

Body Politics: The Power Differential

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A man walks into a room and sits down and takes a pen out of his pocket. A woman walks into a room takes off her coat, puts it over the back of the chair, takes off her purse and sets it on the desk, sits down adjusts her clothing, digs through her purse, and so on in a videotaped study of how men and woman entered a room to attend a meeting, the women exhibited an average of 27 different major movements: the men, only 12. Researcher say that the fewer hand and body gesture you make, the more powerful, deliberate, credible, and intelligent you're perceived to be. There is a power difference between men and women that is reflected in all our different body language. It's not just about men having pockets in their suits and women not carrying a purse there is difference

Between men and women that can be understood only by noting the differences on a power continuum. Why is there such a difference between men and woman and how can an understanding of those differences help us become more People Savvy?

Genetic and Cultural Differences

Where do the differences come from? Some are genetic and some are nurtured from our first minutes in the world. Right after we are born, people start treating boys and girls differently. Boy babies are put down sooner and not touched as much. Mothers hold their girl babies longer right after birth and they give more eye contact and talk to them more, and talk in a softer tone of voice than boy babies. In fact, all adult touch and caress girls more, give them more eye contact and smiles. Boy babies even in their first baths after birth are handled less gently and put in their own beds away from their mothers sooner.

We are different and that is a wonderful thing. It makes our lives more interesting and the world a more balanced place. It important to note that the differences are not so much gender linked as gender class linked. What we often are seeing is not really a difference between men and woman, but a difference in status, a difference in the power people have. Not every man adheres to the statements we make about men and not every woman fits the statements we make about women. I will instead make generalizations based on the research.

Women and men learn to communicate a particular way because those ways are associated with their gender and nurtured and rewarded. Zoologists, biologists and anthropologists say that unlike certain animal species in which the males and females are easily distinguished, we look pretty much alike. The first question

a stranger will ask someone holding a baby is," Is it a boy or a girl?" Even the most liberated parent doesn't like there to be a doubt to their child's gender. Mom thinks, "Hey I stuck that big pink bow on the side of my little girls bald head so you wouldn't need to ask that question and you still can't tell." We fear what we can not identify and categorize quickly so parents and society as a whole want gender difference to be obvious. So we learn behaviors in childhood that helps us be identified as masculine or feminine. What we learn may be different in Auburn, Alabama than Bangkok, Thailand. And what you learn growing up may not fit the cultural needs or gender roles of today, but we are taught in everything we see and hear what good little girls and good little boys are made of.

Our religious, educational, media and political institutions influence our biases based on race and gender expectations. They affect what we enjoy as entertainment, how we interact with others, or even what facial expressions we assume and what tone of voice we use.

Let's see some of the differences as they begin in childhood. Realize that even some elements we are discussing don't seem to be specifically nonverbal. These childhood rituals will lead to different adult nonverbal behaviors. And as you read about these childhood differences think about your life and how you have seen these differences played out in the Adult world.

Little boys tend to play outside, in big spaces; they use large amounts of space and play with things that move through space like baseballs and airplanes. Lots of the toys make lots of loud noises or the boys make the noises for them. Racing across the yard with the plane going Vroooooom! " And the bombs go yeeeeooow boooooom. There are lots of movements and the touch is rough and tumble hitting and wresting to the ground as a part of play. They play in large informal groups or formal teams. The groups are structured so from least powerful to most powerful. The most powerful is the leader. On playgrounds around the country, you can recognize him. He is the one holding the ball. She is the one that says. "Ok we are playing softball and Jim you're first base and Kenny you're in the outfield and I'm the pitcher. The leader is omnipotent ruler all must do as he says.

If you want to see a wonderful example of how boys get status watch a scene in the movie Stand By Me. The boys vying for status around the campfire by who can talk the most, tell the grossest joke or who has the scariest story. Boys interrupt with their juicier tidbit and change the subject when they do not have any thing to contribute to the topic at hands. Boys' games have winners and losers and elaborate rules. "Ok the first one who swings out over rock in the sinkhole and jumps off head first wins." " Ok the guy who can make the best noise with his armpit, without taking his shirt off wins if you do it in Misses Arnows homeroom after the bell rings you win for the whole week. And there are endless arguments about who came in first and who batted the fatherest.

Girls that play or have played team sports learn some of this gamesmanship. And the newest research says women who have played coed team sports as children are more confident at being in charge, being coached and constructive arguing with men.

Still girls play differently. When I spoke on this topic twenty years ago, I thought that we would see more changes in little girl play but if they are playing with other little girls they still play mostly inside in small spaces, in small groups or in pairs. And little girls still have a best friend as the center of her universe. While guys play for status, little girls play for friendship, who is liked the most. Playing house is not a competitive sport. Girls playing mommy can give orders but they are only giving orders to those in play roles significantly subordinate to them. There only command to daddy is to come to dinner and they don't want to give order in lets its "Pretend" play. In real play girls play nice they softly ask with a lilted question mark at the end of their statements rather than command with a loud voice they will say, "you wanna play store?" "How about if we play school?" Boys say, "Give me that or else" or "Scram"

Little girls want all the other girls to be happy and no body wants to be the bossy one. For example, when my godchild is playing with her girlfriends, they have to reach a consensus on what they're going to do. If most of them want to go out on the swing and one little girl doesn't want to, then there's a problem. And they don't play on the swings.

Analyze

How do you see these behaviors play out in the adult's world?

Do you see men taking up more space than women?

Do you see men more comfortable with being in a dominant leadership role?

Do you see women softening there nonverbal to play nice?

Power and Dominance

Men are generally larger, physically including hands and larger brains, though the part of the brain that controls language is larger in women. Men, as well as women, have monthly cycles of physical, emotional, and intellectual highs and lows that are biologically determined. In fact, surprise, men, as well as women, go through a hormonal readjustment.

There was a female supervisor who would put her feet on the desk and her hands in cape and crown. She did it so the guys would feel comfortable, something she did all the time purposefully. Because it is a very dominant masculine set of cues, it was making them feel subordinate. It was inappropriate for her gender. I tell supervisors not to do it because it puts people on the defensive. After

reading this article, go back into your world and notice and embrace the differences between men and woman.

Explore

The next time you're under stress, notice how you respond.

What would others of your gender would do and people of the opposite. For example, do the women tend to cluster together and talk? Do the men get angry and upset or go into the cave (zone out in front of TV) and shut-down?

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