

Women As Love's Experts and Love's Victims

By Carol Tavris (From *The Mismeasure of Woman* by Carol Tavris)

A friend of mine, whom I will call Roberta, has been mildly unhappy for years about one flaw in her otherwise excellent husband, Henry. The flaw rises and falls in importance to her, depending on Roberta's state of mind and general stresses, but it has long been a chronic irritant. Henry's problem is that he doesn't like to "chitchat," as he puts it. This means, Roberta explains, that he doesn't like to gossip about friends and family, he doesn't like to analyze his marriage on a weekly or even yearly basis, he doesn't like to talk about his feelings, and the only time he ever said "I love you" was back in 1974, when he proposed marriage. Once, pressed to reveal his passions, Henry said, "I vote with my feet. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't be here."

Instead of killing Henry at that moment, which was her inclination, Roberta did what she usually does: She called a woman friend, and they met for lunch to discuss Henry. Several hours later, Roberta emerged refreshed, invigorated, and prepared to cope with Henry for another few months.

When I was growing up, the stereotype was that men had all the great and true friendships: Damon and Pythias, Hamlet and Horatio, Butch Cassidy and the Sun-dance Kid. Male friendships were said to be based on male bonding, true and faithful camaraderie, and sturdy affection, whereas women's friendships were shallow, trivial, competitive, and vain. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger advanced his view, in *Men in Groups*, that "male bonding" originated in prehistoric male hunting groups and lingers today in their modern equivalents: sports, politics, business, and bars. Because females do not "bond" in the same way, their friendships are a shadow of the real (male) thing.

When I was growing up, the stereotype said that men were the great romantics, the great lovers. Devoted Rhett Butler was more admirable than the heartless Scarlett; adoring Cyrano de Bergerac was superior to the superficial Roxanne; self-sacrificing Sydney Carton did the far, far better thing than his Lucie would ever do. Women, being interested mainly in marrying a meal ticket, were said to be pragmatic and fickle. What did they know of true love

When I was growing up, social scientists maintained that men were "instrumental" and "task-oriented," whereas women were "expressive" and "person-oriented." This was a fancier way of saying that men were best suited for work and women were best suited for motherhood. Experts explained that such a division of emotional and physical labor was an ideal arrangement for family life, although, overall and if the truth be told, being expressive and person-oriented was not as healthy or desirable as being instrumental and task-oriented

With the rise of cultural feminism in the late 1970s and 1980s, many people began to argue that women's ways of expressing love and having friendships were better and healthier than men's. They no longer regarded women's ease with self-disclosure and talking about feelings as evidence of weakness but of strength. [Some researchers have] argued persuasively that women are better at love because of their skill at connection, whereas men have trouble with attachments because they are reared to overvalue independence and fear connection. Studies were finding that women's style of intimacy brought them moral support, protected their mental and physical health, and made them easier to talk to. Both men and women, it was found, feel better after talking things over with a woman.

As a result, it was not long before we saw the rise of the "deficit approach" to men's ability to love. A typical article of the 1970s lamented "The inexpressive male: A tragedy of American society," and new theories suggested that men have a "trained incapacity to share."¹ Research began emphasizing the competition, rivalry, emotional inhibition, and aggression that men bring

to their friendships and love affairs, in contrast to the emotional honesty and mutual support that women bring to theirs.

Today, it is female friendships that are celebrated as being deep, intimate, and true, based as they are on shared feelings and confidences and on women's allegedly greater capacity for connection with others. Today, male friendships are scorned for being superficial and trivial, based as they are on shared interest in, say, the Detroit Tigers, Michelle Pfeiffer, and classic E-type Jaguars. Today, love is the one domain in which women are thought to excel and to represent the healthy model of normalcy, while men are pathologized—the poor souls who can't love, don't express themselves, and won't allow themselves to become intimate. Roberta, with her emotional demands for "talk" and "love," used to be the problem. Now, for many women, she is the solution, and it is Henry who is the problem.

