

Nancy Finney

### Gender Lenses: Language and Play

People have always understood that men and women are different, but it is often left to the imagination to explain the reasons why. It is proposed in The Lenses of Gender, by Sandra Lipsitz Bem, that the reason we always assume that men and women are different is because of the lenses through which we view gender. In many situations, some that are not usually dissected, these lenses are used to perceive the world and the people in it. Two particular examples that will be used to illustrate these lenses are the language and conversational styles of men and women, and children's activities and demeanor in playground situations.

Bem presents three separate lenses in her book: biological essentialism, androcentrism, and gender polarization. These three lenses can be used individually, but work together to completely understand the reason men and women are viewed so differently. Biological essentialism "rationalizes and legitimizes androcentrism and gender polarization by treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of women and men." (2) This lens is the culmination of scientific facts (evolution, biology, hormones, fertility, etc.) and is used to explain the differences especially physically. Androcentrism is "male-centeredness... a definition of males and male experience as a neutral standard or norm, and females and female experience as a sex-specific deviation from that norm." (2) This lens is based on the fact that all things are based off the male experience and that the male experience is the one that is normal. Anything that differs from the typical male experience is thus different, then (the fall of Adam from Eve, Pandora's box, Freud). Gender polarization "defines

mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female” and “defines any person or behavior that deviates from these scripts as problematic – as unnatural or immoral from a religious perspective or as biologically anomalous or psychologically pathological from a scientific perspective.” (80-81) Basically this means that a person’s sex of the body must match the gender. This lens makes homosexuality, masculinity/femininity, feminism, and many others considered abnormal. These three lenses will help to explain and understand child experiences and conversational experiences amongst men and women, and hopefully will lead to explaining how and why men and women are considered to be so different.

The first useful application of the lenses is with the fifth chapter of "Genderplay" by Barrie Thorne. Thorne observes children at play, and infers many differences between the sexes in situations that he hoped would be uninfluenced by outside factors. The three lenses are quite obvious in this, and it can be seen how they are applied, even in children's eyes. "Boys frequently chase one another, an activity that often ends in wrestling and mock fights. When girls chase girls, they are usually less physically aggressive; for example the less often wrestle one another to the ground or try to bodily overpower the person being chased." (68) It is understood that biological essentialism is occurring on the playground, as girls are less physical simply because they are girls. Even aides recognized in these situations to pull back the boys from the girls, not the other way around. This is because biologically men are supposed to be stronger than women.

The applications of androcentrism are mostly correlated back to biology, but one exception from this was when the girls were giving the boys kisses and "cooties". Cooties were normally only received from girls (this is discussed as a contamination and

pollution problem). Also, girls would ruin games of football because they tried to join in. The boys would complain, "the girls are gettin' in the way". (73) Thorne explains this. "girls as a group are treated as an ultimate source of contamination." (74)

The one lens that was unexpected in this setting was the lens of gender polarization. Unfortunately, it was also in place amongst the playground. "Boys sometimes mark hierarchies among themselves by using 'girls' as a label for low-status boys and by pushing subordinated boys next to the contaminating space of girls." (74) Boys that were different (overweight, slow motor skills, different race, feminine, etc.) were treated as less because they didn't fit the typical mold that most of the boys fit. In this case, the boys were shunned out of the group and told to sit closer to the girls, which also were "less" than the group of boys.

How do the lenses in this setting allow the setup for a male-centered dichotomy? Boys are always disrupting the girls' activities (women can't keep control), the girls will tattle more often (implying they need help to deal with situations), boys are usually the harassers in teasing (men make women feel worse), and they are allowed more space on the playground (football fields, basketball courts) while women have smaller playing areas (jump rope, handball, hopscotch). All of these simple actions imply many huge differences in the way that men and women conduct themselves in social settings, and unfortunately these observations show that men are the ones with the control in this setting, just like they are in the rest of the world.

The second situation to apply the lenses is in Deborah Tannen's second chapter of "You Just Don't Understand". This book is about the different ways that men and women conduct themselves in conversational situations. Women are usually considered to be

more maternal and helpful, while men usually tend to fix things, argue that nothing is wrong, or refuse that they might need help. These assumptions are all based on supposed biological differences, but are actually quite androcentric. Men usually regard giving advice as a form of attack and sees one who gives advice as taking a position above them. Tannen sometimes to be observing from under the lenses herself, as she makes some grand generalizations particularly regarding men's behavior. For example, she states that men will attempt to fix something, even if they don't know how to do so. When needing directions, it is cliché that a man will never ask. This is Tannen's argument as to why: "If self-respect is bought at the cost of a few extra minutes of travel time, it is well worth the price." (62) Gender Polarization is inevitable in conversation between men and women. Guys don't usually give advice or want to talk about problems for long, but girls will spend hours sharing and discussing problems. "Women tend to show understanding of another woman's feelings. When men try to reassure women by telling them that their situation is not so bleak, the women hear their feelings being belittled or discounted." (59) "Many men, sensitive to the dynamic of status, the need to help women, and the need to be self-reliant, are comfortable in the role of giving information and help but not in receiving it." (71) In all problem-solving situations, the end result is entirely different depending on whether it is being solved by men or women.

Neither of these articles can truly encompass nor explain all of the reasons of why we live in a male-dominated society, but they can show some light to two situations that normally one would never think to analyze. Certainly when having a conversation or watching children play, the differences between the genders is not what one would usually notice. Once Bem's lenses are applied though to these situations, it is quite clear

that men and women's differences are perpetuated by everything surrounding them, whether it be aides on the playground or asking for advice. Unfortunately, it is the application of these lenses subconsciously that creates the problem between genders in our society.