

Gender Differences in Talking Behaviors

-- A Survey from Different Perspectives

Introduction

Everyday experiences tell us that boys and girls talk differently. In terms of intention, boys, for instance, tend to use language to top each other, while girls tend to use it to show that they are actually the same. In terms of body behavior during conversations, boys tend to move around and avoid direct eye contact, while girls tend to be more focused and look at each other in the eyes. In terms of the words used in conversations, boys tend to use more technical jargons, whereas girls tend to explain ideas in more layman terms.

These differences are often misunderstood as boys' being aggressive or inattentive, but as we will see, many of them can actually be explained and thus understood in a more neutral way.

Biological Differences in the Two Sexes

The biological sex of an embryo is determined by its exposure to the androgen dihydrotestosterone when it is in the mother's womb. When dihydrotestosterone is present, the embryo develops male characteristics biologically and psychologically¹.

This in fact causes a great deal of differences between the two genders. For instance, male has a lower serotonin level (a chemical which "stabilizes" one's emotion) and a higher metabolism than female, resulting in boys being generally more active than girl². In addition, at the ages of adolescence, girls become more concentrated by the effects of estrogen; conversely boys are affected by testosterone and become more aggressive³. This explains why boys often cannot concentrate on the same thing for a long time and tend to move a lot during conversations and girls, on the other hand, tend to be more attentive. The aggressiveness of boys also influences their talking behaviors in a more indirect way, which we will discuss later.

The right hemisphere of the brain is specialized in logical, rational and analytical thinking, while the left hemisphere is specialized in intuitive and

¹ Paul Kenyon (2004).

² Michael Gurian (2003), p.47.

³ Michael Gurian (2001).

synthesizing thinking. Biologically, the right hemisphere of boys' brains is more developed than that of girls. Consequently, boys tend to speak of abstract concepts more than girls do⁴. This partly explains why boys like to play with technical jargons while girls like to express complicated ideas in terms of more concrete ideas or examples. For the same reason, boys tend to keep silent when working or thinking, but girls are more likely to talk when they are possessing problems. For example, when discussing the pros and cons of something, girls tend to speak out what they think as they are analyzing the problem, while boys usually think silently until they arrive at an answer.

Psychological and Sociological Factors of Gender Differences

The psychological development of children is largely dependent on the society's expectation and norms, therefore we will look at these two factors together.

The society casts the two sexes into different roles. Boys are signified by their physical strength, they are thus guardians of their families and nations. Therefore they should be competitive and aggressive, they are not to look at small details but to see problems from a bird's-eye-view⁵. On the other hand, girls are signified by their reproductive ability and are expected to be mother-like. These gender stereotypes nurture children's gender identity and enforce them to behave according to these norms.

When boys or men chat, often the topics are more philosophical, political or economical, all of which involve some kind of bird's view of the world. On the contrary, girls tend to chat on miscellaneous topics in their everyday lives, like what new clothes they have bought, who they have seen the previous day, what happened after that, etc. Girls, moreover, show more concern towards others than boys because of their mothering identity; while being more competitive and aggressive, boys tend to top others with their words.

⁴ Michael Gurian (2003), p.49.

⁵ Paul Kenyon (2004):

“Sex differences are recognized in children's free drawings with respect to motifs, colors, figure compositions, and expression.

Boys tend to draw mobile objects and mechanical objects with dark or cold colors and often use bird's-eye-view composition when they draw pictures, whereas girls like to draw human motifs (especially girls and women), flowers, and butterflies with light and warm colors and tend to arrange motifs in a row on the ground.”

In addition to the above mentioned reason, boys' topping each other can also be explained by the real social needs for males to compete for resources and mates. Topping others, even just in words, demonstrate a higher status over the others. This also explains why boys tend to use more technical jargons, as it shows that the speaker understands something which others do not, and thus the speaker is more intelligent.

Because of this general tendency of aggressiveness between males, those who do not wish to show aggressiveness to each other, when talking, often avoid looking at the other in the eyes. This is because looking directly at the other delivers a message among males: "I am competing with you." For example, when two males are discussing on something, looking directly at the other may lead him into thinking that you are trying to top him or devalue his opinions, while looking around can ease this tension and make both feel more comfortable.

Conclusion

Besides the biological, psychological and sociological factors, how boys and girls talk can also be influenced by others factors such as culture and religion. How these differences develop is an interplay of all these factors, which are subject to personal experiences and differences, therefore we should be cautious not to overgeneralize these tendencies into stereotypes. Nonetheless, the facts that such tendencies do exist and that they are shaped by objective factors should be acknowledged, so that we would not have biases towards these differences.

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