Imagine attempting to negotiate the tortuous twists and turns of a relationship with a partner who was raised speaking a different language and hewing to a different value system and world view from your own. It’d be tough, wouldn’t it? Yet according to sociolinguist Deborah Tannen, that’s exactly what millions of exasperated American men and women are doing every day. In her provocative new best-selling book, You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, Tannen argues that much of the male-female strife with which all of us are so achingly familiar can be traced back to the fact that boys and
The girls would face each other physically and look directly at each other, while the boys sat parallel or at angles and didn’t look directly at each other. The girls responded very congenially to the request that they just sit and talk to each other; the boys, on the other hand, were extremely uncomfortable—as if they were being asked to do something bizarre. The youngest boys, for example, kept saying things like, “I can’t wait till we play games. What games does he have?” And, “Do you want to come over to my house and ride my bike?” They kept talking about a time that they could do something. The overall topics they talked about were also completely different. The girls quickly settled on talking about the problems of one girl and then went on talking about that. This happened with all the different age groups. The boys jumped from topic to topic. They didn’t talk about any one topic for more than just a few turns. Suddenly it struck me: These kids are growing up in different worlds.

In your book you characterize the boys’ world as dominated by a hierarchical social order where you’re either one up or one down. Girls, on the other hand, live in a network of social connections, where intimacy and community are paramount. How does this affect our way of communicating?

OK, let’s take the issue of asking for directions. Men generally don’t want to stop to ask for directions and women do. Women can’t understand why men don’t want to do it. To women, asking for directions means having a fleeting connection with a stranger. That’s a positive thing. You don’t lose anything. But for a man, it means you’re putting yourself “one down” to a stranger, and that’s very uncomfortable. As an extension of that, men assume that if the person they’re asking doesn’t know, he’s going to tell them the wrong thing, since admitting ignorance would put him “one down.” Women think if the person doesn’t know, he’ll simply say so.

Another example comes from a story about my parents. While I was working on my research for this book, I would periodically ask them to tell me about their most recent arguments. One time my father said that my mother had recently noticed that he was holding his arm funny, so she asked him what was wrong. When he told her it was hurting him, she
asked, "For how long?" He said, "About two weeks." And she said, "Go ahead, treat me like a stranger." I instinctively understood my mother's feeling about it, but I hadn't a clue why my father wouldn't have told her. So I asked him. "Well I guess from the beginning men learn to be protective of women," he told me. That was the biggest non sequitur I had ever heard! What did that have to do with telling her that his arm hurt? He explained, "Well, if I tell her about something that's bothering me, then she worries. So why should I worry her? It might be nothing and go away."

I've since heard from other men that they don't tell their wives things because they don't want to worry them. And yet for women, not being told something is the very worst thing. They see it as a big rejection, because for women, intimacy is telling secrets, and if you withhold something, you're not as intimate as they'd like.

Male and female sales people provide another example. Women often feel that if they go to buy a computer or something from a man, he gives information in a way that makes them feel stupid, using terms they don't understand and if they tell him they don't understand, then he acts like they're even stupider. Many male sales people tend to use information to establish a one-up position. Women sales people, on the other hand, don't tend to use the information they know to make themselves feel better. In fact, they seem to feel best if they can help you know as much as they do.

After reading a draft of my book, a male colleague of mine went to a conference and then told me he suddenly understood what women are doing when they give talks. A woman who was giving a paper at the conference kept saying, "Do you understand? Do you follow me?" And he said it blew his mind that her main concern really was that the audience understand her. When he gives a paper, he said, he's not concerned with that; he's concerned that no one in the audience be able to stand up and put him down once he stops talking. He's covering his ass (laughs). Whether or not people understand what he's talking about is way down on his list of priorities.

This makes men seem awfully foolish.

(Laughs). That's because you're a woman.

Now, here is the stand that I take. Men live in a world where people are in fact trying to put them down. So that perspective makes sense to them. The women's world is not like that, so it doesn't make sense to us.

