
Defining Gender Differences: Is the Proof in the Process?

Sheila Heen

Do men and women negotiate differently?"

This is surely one of the most frequently asked — and most frustrating — questions for anyone working in the field of negotiation today. It is frustrating because there are so many opinions, and yet so few conclusive answers. The field is filled with contradictory research results, a spectrum of biological and behavioral theories, and a deeply-felt sense that there are — or should be — answers to questions like this. Being asked to generalize about gender is also frustrating because it is both difficult and dangerous. Individual behavior always deviates in some way from the described group norm, and generalizations often produce suspicion and defensiveness on the part of the generalized.

The question persists perhaps because there is a part of each of us

that wants easy answers to difficult questions, such as "When she started crying in that negotiation, was that because she is a woman?" or "Could I have done better in this negotiation if I were a man?" or "Are we having this argument because we are miscommunicating across gender boundaries?"

Questions like these instinctively arise when we feel "stuck" or are searching for satisfying diagnoses for why a negotiation or conversation is going wrong. Definitive answers would give us valuable information about ourselves and others, provide a convenient excuse for a failed negotiation, and relieve us of responsibility for trying to act differently. Conclusions like "He's a man; he just doesn't get it" or "Women are like that" suggest that you and *your* behavior had nothing to do with the problem, and that trying to have a

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conversation about the problem or change the situation is probably a waste of time.

Douglas Stone¹ and I hoped to highlight the underlying complexity of these questions when we sat down to develop a syllabus for a new course called *Advanced Negotiation: Applications to Gender Dynamics*. The five-day workshop was offered during the June 1995 Program of Instruction for Lawyers at Harvard Law School.² One of our goals was to give participants skills and concepts that enable them to raise and discuss difficult issues like gender candidly and effectively. And yet, we knew we first needed to get past the initial quest for easy answers, and to convey some of the complexity of the questions. In order to do so, we designed an exercise for the first day of the course which surfaced some fascinating data, and suggests some questions for research and thought.

A Short History

The idea for this exercise evolved from a workshop on negotiation and gender dynamics that Doug and I taught in Canada in December of 1994. There we had participants watch a film called *A Jury of Her Peers*,³ which explores differences in perceptions among the characters in the story, and often provokes similarly divergent perceptions among audience members. After the film, class members were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions of the events in the film. Our experience with the *Jury* questionnaire has shown that the substantive answers given by individuals vary, and that

these differences are sometimes correlated with gender.

To further explore this correlation, we divided the class into two "juries." One jury was all female, the other all male. Each single-sex group was then asked to come to agreement on collective answers to the questionnaire. We wondered whether the answers each jury agreed upon would be correspondingly different. What we discovered was that the most interesting thing about the exercise was not the questionnaire answers, which were somewhat disparate, but the stark differences in process used by the two groups.

The men's group engaged in a rigorous discussion about the task at hand, and each advocated for their own answers. They spoke in short, declarative sentences, and focused their attention on reconciling different positions as expressed by individual group members. Few men expressed confusion or ambivalence about their positions, although all of them later said that they felt ambivalent about their views. No questions were asked in the session. The men used a majority voting structure to decide on their final answers.

In the women's group, a voting structure was also adopted; however, it was used not to decide, but to identify those who were undecided or felt ambivalent. Those identified then took the floor to explain why they felt "torn," using personal examples as supporting data. The women's group decided on their final answers by reaching consensus, and checking that everyone felt comfortable with the position the group ultimately took.

Our Purposes

The Canadian experience raised a number of provocative questions, questions we wanted to push a bit further in the Harvard course. We decided to adopt the single-sex group structure, and to give each group a task to perform. More than the content of their answers, we were now interested in *how* each group went about organizing themselves and performing the task at hand. How did they negotiate with each other in the group? What sorts of communication did they use? Did they ask questions? Qualify their answers? Argue? Assume they needed a group consensus or a collection of individual views? And finally, what sorts of data or reasoning did they cite, and was that data or reasoning made explicit? We hoped that the review of the exercise would consist mainly of thinking about similarities and differences in how the groups negotiated, and whether their behavior matched their own descriptions of how men and women negotiate.

We also wanted to give participants a chance to think about some of the questions asked by researchers before they became acquainted with the answers — or lack thereof — produced by studies in the field.⁴ We drew two questions from the research for consideration — whether men and women negotiate differently, and whether they view conflict differently.

