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BY CHRISTOPHER BYRON



Five months after pleading guilty to six counts of stock fraud, fallen junk-bond king Michael Milken is now preparing to meet his fate. In two weeks, U.S. District judge Kimba M. Wood will sentence him, and help us begin to decide his place in history. Hundreds of letters from all over the country have been flooding Wood's court, urging everything from dismissal to emasculation. Meanwhile, Milken bides his time, relying on faith, hope, and his own conspicuous charity.

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BY DEBORAH TANNEN



Look who's talking—and who's not. To most New Yorkers, silence is leaden—so the talk of the town rages on. And on. Here, the author of the best-selling *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* assigns speaking roles to lovers and other strangers. In this city, the dating game has different rules: The strong, silent type may be a woman, and the man may be the one to hone his listening skills. A conversation piece.

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Talking NEW YORK

IT'S NOT JUST THE
ACCENT THAT MAKES US DIFFERENT

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

ALLISON BROKE UP WITH Manny at the end of a long car ride back from the Adirondacks to Manhattan. He had driven her crazy by talking the entire trip. After giving his assessment of all the people they had met, lecturing about the local flora and fauna, and listing options for their next vacation, he provided a running commentary on what he saw out the window and read road signs out loud. Hadn't Manny heard of the strong, silent type? To Allison, his monologue underscored how different they were.

This apportionment of talk and silence was the reverse of the pattern I've discovered in most places in America. Generally, it's women who complain that the men in their lives don't talk to them, and men who gripe that the women they live with talk too much and insist on conversation when they want to read the newspaper or watch television. Why are Allison and Manny so different? You guessed it: He's a New Yorker and she's from Minnesota.

Native New Yorkers (I know, because I'm one) sometimes feel like a unique species. In this way, we are: Gender differ-

ences in conversational style are exaggerated or reversed if one partner is from New York and the other is not. If the woman is from New York and the man isn't, the widespread tendency for the woman to talk at home while the man clams up increases. If he is from New York and she isn't—as with Allison and Manny—the opposite can happen.

Since the publication of my new book, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, most of the people who have written to me, or called in to talk shows I'm on, have told me that their relationships fit the pattern I describe: The woman comes home and tells all to a man who has nothing to say. But every now and then I get a call—as I did on *Donahue* recently—from a woman who complains that her husband talks constantly and doesn't let her get a word in edgewise, or a man who complains that his wife never talks. A male television-talk-show host asked me, "Why do women leave the room and refuse to discuss a problem when you're trying to talk it out?"—just the question countless women ask me about men. In these exceptional cases, it almost always turns out that the man is from New York, and the woman isn't.

We look to a primary relationship as a haven in a hostile world; we expect our partner to be our best friend. But if our primary relationship is with a person of the other gender, we're likely to have different assumptions about what it means to be best friends. Women assume that the essence of friendship is talk: a free-wheeling exchange of thoughts and feelings, daily experiences and impressions. In contrast, many men feel it means doing things together, or simply being together; talk isn't required. In fact, they feel that one of the benefits of being close is not having to talk, since talk is something you have to do to prove yourself in the outside world. But New Yorkers—both men and women—are often big talkers, at home as well as outside. What's more, conversational style differences between New Yorkers and others make it hard for a non-New Yorker to get into a New York conversation.

Here's how it works: Allison herself was partly responsible for Manny's verbal onslaught. He believes that talk is a sign of goodwill in a friendly situation and silence is evidence of a lack of rapport. So it was her silence that made him resort to scenery and road signs to fill the conversa-

TALKING NEW YORK

tional space. But Manny wasn't blameless. Each indication that he intended to keep talking reinforced Allison's determination not to talk in order to demonstrate the behavior she considered appropriate: companionable silence.

AS IT HAPPENS, CONVERSATIONAL-style differences that cause grief in a long-term relationship are often what attract New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers to each other in the first place. It was his talkativeness that drew Allison to Manny. She thought of it as openness, a willingness to do his share of relating. And Manny was drawn to Allison precisely because of her tendency to listen rather than talk, which he saw as calm reserve, as being "centered." But the conversational-style differences that bring New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers together can eventually drive them apart.

Another bone of contention is contentiousness. Men are, by and large, more comfortable with opposition and argument than women, who are inclined to support and agree with each other. Many women resent it if their partners disagree with them in public or correct them on points of fact. If a woman tells another woman about a problem with her boss, her friend is likely to join her in criticizing the boss.

But if a woman comes home and tells her male partner the same story, he may explain the boss's point of view. She thinks he's being disloyal; he thinks he's being helpful. Indeed, men often take oppositional stances when they feel friendly, by arguing about sports and politics, for example, or just razzing and teasing each other.