The new stereotype of Woman as Intimacy Expert is part of the women-are-better movement that has transformed activities formerly thought to illustrate female deficiency into female strength. On the surface, the stereotype praises women, and certainly it validates much that is true of women's experience. Yet both sexes sacrifice a great deal to maintain this stereotype, and the reasons that it has prevailed throughout our society have little to do with either gender's, native abilities or deficits. To find the reasons, we need to stop asking "Which sex is better at love? Whose emotional style is better?" and ask instead: What are the consequences for women and men of the belief that women are the intimacy experts, the love experts? What are the consequences in a family when one partner demands and pursues intimacy, and the other retreats into silence? Why, if women's ways of loving are so normal and desirable, aren't men rushing out to buy books to fix themselves, books called *Men Who Love Too Little*?

It is not my intention to take away from women the one area in which they have approval to excel: the realm of nurturance, love, and caretaking. Although "women's ways of loving" have much to commend them, they must be put in perspective. The misunderstandings between women and men on matters of love and intimacy are often very funny, but they are no joke. They are part of a system that relegates the sexes to separate spheres of expertise: the intimate world of love for her, the public world of work for him. This schism is unfortunate for all concerned, because the two spheres, which represent equally valuable activities, are not equally valued in our society. Women's alleged superiority in love is a sop given to women in a system that regards love and care as fluffy topics to begin with, suitable for women's magazines, greeting cards, and sermons.

THE FEMINIZING OF LOVE

Dear Abby: Another St. Valentine's Day has come and gone without flowers, candy or any kind of a valentine from my husband. I'm 25 and he is 26, and we've been married for three years. I'd have been thrilled if he had brought me a flower—or even handed me a valentine—but he ignored the day completely. . . . He's a super guy, hard-working and decent, so maybe I shouldn't complain. But it sure would have felt great to have been remembered on St. Valentine's Day.

Any suggestions?¹

—Nobody's Valentine

"Nobody's Valentine" is in good company, but I wonder whether she would be consoled to know that 85 percent of all valentine cards are purchased by women.³ This is a fascinating statistic. Why aren't more men buying valentines? And why do so many Women want them so much? "Nobody's Valentine" is the target audience for countless books and articles that offer to help women learn to understand, manage, or change men and get them to be more "loving," at least as women define loving—by revealing their feelings. The cover line on an issue of *Self* magazine is typical: Right after "Breakthrough! The easiest diet!" and "6 Steps to a GREAT BODY!" is "Get him to talk—tonight."

Of course, for all the women who are asking, “Why won’t he talk to me? Why won’t he say he loves me?” there is a corresponding number of men who are complaining, “Why doesn’t she shut up? Why does she keep needing reassurance that I love her?” Many women say that their greatest wish for their marriages is that their husbands be more intimate, better at communication. “If only my husband would tell me what he is thinking,” they say, “everything would be perfect.” For their part, men say, “If only she were happy, if only she would stop complaining, everything would be fine. She expects me to read her mind and know why she is unhappy; I’m truly baffled by what she says she wants.”

Underlying these reciprocal complaints is the real problem: that men and women tend to define intimacy and express love differently. For many men, love is action: doing things for the other person. For many women, love is talking: acknowledging the immediate feeling of the other person’s adorableness.

For example, psychotherapist Richard Driscoll, in *The Binds That Tie*, describes the following scene: A wife, Paula, asks her husband, Don, if he “really” loves her. Don tries to give her an honest answer: “I know I want to be married to you. I am satisfied to go to work every morning, because I know that I am supporting you and that you are there for me. I would never want to leave you, and I would never want you to leave me. Is that what you mean by love?” This answer leaves her unsatisfied. “But why can’t you say you love me?” Yet, as Driscoll points out, Don did in fact say he loved her, but in his own words rather than in her words.