Doug and I wanted participants to jump in and muck around in the complexity, subjectivity, and nuances involved in attempting to

identify group tendencies. Our experience with presenting research findings had been that participants agree or disagree with the findings based on whether they themselves or others they know act consistently with the research subjects.⁵

“My secretary doesn’t act that way at all,” or “The women in my firm can’t afford to negotiate like that,” or “That’s not true. I don’t act that way,” are common and instinctive reactions as study conclusions are tested against personal data and self-perceptions. Asking participants to generalize first, based on their own experience or their perceptions of men and women, would highlight this individual and collective complexity. It would also give us some personally-generated fresh data about how men and women negotiated in single-sex groups in this particular instance, data that would be hard for the participants to dismiss.

Setting Up the Exercise

We began by dividing the group⁶ along gender lines, putting the men in one room and the women in another, almost identical room. Doug and I went to our appropriately gendered rooms and each gave the following instruction⁷:

You have thirty minutes to complete the following task. You must answer two questions. First, *what does ‘conflict’ mean to you?* And second, *do you think that men and women negotiate differently? If so, how?* At the end of the thirty minutes, you will be asked to present your answers to the other group.

We've provided flipcharts to use in that presentation if you would like them.

We placed flipcharts with the headings: "Conflict" (in quotes) and "Do men and women negotiate differently? If so, how?" at the front of the room, then moved to the back to observe.

What Happened

In the women's group, I had scarcely finished the instructions when someone called out, "Well. If we're going to do this, we have to be able to talk to each other!" Each of the ten women jumped up and began the rather daunting task of converting a lecture hall into a forum for discussion. They dragged chairs from the back of the room, some sat on steps or on the floor. Within sixty seconds they had created a circle which included everyone in the group.

They then turned to the task of creating an agenda and allocating time. Someone volunteered to keep time and another to take notes on the discussion. It was decided that ten minutes would be spent on the first question, then they would come to consensus and write up their answers in the next five minutes. They would then repeat this process for the second question, filling the allocated thirty minutes.

Discussion of question one began. "What does conflict mean to you?" they pondered out loud and paused for a moment in thought. Then answers came tumbling out in stream-of-consciousness or word association style. "Fight," offered one woman. "Growth," offered another. "Perhaps an opportunity to make a

choice to grow," said a third woman, building on the preceding idea. The group continued, naming emotional reactions, conceptualizations, and elaborating with their own experiences.

At several points in the conversation women asked each other, "What did you mean by that?" or "What makes you say that?" and the answers came in the form of stories or experiences from their past. When a disagreement arose in the group, women again turned to their personal experiences to explain their perspective.

"Conflict means that somebody wins and somebody loses," said one participant.

"Not in family conflict," corrected another.

"Well, that's the way it was in *my* family," explained the first, "In fact, that's the way it *still* is in *my* family."

After ten minutes had elapsed, the timekeeper reminded the women that they needed to move toward consensus on their answers. The woman who had taken notes on the discussion said she wanted to make sure she had represented everyone's comments accurately, and read her notes aloud. The group agreed, and she and a colleague began recording the list on the flipchart, while the group turned to discuss the second question.

Across the hall in the men's group, Doug finished the instructions and took a seat in the back of the room. No one said anything. Instead, each of the men picked up their pens and began writing down their answers individually. The room was filled with silent scribbling and

thoughtful stares for eight minutes. Finally, one of the men put down his pen and said, "Well, we should probably get these things up if we need to report back to the group." He went to the front of the room and began the process of collecting answers, recording them on the allocated flipchart.

"Conflict is a problem requiring resolutions," one man began. "When people perceive their goals as irreconcilable," offered a second. "Disagreement," "opposing views," and "different interests without misunderstanding" continued the nature of the responses — thoughtfully articulated, definitional answers from each man's notes. The scribe recorded each definition in turn. "Different perceptions," "Relationship breaks down because of miscommunication and perceptions of conflicting interests." The recorder hurried to get it all.

Throughout this process, no questions were asked. No exchange between any of the eight men facing forward at their lecture hall seats occurred. No experiences, data, or reasoning was given for any of the responses. Each of the answers attempted to define, precisely and rigorously, the nature of conflict as a concept.

Back in the women's group, several references were being made to "what the guys are up to." "What do you think they're saying?" one woman asked during the first five minutes of the session. "I'm really curious," remarked another. When someone related what conflict meant with her husband, another asked, "Do you think they're telling

stories like this next door?" The women laughed.