What are the most common conflicts that couples run into as a result of trying to communicate across this gender gap?

The biggest complaint I hear from women is that their partners don't talk or listen to them. Women are seeking that certain kind of conversation that they feel is the essence of closeness and intimacy; that kind where I tell you everything that's on my mind and discuss everything with you. Men don't have those kinds of conversations, so they don't know what women are trying to get at. They can't figure out what women want from them. They feel that women just go on and on about nothing (laughs). So we have the scenario where the woman's trying to talk, and the guy's got the newspaper in front of his face because he feels there's nothing to talk about.

A central area of confusion for couples involves what I call "troubles talk." For women, talking about troubles is the essence of connection. I tell you

(continued on page 60)
something different than a man might be looking for?
I think so. I think for most men, talking about the problem is wallowing in it and makes them feel worse. For women, talking about it makes them feel better.

For women, talking about troubles is the essence of connection.

I think so. I think for most men, talking about the problem is wallowing in it and makes them feel worse. For women, talking about it makes them feel better.

For women, talking about troubles is the essence of connection.

Because it makes them feel connected to someone; they don’t feel alone with their problems.

So even if a solution isn’t arrived at, that’s not the point?

Right. It’s not only not the point, but it gets in the way, because if she wants to keep talking about it and he comes in with a solution, then there’s nothing more to talk about. One woman told me that when she talks to her partner about a problem and he just moves in with a solution, she feels he’s diminishing her problem. I told her that he is, but from his vantage point that’s a nice thing to do.

Why is that?
This is well illustrated by Dorval’s tape of tenth-grade boys talking to each other. Each one is talking about his own problems and dismissing the other’s problems as if to imply, “You shouldn’t feel bad, because your problem isn’t so bad.” The boys seemed to be very happy with that.

What kinds of complaints do you hear from men about women?
The most common one is that women complain all the time and don’t want to do anything about it: “She asks for your advice and then she doesn’t want to take

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Men misunderstand the ritual nature of women's complaining. She'll tell about a trouble, and he'll tell her how to fix it. Because he really thinks that she's asked for advice, he's frustrated that she won't take it. I often hear things like, "My wife complains and complains about her job. And then I say, 'If you hate your job so much, why don't you quit?' Then she'll say, 'Huh? I love my job.'" Just because she's complaining doesn't mean that she hates it. But a man assumes that she does—because he wouldn't complain that way unless he really did hate his job.

So the most common problem is that men don't want to talk and women want to talk all the time—

At home.

At home?

Yes. It's not that women talk more than men overall; it's that women talk more at home since talk, for them, is a way of creating intimacy. Since men regard talk as a means to negotiate status, they often see no need to talk at home. But they talk more in public situations with people they know less well. At a meeting, when questions are solicited from the floor, it is almost always a man who speaks first. When the phones are opened on a radio talk show, the vast majority of calls are from men, who are more likely to speak at length, giving introductions to their questions (if they have any), and addressing multiple topics.

Another common cause of frustration between couples is that when women are focusing on intimacy or connection, men often feel like they're being pushed around.

Can you give an example of that?

An example I give in the book is a common one. It involves a woman who won't make plans without checking them first with her husband. He, on the other hand, simply reports his own plans to her as a fait accompli. "Why don't you tell your friends you need to check with me?" she says. To which he replies, "I can't tell my friends that I need to ask my wife for permission." Thus, the same act—checking plans with a spouse—connotes very different things for husband and wife. For her, it simply means, "We are connected to each other."

And for him?

It means, "one up, one down." Having

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to check reminds a man of being a child. Unlike women, men have a gut-level resistance to doing what they're told, to doing what someone expects them to do.

Here's another example. It's a bit explosive because it has to do with sleeping with other women. But I think the way they talk about it is significant. A woman told me that she was dating a man and they had an understanding that they wouldn't hurt each other and they wouldn't limit each other's freedom. So he starts sleeping with other women and she registers a complaint, "This is hurting me, and we agreed not to hurt each other." And he says, "But you're limiting my freedom." And she says, "Well, how can you keep doing it when you know it makes me feel so bad?" And he says, "You're manipulating me."