Paula did not see this, says Driscoll, because “she thinks of love as a feeling” and “he thinks of it as a commitment to being with a woman and working to provide for her.” This is one reason, he believes, that many men are reluctant to say “I love you,” at least with the frequency women do. Repeating this phrase daily or on demand from a woman, says Driscoll, “sounds stupid to them. After it has been said once, these gents argue, there’s no reason to repeat it over and over like a trained seal yapping on cue from a handler.”⁵

Here is another husband, participating with his wife in a study of love. He says: What does she want? Proof? She’s got it, hasn’t she? Would I be knocking myself out to get things for her—like to keep up this house—if I didn’t love her? Why does a man do things like that if not because he loves his wife and kids? I swear, I can’t figure what she wants.

But his wife says:

It is not enough that he supports us and takes care of us. I appreciate that, but I want him to share things with me. I need for him to tell me his feelings.⁶

What men do, every day of their lives, simply doesn’t feel like love to this wife, to Driscoll’s client Paula, and to Nobody’s Valentine, who knows but discounts the fact that her husband is “hard-working and decent.”

The resulting misunderstandings between couples occur daily in countless households. In one study, seven couples recorded their activities and marital satisfaction for several days? Everyday, they noted down how often the spouse did a helpful chore, like cooking a good meal or repairing a faucet; how often the spouse expressed affection; and how satisfied they were feeling with the marriage. The wives thought their marital relations were best on days when their husbands had verbally expressed affection to them, regardless of what the husbands did. But the husbands’ degree of satisfaction depended on their wives’ deeds, not on their affectionate words!

The researchers then directed the husbands to step up the frequency of expressions of love toward their wives, and asked the wives to keep track of any such demonstrations they noticed. After a while, they called up the husbands whose wives said there had been no change, and asked them why they had not complied with instructions. One husband replied huffily that he certainly had complied. . . by washing his wife’s car. The husband thought that was a perfectly good way to express his love for her, but she, of course, hadn’t a clue.

The doing-versus-talking distinction in the emotional styles of males and females begins in childhood, when boys tend to develop what psychologists call “side – by - side” relationships, in which intimacy means sharing the same activity—sports, games, watching a movie or sports event together, bantering and joking. Girls tend to prefer “face-to-face” relationships, in which intimacy means revealing ideas and emotions in a heart-to-heart exchange. As adults, women may have a tough time understanding that for many men a “shared intimate activity” can be something as banal as watching TV or being in the same room together doing different things. Words are irrelevant, even superfluous. As a woman I interviewed said:

My husband and I have a custom of reading the papers and having coffee together every morning. He loves to listen to music in the background, so the radio is usually on. I don't like the music especially—I'd rather have quiet—but I know how much he does. One morning, though, the radio was annoying me, so I got up to read the paper in the other room. My husband protested immediately—“Where are you going?” I said I was leaving so he could enjoy his concert. “Never mind the music,” he said., rather crossly, “come back here and I'll turn it off.” His tone made me feel cranky, until I realized what he was really saying—he'd rather share the morning with me than with the radio.

This woman is fortunate that she got his message. Being together comfortably is the soul of intimacy to him.

For most women, in contrast, intimacy rests on talk—both “deep talk” about significant feelings and worries and “small talk” about daily events. Without it, many women feel like unwatered plants; they wither. So do their relationships. A common refrain in the explanations divorced women give for the failure of their marriages is “lack of communication.” A bad marriage, they say, is by definition one in which there is “no talking.”⁸

Moreover, women demand a particular kind of talk. When men talk to each other or to women, they tend to discuss relatively impersonal matters, such as cars, sports, work, and politics. When they reveal anything about themselves, it tends to be their strengths and achievements. Women like to talk about personal matters, such as their feelings and relationships; they are willing, often eager, to reveal weaknesses and fears. When a woman is worried, the first thing she does is call a friend to discuss it. When a man is worried, the first thing he does is distract himself by watching TV, playing racquetball, or drinking with his buddies.