Next door, no reference was being made to what was going on in the women's room. The first explicit reference to the parallel process came when the men turned to the second question. "What did you guys have for this second question?" asked the facilitator, moving to the flip chart marked "Do men and women negotiate differently?"

As the members of the men's group began reporting their answers, the anxiety level in the room seemed to rise. "Any way we go here, we're going to be ridiculed," said one man. Several others agreed. They proceeded after someone added, "Yeah, so let's just answer. What else can we do?"

And so, the men answered a hesitant "yes," but issued a number of caveats. They emphasized that this was a hypothesis, and that they were referring only to intergender negotiations, rather than to behavior in all situations. They then began listing pairs of behavioral perceptions, including: "Men are more tangible, result-oriented, quick and direct; women are more interested in relationships and feelings." "Women are more interested in conciliations (wives were specifically and laughingly excluded from this statement); men more interested in victory." "Men are more interested in and sensitive to power issues in negotiation; women less interested in 'power' and less willing to discuss it."

At this point, several of the men focused on whether women "over-compensate" for their perceived lack of power, and then on the question

of whether creating contrasting male-female “pairings” of behavior was appropriate or useful. The fear was again expressed that these answers would simply subject the group to criticism by the women, despite the fact that many of their generalizations seemed favorable to women. After some discussion, the group proceeded, adding one observation and one question — that women “tend to identify with the client (more than men do),” and wondering whether women who “over-imitate” men do better or worse in a negotiation.

Interestingly, conversation in the women’s room was proceeding along similar lines on question two. The group decided that men and women do negotiate differently, although a number of the women at the beginning, and later in the discussion, qualified their answers with the assertion that they *themselves* did *not* fit this stereotype of female negotiators.

The differences listed by the women were not dissimilar to those perceived by the men. They included: “Women are more process-oriented; men are results-oriented.” “Men do not allow for or feel the need for expression of emotion” or “Men are not acculturated to express emotion.” “Women value the relationship element more than men” and “Women second-guess themselves and the other party.” Finally, the group added, “Women think, ‘What do they or will they think of me?’” a question which had, in fact, concerned both groups during the course of the exercise.

Reviewing the Exercise

When the two groups came together and presented their answers, the similarities and differences among their responses was discussed briefly. Doug and I then shared our observations of the processes in each room.

The women quickly identified their own process as the correct, or “superior” one, and one woman declared with delight, “We won!” Some of the men felt they had been somehow tricked, or set up to fail against the female, or “politically correct” standard of behavior. When we talked about this feeling, a few women remarked that it was a reversal of what they often felt — that they are measured against a male norm of correct behavior.

We spent much of the rest of the day reassuring the men that it was not our intention to set them up to be ridiculed or to fail, as well as discussing some of the questions suggested by our collective experience. The men and women in the exercise almost universally described themselves as exceptions to their own described stereotypes. “Many women [or men] negotiate like this . . . but not me,” was a common caveat in both rooms. Yet the groups simultaneously engaged in behavior which demonstrated many of the same gender stereotypes they claimed did not fit individually.

Questions Raised

The temptation to draw conclusions about male and female tendencies from this experience is all but overwhelming. Yet we developed the

exercise in an effort to move away from conclusions and grapple with the complexity of the data and the difficulties involved in generalizing about gender and individual and group negotiating behavior. I want to be consistent with this purpose and sidestep the temptation to construct a pat conclusion for this column. Instead, I will focus on some of the questions raised by our experience, in the hope that they will prompt discussion and further exploration.

For instance, what created the dissonance between an individual's self-perceptions and the same person's behavior in the group? Is this simply a result of skewed self-perceptions? Or does participation in a group prompt different, perhaps gender-correlated, behavior than is the case when one negotiates on one's own? Or perhaps the composition of the group has an impact on individual behavior? Do individuals in single-sex groups behave differently than they do in mixed-sex groups?

Building on these questions, several participants wondered what would happen in a group of men with one woman, or a group of women with one man. Would the group adopt the majority style? Is there really an identifiable male or female style? If so, would one (or more) opposite-gender members transform either group to use of a third, mixed-group dynamic? And finally, pulling together the intersection of group dynamics and individual behavior, we wondered what would happen if we placed two members of one gender into a group of the opposite gender? Would those two individuals feel any

affinity toward each other? Might they act differently toward each other than they do toward the rest of the group?