In New York, however, friendly contentiousness is common among women as well as men. A New Englander who arrived in New York and took a cab from the train station was immediately offended by a cabdriver who gruffly took him to task for slamming the cab door. But a New Yorker told me she loves nothing better than to fly into La Guardia and have a porter chide her for having heavy suitcases or to go to a delicatessen and have a waiter tell her she ordered the wrong thing. Since New Yorkers assume a no-holds-barred directness with intimates, we regard offhand brusqueness (as distinguished from downright nastiness) from strangers or acquaintances as a sign

of friendliness: They are treating us like family.

This can result in a tendency to disagree and question, rather than agree and support, in conversation with friends. And contentiousness can get New York women into trouble, because women are expected to be agreeable. For example, women often enact a routine I call "troubles talk": One woman tells a trouble, and the other offers a matching one. A woman from Massachusetts complained that a woman friend from New York was always putting her down. It turned out that when she mentioned a problem, her



New Yorkers of both genders assume directness is appropriate. We treat strangers or acquaintances brusquely, like family.

friend often said, "That's not a problem for me." This violates the rules of troubles talk, which require that if you can't say, "I'm the same way," you should at least say, "I know how you feel." Refusing to admit to being the same seems to imply thinking you're better.

Another way that many New York women differ from women at large has to do with directness. Most women don't give orders in the form of direct commands; instead, they suggest and hint. This works fine if everyone understands the system. Jane asks, "Shall we go to the movies tonight?" and Susan answers, "I'm tired, but if you want, we can go." Jane then lets Susan off the hook: "If

you're tired, we'll go another time." Susan gets her way without demanding it, and Jane feels she chose not to go. But a man might take Susan's statement literally: You said you'd go, so let's put on our coats.

New Yorkers of both genders assume directness is appropriate when two people are close. So women and men may reverse roles if the woman is from New York and the man's family is from a culture that prefers indirectness, such as Greek or Japanese. This is what happened when a Greek man accused his New York-bred wife of selfishness because she never did what he wanted.

He would send out hints about his preferences, which she'd miss because she assumed that married people tell each other directly what's on their minds. For instance, whenever they were in a department store, he would suggest they visit the furniture department. He was certain she knew he wanted to buy new furniture, yet she refused to do so; though she had wondered why he was so interested in furniture, she was genuinely surprised to learn he wanted to buy some, since he hadn't said so. This man also picked up signals his wife hadn't sent out. For example, when she asked if he wanted to go to a party, he assumed she wanted to go—otherwise, why would she ask? He agreed to go for her sake and was angry and incredulous when she later said she'd gone because *he'd* wanted to.

THERE'S ALSO A DISCREPANCY between New York women and their non-New York sisters in terms of raising topics. When I studied conversations between Louisiana children and their best friends, which had been video-

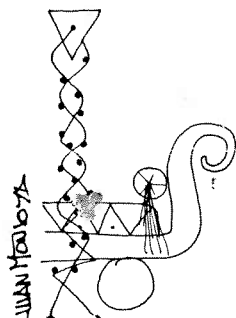
taped by psychologist Bruce Dorval of Long Island University, I found that the girls' centered on one girl's problems; the conversations between boys jumped from topic to topic. There was one pair of boys who did discuss problems, but each talked about his own problem and dismissed the other's. Yet the boys didn't seem to mind. For them, dismissing the other's problem was a way of implying, "You shouldn't feel bad because your problems aren't so bad." When it comes to switching subjects, New York women resemble these Louisiana boys more than the girls. New Yorkers trust others to get back to a topic if they have more to say about it. So New York women may be seen as self-centered

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by non-New Yorkers. This is just what women say of men who start following their own agenda rather than exploring and pursuing the topics raised by them.

What's the logic behind these New York conversational strategies? The style can be understood as "high involvement." You show you're a good person by demonstrating enthusiastic participation in the conversation. You offer talk as a gift. You convert minor commonplace experiences into long, dramatic stories full of acted-out dialogue and exaggerated facial expressions. You talk along when you listen, offering little (or big) expressions of interest or disbelief or even mini-stories showing your understanding through shared experience. You toss out new topics to forestall any lulls. All this conversational exuberance is intensified by loud volume and fast pacing, to reinforce the enthusiasm and participation. The risk of offending by not talking is deemed greater than the risk of offending by talking too much.

UNBEKNOWNST TO WELL-INTENTIONED New Yorkers, high-involvement strategies seem intrusive to those who have what I call "high-considerateness" styles. They're showing they are good people not by demonstrating eager involvement, but by not imposing. With volume held in check, they leave nice long pauses to make sure other speakers are finished before they start to talk. They are circumspect in dealing out talk, often waiting to be asked to speak, to make sure that others want to hear what they have to say. They state the points of their stories rather than acting them out, and the points are less likely to be personal. This leaves New Yorkers wondering whether the story has a point at all. Non-New Yorkers also make a lot less noise when they listen, causing New Yorkers to wonder if they've fallen asleep. They make sure a topic is exhausted before introducing a new one—a strategy that can exhaust a New Yorker who thinks the topic has been talked to death—and they would rather risk offense by saying too little than too much.