When I heard that, I thought, There's something so universal about this; I mean I've heard this kind of thing so many times. Men feeling that women are manipulating them, because women want men to do what we want. We want them to want to do what we want, because that's what we do. If a woman perceives that something she's doing is really hurting a man, she wants to stop doing it. If she perceives that he really wants her to do something, she wants to do it. So she thinks that that's love and he should feel the same way toward her. But men have a gut-level resistance to doing what they're told, to doing what someone expects them to do. It's the opposite response of what women have.

I think men might beg to differ with that point. I actually haven't heard men disagreeing with that. They have told me that it seems right to say that men are sensitive to being told what to do, so if they feel somebody's telling them what to do, they want to resist. Now, certainly there are men who are very eager to please their wives—I would not want to say that that's never the case. But if a man is going to be touchy, it's more likely to go in that direction. Whereas if a woman is insecure, she's more likely to go in the other direction, be super-accommodating.

And where does that tendency to accommodate stem from?

Once again, I trace it back to the way girls and boys talk among their friends. In the girls' groups, there's a great premium put on being agreeable and being the same.

And the boys—

Resist doing what they're told. Because to them, being given orders, being told to do something, means the other person is dominant and they don't want to be dom-
excellence?
It prevents displaying it.
That wouldn't seem to bode well for
girl's prospects in male-dominated fields
like business or politics.

Well, that's what seems depressing is that
girls are in a double bind. If we talk in
ways expected of girls, we're thought
incompetent, yet if we talk in ways
expected of men, we're called bitches. This
doesn't leave a lot of options. And of
course there are girls who are succeed-
ing, and we all succeed somewhat, but it is
frustrating. But as more girls get into
these fields, things have got to get better.

One thing that's encouraging is that I've
heard from management consultants that
there's a kind of movement out there
toward what might be called a feminine
managerial style. That is, managing by
consensus rather than fiat. I think the fact
that Americans are giving more respect to
the Japanese is going to be a factor, too,
because what I refer to as women's style is
close in many ways to the Japanese way of
doing business. A lot of men call in to talk
shows that on and say, "Well obviously
girl's ways are ridiculous and men's
ways are better because who would want
to spend all this time talking about per-
sonal things before you get down to busi-
ness?" And I tell them, "If you're doing
business with a Japanese businessman,
then the woman's way is going to work
much better, and your way isn't going to
get you anywhere." It's definitely charac-
teristic of the Japanese style to make sure
there's a personal relationship as a founda-
tion for doing business. And to be indi-
rect: not to get right to the point.

Are you saying women typically communi-
cate more indirectly than men in our culture?

Well, not across the board. If you ask,
for example, about what's bothering
you—how do you feel?—then women
will be more direct. But I think men are
more direct when it comes to making
decisions about what to do.

In relationships, too?

Yes. Something I hear a lot is that
women feel men make all the decisions
and don't take their wishes into account.
This problem often can be traced to con-
versations in which a woman tries to start
a discussion by asking a question. For
example, a couple's driving in a car, and
the woman says, "Would you like to stop
for a drink?" The man replies, "No." And
that's the end of that. She then feels, "He
doesn't care what I want. He's not interest-
ed." She thinks he should have responded
by asking her what she wanted. Then they
could talk about it and come to a decision
[CONTINUED ON PAGE 107]
CAN WE TALK?

by consensus. But he took the question literally. Later, when he finds out that she's annoyed, he feels that he's being manipulated: "You didn't tell me what you wanted, and now you're mad at me because you didn't get it. Why don't you just tell me what you want in the first place?" In fact she did try to tell him but she didn't get to, because her way of starting the negotiation got short-circuited.

In reading parts of your book it's hard not to think that the female modes of interaction are in some sense superior. Do men feel slighted by your work?