In short, some of the basic functions of talk are different for men and women. For many men, the purpose of talking about feelings and problems is to solve them; for many women, the purpose of talking is to talk—simply to share the feeling. When women report the benefits of intimate conversation, they list relief from stress, feeling better, and self-improvement. The benefits that men report are more constructive, such as getting advice or help in solving problems. Thus, when a woman describes her worries, fears, or anger about a problem, she is often seeking confirmation of her feeling; the man interprets her talk as a request for help.⁹

In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, Deborah Tannen describes the story of a woman, Eve, who had had a lump removed from her breast. Eve tells her sister, a woman friend, and her husband, Mark, how upsetting it was to undergo the operation, and how unhappy she is with the stitches and the changed contour of her breast. The sister says, “I know. When I had my operation I felt the same way.” The friend says, “I know. It's like your body has been violated.” But Mark says, “You can have plastic surgery to cover up the scar and restore the shape of your breast.” Mark's comment makes Eve feel hurt and angry; she thinks it means he is disgusted with how she looks. But of course he thinks she is disgusted with the way she looks and he wants to be helpful “Eve wanted the gift of understanding,” Tannen observes, “but Mark gave her the gift of advice. He was taking the role of problem solver, whereas she simply wanted confirmation for her feelings.”¹⁰

Men and women speak different languages of love, but in psychotherapy, research, and popular lore, the female language has become the dominant one! Women appear to be better than men at intimacy because intimacy is defined as what women do: talk, express feelings, and disclose personal concerns. Intimacy is rarely defined as sharing activities, being helpful, doing useful work, or enjoying companionable silence. Because of this bias, men rarely get credit for the kinds of loving actions that are more typical of them.

“Part of the reason that men seem so much less loving than women,” argues Francesca Cancian, a sociologist and author of *Love in America*, “is that men’s behavior is measured with a feminine ruler.”¹¹ Many social scientists, she shows, use what she calls “a feminized definition of love” in their research: For instance, they label practical activities and helping the spouse as “instrumental behavior” and expressing feelings as “affectionate behavior.” This distinction, she observes, thereby denies the affectionate aspect of practical help.

Yet most men are more likely than women to agree with statements like “When she needs help I help her” and “She would rather spend her time with me than with anyone else” as evidence of the love in their relationships. Many men define “commitment” not as constant reassurances of love, but as the daily work they do to support their families. “Many working class women agree with men that a man’s job is something he does out of love for his family,” Cancian observes. “But middle-class women and social scientists rarely recognize men’s practical help as a form of love.”¹²

When men do speak for themselves, their styles of intimacy are as effective as women’s in producing feelings of emotional closeness and meaningful connection. Psychologist Scott Swain conducted a study in which he defined intimacy as any action in a friendship. “that connotes a positive and mutual sense of meaning and importance to the participants.” The participants, not the observers, got to define what intimacy meant to them, and “any action” would do. One young man said that his most intimate experiences with other men consisted of “a lot of outdoor-type things—fishing, hunting, Tom-Sawyer-type things.”¹³

Swain’s interviews reveal how different male intimacy is from the female standard. Men use the degree of comfort and relaxation they feel with other men as an index of closeness, says Swain. One interviewee explained that he was “more relaxed around guys. You don’t have to watch what you say. . . . I wouldn’t be careful I shouldn’t say something like this, or I shouldn’t do this. That’s because with the guys, they’re just like you.”¹⁴ When asked to recall a “meaningful” time with men friends, another young man said:

The fun things come to mind. We rented a VCR and some movies and watched those, and just all the laughing together comes to mind as most memorable. As to the most meaningful, those also come pretty close to being the most meaningful, because there was just total relaxation there. That I felt no need to worry. There’s no need to worry about anyone making conversation. The conversation will come. And we can laugh at each other, and you can laugh at yourself, which is handy.¹⁵