These differences wreak havoc in close relationships when only one partner is from New York. The New York-bred partner ends up doing all the talking and accuses the other of not holding up his or her end of the conversation. The non-New York partner ends up seething: "You only want to hear yourself talk; you're not interested in me." Both attribute their dissatisfaction not to differences in conversational style, but to the other's personality flaws and bad intentions.

So much for talk in close relationships. What of the time spent talking "in public"—in social situations with people we



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know less well, and at work? Most women use language to create connection and intimacy, so they are more comfortable talking in private, with people they feel close to. Men use language to negotiate status in a group. It goes back to the way boys and girls learn to use language growing up. In a study of working-class black children in Philadelphia, anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin has found that boys tend to play outside, in hierarchical groups. High-status boys give orders, and low-status boys get pushed around, so boys learn to negotiate status by displaying their abilities and accomplishments. But girls' groups operate on more egalitarian principles; Goodwin observed girls ostracizing one girl who dressed better than her friends and another who did "too" well in school. So girls tend to avoid boasting or appearing better than others.

THESE GENDER DIFFERENCES put women at a disadvantage in public situations. At a meeting, say, men are more likely than women to jump in, hold forth, and state their opinions as fact. The high-involvement style of New York men reinforces this advantage by making them even more comfortable speaking up and speaking out, though if they go too far, they may be considered abrasive by non-New Yorkers. High-involvement style also gives New York-bred women an advantage in this regard, but the advantage is not as clear-cut.

The tendency to speak up at meetings, to be comfortable with argument and conflict, to put oneself forward and make one's accomplishments known, may make New York women more forceful in positions of authority. But all women are judged by the same expectations. Whereas New York style reinforces a man's masculinity as well as his authority, it may reinforce a woman's authority but compromise her femininity in the eyes of non-New Yorkers. She may be respected and taken seriously, but she may also be disliked. Whereas the New York man is considered assertive, the New York woman is seen as aggressive. Whereas he is a take-charge person, she is called—as Geraldine Ferraro was by Barbara Bush—the word that "rhymes with rich."

The obvious question is "Why are New Yorkers different?" Many people suggest that because there are so many of us in so little space, we have to get closer and move faster. But it is just as logical to say that because there are so many of us, we have to be extra considerate of one another. Tokyo is quite crowded, but Japanese style is as high-considerate as you can get: maximally indirect and talk-averse. Whereas many New Yorkers will exchange fleeting remarks with just about

anyone within hearing distance, an American living in Japan was hurt when his neighbor walked within inches of his open front door without showing any sign of having noticed him. The American was told that this was the Japanese way of not imposing in an overcrowded setting. So crowding in itself doesn't account for New York style. Instead, I believe that our way of talking results from the conversational styles of cultures that settled in large numbers in New York: East European and Mediterranean. More recently arrived immigrants, such as Hispanics, Africans, and West Indians, fit right in. Class plays a role, too. The fast-paced, stand-close style of ethnic New Yorkers seems as alien to patrician New Yorkers as it does to Americans from other parts of the country.

Because of these cultural influences, moreover, not all New Yorkers have the same conversational style. For example, an Irish New Yorker may talk as quickly and exuberantly as a Jewish one but about less personal topics. Even two New York Jews may differ. One woman grumbled that her husband doesn't believe she can tell a story by herself. When they have guests and she begins to talk, he takes over. I explained that he probably isn't trying to tell the story *for* her but *with* her. He expects them to toss the narrative ball back and forth, speaking on the same team. By participating in her story, he's showing his interest and his caring, not trying to take over. The reason he ends up telling her story is that she withdraws, leaving him to carry the ball. To understand why this happened, I asked about their backgrounds. "We have the same background," she said. "We're both from New York, and we're both Jewish." But I wasn't licked. "Is he East European Jewish, and are you German Jewish?" Her mouth fell open: "Yes." New York Jews of German background often show the northern European influence of high considerateness, whereas East European Jews share high-involvement style with other East Europeans.

SO WHAT'S A PERSON TO DO? When your partner is driving you mad, before accusing him or her of a flawed character or evil motives—or maybe right afterward—stop and ask yourself if the culprit might be different conversational styles. If only one of you is a native New Yorker, chances are especially great that the answer will be yes. With the burden of blame lifted, you can start to make small adjustments. Take heart: Allison and Manny got back together and lived happily ever after. (Well, as happily as any of us.) And on long car rides, they're both busy trying to quiet their children, who overwhelm Allison's silence and Manny's talk with their noisy arguments.

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