An underlying question also haunts the results of this experience for Doug and for me. Put most simply, our intention in creating the exercise was to see what happened and to talk about it. Yet were we, as observers, skewing the data by looking for particular kinds of behavior? By focusing on whether men and women asked questions, shared ambivalence, or used personal data or explicit reasoning, we necessarily suggest that these are significant reference points for analyzing communication patterns. Perhaps there are more interesting or important questions to ask or data to pay attention to. The defensiveness expressed by some men in the group may have been generated, in part, by the observations we chose to highlight.

Our choice of observations reveals a deeper question: What is our purpose in exploring possible gender tendencies in negotiation? Is it simply to enhance our ability to describe how negotiators — men and women — tend to behave? Or do some of us come to the field with other motivations in mind: hoping to explain what went wrong in our own negotiations, wanting short cuts to being more personally competent — or less incompetent — with those of the opposite gender, seeking awareness of systematic miscommunications between genders for use in a mediation or other professional context, or simply for validation that our own negotiation style is an effective or acceptable one?

For those of us engaged in teaching others to be more effective negotiators — or seeking greater skillfulness ourselves — what is the relationship between this research-oriented, descriptive quest and our prescriptive lens? Assuming it was possible to reliably describe male and female tendencies, how would these long sought-after answers affect the advice we might give on how one *should* negotiate in any given situation?

Finally, the exercise demonstrated at least one challenge to productive dialogue about gender differences — or other differences — in negotiation: How to create dialogue where a wide range of observations, experiences, and reactions are heard *and* to do so without silencing individuals who may then feel attacked or ignored? The men in the room were poised to be rejected, to have their ideas and beliefs ridiculed. The variety of purposes with which people come to the conversation, and the ambiguous relationship between the descriptive and prescriptive realms in the field, may be contributing to

this defensiveness. If one is coming to the dialogue for validation, it is easy to hear a judgment about whether one gender's approach is viewed as a more effective or appropriate one. How do we address this defensiveness and create a space for those who feel criticized or rejected to reflect about their own purposes and practice?

The questions raised by this experience could form the basis of a research agenda on gender differences in negotiation, or could spark discussion about the relationship between the descriptive and prescriptive arenas in the field. Or they might serve as a reminder to the practitioner that generalizations about gender and negotiation behavior — your own or others' — is a difficult endeavor.

Finally, the exercise suggests to all of us in the field that struggling with our own assumptions about gender, examining our personal and professional purposes, and grappling with complex and contradictory data, are all part of the process.

NOTE

This article and the workshop on which it is based evolved from the author's work with Douglas Stone and Bruce Patton on how to have difficult conversations around issues such as gender, race, relationships, and emotions. The author, Stone, and Patton are currently working on a book on the subject entitled, *Discussing the Undiscussable: How to Have Difficult Conversations*.

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2. The Program of Instruction for Lawyers (PIL) at Harvard Law School offers a variety of law-related, continuing education courses. These short courses, offered each June and November, are attended by business people, educators, government officials, and other interested parties, as well as by lawyers.

3. *A Jury of Her Peers*, by Sally Heckel. Copyright © 1980 by Texture Films, Inc. Distributed by Public Media Education, a division of Public Media, Inc., 8124 North Central Park, Skokie, Ill. 60076.

4. For a sampling of studies examining behavioral correlations to gender, see Brock-Utne (1989) — women's poor performance in lab studies due to "context-stripped" nature of games; Gerhart and Rynes (1991) — women negotiators received lower salary outcomes than their male counterparts; Gwartzney-Gibbs and Lach (1991) — differences in formal and informal systems of workplace dispute resolution; Lewicki and Litterer (1994) — a summary of research on how women conceptualize conflict differently and are treated differently in negotiation; Rubin and Brown (1975) — differences in style and effectiveness due to individual interpersonal orientation rather than to gender; Tannen (1986) — showing differences in conversational styles; Watson (1994) — differences due to role and power of negotiator rather than to gender.

5. See Argyris, Putnam, and McLain Smith (1985).

6. Our nineteen participants came from seven countries and included nine men and ten women. They were, as a whole, a highly educated and motivated lot, and included lawyers, mediators, psychologists, business professionals, teachers, and art historians. We had a fair range of cultural and ethnic diversity, but did not have a significant racial mix.

7. The observations, quotes, and data from this exercise come from written notes taken by Doug Stone and myself while observing the exercise, and from the written record of the session — the flipcharted answers created by the participants. These materials are, unfortunately, more prone to error and observational subjectivity than a video or audiotaped data collection would be. My suggestion to myself and others would be to videotape the exercise, if this can be done without being intrusive for participants or impacting their behavior.

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