women's disregard of such messages represents a sacrifice of major proportions.

Guidelines for Successful Female–Male Interaction

The messages communicated nonverbally through female and male gender displays are both powerful and resistant to change. These messages frequently serve as barriers to successful communicative interaction between males and females; therefore, the need for change is apparent. But the extent to which the dysfunctional features of female–male communication can be modified is a debatable question.

Potential for Modifying Nonverbal Cues

In their penetrating essay on the potential of nonverbal communication as an agent for modifying the dysfunctional features of gender displays, Mayo and Henley (1981) argued that gender-defining nonverbal cues are resistant to change for these reasons: (a) nonverbal behaviors that are out-of-awareness obviously will not be changed, (b) nonverbal behaviors characteristic of gender displays are reinforced by powerful social forces such as the media, and (c) nonverbal behavior that is gender-deviant is frequently punished.

These arguments clearly have merit. Neither males nor females can modify their undesirable nonverbal communication behaviors unless they know that those behaviors *are* undesirable. At the same time, we must recognize that individuals can be trained to become aware of nonverbal behaviors that are demonstrably dysfunctional or undesirable. Recent evidence suggests that many dysfunctional, gender-linked nonverbal behaviors can be eliminated with appropriate training (Brown, Dovidio, & Ellyson, 1990). In fact, some sensitivity training is based on the proposition that individuals learn to communicate more effectively by increasing sensitivity to their own behaviors.

Clearly, many of the nonverbal behaviors we have come to accept as characteristic of each sex are learned behaviors. Sex-role stereotypes reflect deeply embedded cultural values that are reinforced by powerful communicative forces such as the media. Comprehensive changes in the nonverbal profile for males and females must be preceded by major changes in cultural values. Dysfunctional gender-related behaviors are learned, therefore they can become unlearned. The force of cultural norms is not so strong at present that dysfunctional "male" and "female" nonverbal behaviors cannot be modified. Individuals will attempt such modification, however, only when they become convinced that the advantages of change outweigh the disadvantages of inflexible attachment to fixed communication styles.

Gender-deviant behavior by a woman involves some degree of risk. Such behavior might be punished. Porter and Geis (1981) recognized the double-bind that a woman may encounter when interacting with a male who assumes the traditional proactive role. They wrote that if

> *a woman is ignored when she presents ordinary, moderate demand signals which are effective for men, she may attempt to secure recognition by increasing the intensity of the signal, and end up being recognized, not for achievement, but as overly emotional, arrogant and abrasive. Indeed, from the perceiver's point of view, the strong demand is uncalled for.* (pp. 55–56)

Punishment and negative reinforcement are far from inevitable, however, when males recognize that such reactions on their part are counterproductive.

Although nonverbal behaviors characteristic of gender displays cannot be changed easily, there is an increasing amount of evidence that the most dysfunctional of those behaviors can be changed in specific situations. For example, the psychologically androgynous person has consistently exhibited the ability to add selective opposite-sex behaviors and eliminate the least desirable behaviors associated with his or her own sex (Mayo & Henley, 1981). Androgynous persons have a communicative flexibility not possessed by the person who conforms to the behavioral norms associated with traditional sex-role stereotypes. They have demonstrated the valuable ability of emphasizing or de-emphasizing the male and female traits they display, depending upon the specific requirements of the communication situation. This ability could account for the fact that androgynous individuals experience more satisfying interpersonal outcomes than proactive males and reactive females (LaFrance & Carmen, 1980).

Sensitizing Communicators to Dysfunctional Gender Cues

The first step in modifying, and ultimately eliminating, dysfunctional nonverbal cues that are characteristic of gender displays is making the communicators *aware* of such cues. The success of conventional sensitivity training suggests that individuals can be made aware of behaviors that are dysfunctional. Individuals typically seek to change their own behaviors when they become fully aware that those behaviors serve neither their own ends nor the ends of successful interpersonal communication.

Nonverbal sensitivity training currently takes a variety of forms. For example, a colleague and I conduct a sales and communication training program designed to sensitize

salespeople to their communicative behaviors that serve as barriers to effective persuasive communication. In order to make the salespeople aware of their most dysfunctional behaviors, they are videotaped in both simulated and real sales situations. Their dysfunctional behaviors are then identified by their peers and by the trainers during a videotape replay. Similar formats are being used by others to train police officers, politicians, and labor-management negotiators. The objective is to make the trainees fully aware of which of their communicative behaviors are dysfunctional, and why they should be changed.

I believe that similar procedures should be used to sensitize interacting males and females to the nonverbal communicative behaviors that can and should be modified. The rapid growth of assertiveness workshops and seminars suggests that communicators realize that they must become aware of their problems before they can solve them. Women attend assertiveness workshops in disproportionate numbers. This fact may reflect the rapidly growing awareness of a number of women that their relative nonassertiveness is a gender-related problem.

Modifying Gender-Stereotypic Nonverbal Behaviors

Males and females, by virtue of their gender, tend to adopt inflexible communicative styles that limit their potential for successful communication. As I have indicated, those communicative styles cannot be easily modified. The reasons for trying to modify them are compelling, however. Helpful guidelines that can be used to modify stereotypic male and female dysfunctional nonverbal behaviors have begun to appear (Cannie, 1979; Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Hall, 1984; Thorne & Henley, 1975).

The following guidelines are not comprehensive, because our current level of knowledge about the nature of female–male interactions is still incomplete. There is, nonetheless, a basis for a beginning.

Both men and women should begin by examining their own styles of nonverbal communication for sex-stereotypical cues that are dysfunctional. They should recognize that they will probably have to modify some of their gender-related behaviors in order to have a marked impact on the image traits that are attributed to them. Porter and Geis (1981) found, for example, that a woman who sits at the head of a discussion table does not increase her chances of being perceived as the group's leader. The implication is that women must modify more than one nonverbal behavior if they are to enhance their prospects of being perceived as leaders. For a man to become a successful leader in a group that prefers democratic leadership, he must seek to suppress a number of the dominating and autocratic behaviors associated with the traditional male style of communication.

Men in particular must begin by developing a style of communication that features an interpersonal rather than an intrapersonal orientation. Through a modified communication style, men must demonstrate quite clearly that their attention is focused on the needs, concerns, and opinions of their opposite-sex partners. Men must become more physically and psychologically attentive. As Cannie (1979) put it, attending "is the basic nonverbal skill for valuing others. It is a process of showing people you are interested in them, you are listening, and what they say is important to you. This meets their self-esteem need and returns trust to you. Attending can be physical and it can be psychological" (p. 11).

In order to become a more flexible, sensitive, and attentive communicator, the male should do the following:

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