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Gender and Communication

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How Men use Body Language to Gender Themselves and Women

2:25pm River Park Square Mall Saturday Afternoon:

Participants: Six college aged men.

What Occurred: Six college aged men walking through the mall come to an escalator, each waits for at least three steps to come between him and his buddy, until they had taken over the entire elevator length. Each man also spread his arms to hold onto both railings as he gets on and puffs out his shoulders to make himself look bigger.

Evaluation: This display seemed to say a lot about proxemics. The men observed gave themselves as much personal space as they could and still maintain being in a group. They also made themselves look bigger by spreading out in the space they had given themselves as if to claim the space. A little of the posturing seemed to be to not get too close to their friends in the group so as not to be mistaken for being other than heterosexual. The funniest thing to me was the way in which they each waited their turn at the top of the escalator so that they could appropriate the right amount of space. Males in our society take up more room and show their power through taking up space owning it. They also must maintain the air that they are not gay so they give other men plenty of space. I did not get to observe these men around women, though it would have been interesting to see the amount of space they would give to a girl.

7:00 Riverpoint Campus, Classroom Wednesday Night

Participants: Me (28), three male classmates (all in their early twenties)

What occurred: Class is put into groups to discuss weekly readings. I am the only girl in my group, the boys array themselves around me and we get to work. After we discuss the chapter we are assigned the conversation shifts to topic of how one of the boys got a huge scar on his hand. Interest

from the other boys increases and he gets into his description with lengthy detail and gestures. Other males start telling similar scar stories. I try to chime in, but somehow once I start in the others lose interest and get distracted by shiny things and that topic peters out. They start looking at each other not me, one of the group members starts talking to someone outside our group.

Evaluation: The men in the group had an expectation that I would not be interested in gory, as I called them, 'scar wars' because I am female. As such they excluded me from participation through a series of subtle cues, including: interruption of my comments, talking over me, looking at each other but discontinuing my eye contact, leaning back in chairs as if to put distance between me and them and finally talking to others outside the group. I eventually had to resign myself to shutting up as the conversation flow had been compromised. As for my reaction to being shunted out of the conversation in the group discussion, I found that it was easier to shut up and ignore the insult than pursue a discussion that they had ended when I tried to chime in. I also noticed it took me longer to chime into the discussion with three men vying for attention. Not because I wasn't there, I was of a height and build with all of them, but because when I started to speak they got louder.

On the bus 12:10 Friday Afternoon

Participants: Strangers, a young Man and young Woman, on the bus.

What Occurred: Bus stops and seats become available on the bus. Boy looks around and sees a pretty girl behind him.

Boy: "You want to sit?" he asks her.

Girl: "Not really," she says. Arms crossed, looking annoyed.

Boy gives her an insistent look, and smiles at her, dropping his head and slumping shoulders, but keeping eye contact. Girl smiles wryly, as if resigned to the inevitable, and after a moment of hesitation steps passed the boy to take the preferred seat.

Evaluation: The man on the bus forced his will on a woman just through eye contact and power differentials. The boys confidence that the girl would do as he willed seemed to pressure the girl to

comply with his wishes, if just to avoid having to be under his gaze. This was an example of using proxemics, the boy was taller than the girl by at least a foot; and eye contact, the boy maintained eye contact and smiled his will into being. The boy also seemed to be altercasting, casting the girl in the role of the submissive, obedient party, by using rules of politeness and gender stereotypical behaviors we all know.

In conclusion the men I observed in my study were able to assert certain amounts of power in situations, or appear to assert power over others. The methods used ranged from using polite discourse and conversation techniques to physical height, eye contact, and other non verbal cues to force their will.

All the men in my study were white, young and college age and most likely educated from the way they presented themselves or where I was in contact with them. Which may skew my results. However they were not all the same in appearance, athleticism or build. The college boys on the escalator were athletic and made themselves look big through posture and clothing choices. The boys in the classroom were smaller, geekier and less intimidating as we were all seated. And the boy on the bus was sort of in between, not terribly athletic, lanky but tall and standing over the girl. I observed men using body language to assert dominance, stake out territory and control others.

The girl on the bus seemed to accept the control of the boy, but I noticed she also seemed to understand her role and obeyed the command with a wry smile and the rolling of her eyes. She was being manipulated, she knew it but she decided it was easier than arguing with the guy. She also seemed to look about the bus sheepishly when she sat. Perhaps she was more aware of her reactions than it seemed, or maybe more than she actually realized.

I started my study confident I would see gender performance in action and that it would be readily apparent. However I found that though everyone performs gender constantly it was hard for me to study my coworkers, friends and family and decide whether what I was witnessing was really just gender. I found the best way to evaluate what I was seeing was by observing mostly strangers so I

could see it from more of a distance and not have to wade through personal history with the subjects I was observing.

All in all, I found gender performance more places than I expected, and I found my eyes more clearly seeing the gender dynamics being played out in front of me. I am surprised how deeply ingrained these behaviors are, not just in the displays of these strangers, but in my own reactions to other people. I did not realize the depth of my own powerlessness and the way in which I so often remain quiet when I could say something. I let others control me as much as they try to assert that control.