Not at all. The reaction I've gotten from men has been very enthusiastic. I think men in particular are relieved to see a woman writing about this phenomenon in a way that doesn't blame them. A lot of self-help books—and by the way, I feel strongly that mine is not one—imply that there's something wrong with men because they don't communicate like women.

And you don't think so?

I think it's crucial to realize that if the vast majority of men act like this starting from as early as two-and-a-half to three years old, there's a limit to how much you can say their behavior is pathological. We might say that men would be better off if they were different, but we don't want to say that they're sick.

That intimate talk is a healthier way of communicating.

Right. Now I know that there is some research that says that if people talk about their problems they get better sooner—they don't grieve as long and things like that—and I don't want to question those findings. But after all, there are entire cultures where no one, man or woman, would ever talk openly about their problems; are we going to say those cultures are sick? Of course, that doesn't mean that people can't change if they want to.

Except that, for the last twenty years at least, women have been trying very hard to get men to change toward what you might call a more female style of communication—with what seems like limited success. There's always going to be a few men who come over. Talking more intimately is a learnable skill, as we've seen from the encounter groups and sensitivity-training movement of the '60s. But you're right; it hasn't affected many men, and it certainly hasn't broken through to the mainstream.

My husband, for example, likes to sit and talk with his friends about whatever's on his mind. And he always laments how hard it is to find other men who are will-

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ing to do that.

So it's going to be a good, long time before the sexes reach common ground. That's pretty discouraging.

Well, yes and no. Certainly a lot of profound unhappiness is caused by these differences; after all, there's nothing more deeply distressing than to have your fundamental intent misunderstood by the person you're closest to. On the other hand, if women can begin to understand that intimate talk doesn't have the same meaning to a man as it does to them—and men can begin to understand women's need to share and connect—then maybe at least people can avoid the feeling that something is terribly wrong with their relationships. Realizing that a partner's behavior is not his or her individual failing, but a normal expression of gender, lifts this burden of blame and disappointment. Understanding gender differences in ways of communication is the first step toward change.

And what comes next?

From there, there are two options: Make adjustments, or learn to accept. Clearly the choice will depend on the individuals involved. If you're with a person who's amenable to negotiation, then I think the ideal thing is for each person to give a little. Some men have learned over time the kinds of stories their wives want to hear, and they've learned to come home and tell them. Now, they'll probably never do it exactly the way the woman would like, but it's closer. And then other women just accept that they're not going to get the kind of intimate communication they want from their husband, and don't take it as a tremendous failure of the relationship. "I'd rather he talk to me that way, but he doesn't," they say, in effect, "I'll get it from my friends."

If the men and women of our generation have already been polarized to some extent, what about our children? Can we raise them equally? If the sexes reach common ground, I think parents can do more. But again, I think awareness is the most important thing. That doesn't mean trying to make sons like daughters and daughters like sons. Rather, it means instilling a flexibility and mutual respect in children of both genders. That would be the ideal.

Is there a larger metaphor in your plea for understanding and tolerance between the sexes?

Yes, I definitely see it as part and parcel of the larger cross-cultural perspective. What I'm ultimately advocating, in a sense, is respect for diversity—of all sorts.

CRACKING THE CODE OF TOMORROW
[CONTINUED]

Television is a powerful instrument, much like home and the car, that takes you, you resist. It's a great ball game, but you're always the home team. You can turn the channels on and off, but you can't control the events. There's a warning in the evening news, on the phone, in the newspaper, on the electronic bulletin board. But not to the telephone. It's popping with friends, with family, with your own personal experiences, with the experience of the people you're talking to. Yes, it's a little surreal, looking at the images and the words, reading the texts, and thinking that perhaps they don't amount to much. But I think the messages are there. They're not just words anymore, just letters. They are the language of television, and the messages and the implications are everywhere. What I'm ultimately advocating, in a sense, is respect for diversity—of all sorts. We must be the ideal.