When they were asked to describe the “most meaningful occasion spent with a same-sex friend,” the men mentioned twenty-six events, of which twenty were spent in “an activity other than talking”—fishing, playing guitars, diving, drinking, weightlifting, winning a court case, being with a close friend whose sister had died. “Can’t think of just one thing that stood out in my mind,” one man said. “It was more like a push-pull type thing. Like I’d pull him through things and he’d pull me through things.”¹⁶

Several men said that intimacy with women friends is “just talking”; the talk that women like is, to them, “the lighter side of things.” For many men, actions speak louder than words and carry greater value for the friendship, as they do in love relationships. They do not need to say to each other, “I like you”; being invited to a game or another activity means “I like you.” (Many parents try to teach their daughters this fact about boys, explaining that if a boy puts a frog in a

girl's lunchbox, it means he likes her. Girls find this hard to believe.) Men convey affection to one another, adds Swain, with "physical gestures, laughing at jokes, doing one another favors, keeping in touch, 'doing stuff,' teasing, and just being around friends."¹⁷

Of all these expressions of affection and closeness, perhaps the one that women tend to understand least is men's language of teasing and "joking around." Here, for example, is an exchange between a worried mother and Dr. Joyce Brothers:

Dear Dr. Brothers: Our 14-year-old son loves to tease his young sister While he has a lively sense of humor, she often doesn't appreciate it, and this becomes the cause of some really unpleasant quarrels. Is there anything we can do about this?

Joyce Brothers, being a woman and a psychologist, uses a female yardstick to measure this boy's behavior:

Teasing often is not simple harmless fun. It can be a way of masking hostility, a kind of hit-and-run attack. . . . Ask your son how he'd like it if he were constantly the butt of jokes or if these same tricks were played on him. . . . Discourage the "teasing" and try to get your son to explore what's behind it.¹⁸

Notice that the direction of the intervention here is to change the boy's way into the girl's way. Joyce Brothers does not advise the parents, "Discourage your daughter's humorlessness and try to get her to explore the reasons she takes her brother's teasing so seriously." The son does know what it's like to be the butt of jokes, because that is how boys and men express many of their feelings to one another. Girls and women keep looking for the meaning "behind" the jokes, a doomed enterprise that makes women seem, to men, overly literal and humorless. To many women, like Joyce Brothers, it is obvious that the boy's teasing is hostile and demeaning. To many men, it is just as obvious that the boy's teasing is his way of being affectionate while also being appropriately masculine.

Men use jokes, teasing, and "horsing around" as ways of creating bonds of camaraderie and in-group knowledge. Jokes communicate affection (and other feelings) indirectly, so no one can accuse the speaker of being wimpy or soft; they protect the speaker from the risk of rejection (or counterattack) that a straightforward remark might evoke. One of my husband's golfing friends, on hearing that my husband's son would be playing with them that day, said, "That's good; I hope he's a better player than you are." It's the kind of teasing remark that few women would say to a female friend—it would be regarded as a hurtful putdown—but my husband laughed and knew it to mean "I enjoy golfing with you and like you very much, even if you do beat me more often than I like."

Among men friends, Swain concludes, joking "camouflages the hidden agenda of closeness." Most men recognize the hidden agenda, but many women do not. In Swain's study, for example, one man had learned to waterski from his best friend. He had trouble getting the knack of it, but by joking the friend removed competitive pressure and worries about failure:

We were just able to make jokes about it, and we laughed at each other all day. And it finally worked out—I mean it was great for me to be that frustrated and that up-tight about it and know the only thing he was going to do was laugh at me.¹⁹

Of course, men also use jokes to create distance and to express anger or contempt; women who encroach on traditionally male territory do not mistake the hostility behind the sexist put-downs that they are expected to tolerate with "good humor." But the ambiguity in much of male teasing is the reason that jokes are such a good disguise for love and attachment: The speaker can always claim the listener didn't understand his intention. Most males become fluent in joke-speak and its many meanings by adolescence. They know that "What a jerk!," coming from a friend when they fall off a bicycle, conveys amused affection, but the same remark from a passing stranger is an act of hostility:

NOTES