

# Human nature versus social roles and need for self-observation

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## Conflict Resolved: Human Nature versus the Social Mores of Men and Women

Despite the massive changes that have occurred over the past 20 years in the relationships between men and women, Tannen's argument is still timely and relevant because it touches something deeper than roles people play. The last two decades have shown us unprecedented cultural changes in American society. Women have been more present in politics and the media than ever before. For the first time in history there was a strong possibility of seeing a woman president in the United States. In television broadcasting there was an explosion of woman-hosted talk shows with Oprah and Rosie leading the pack. High profile women perpetrators have entered the mindset with movies such as *Monster* chronicling the life of female killer Aileen Wuornos. And men all over the world still squirm whenever they hear the name Lorena Bobbitt. We've witnessed all manners of gender bending with TV shows including *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl*. Same sex marriages have challenged the traditional roles of men and women in the home. Reality TV has taught us that women can be tough and men can be gentle. Cultural acceptance of these gender based behaviors has broadened dramatically since 1990. Yet Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand* still has something to say to us after all these years. Without a doubt Tannen wrote her masterpiece from a particular socio-economic perspective with a specific audience in mind. The text has "middle-class America" watermarked on every page and no one can argue the fact that the book was intended to inform the masses. Cultural expectations

heaped upon children from a young age results in many people sent in pursuit of the “ American dream” with its corresponding gender roles. Public schools in America segregate the boys and girls. We all know that boys play football and girls are cheerleaders. Over time we become desensitized to the harsh mechanisms which society employs in order to keep both men and women stuck in their traditional roles. As Tannen tells us, “ We cannot take a step without taking stances that are prescribed by society and gender specific. We enact and create our gender, and our inequality, with every move we make.” (283) People find Tannen’s book refreshing even today because it steps outside the box. It depicts a wider perspective that helps people to recognize themselves. Reader’s accomplish the enormous task of shedding the blindfold they’ve been duped into wearing when they approach Tannen’s message from the perspective of being a human rather than either male or female.

Anyone can understand Tannen’s ideas if they simply step back and practice some self-observation. When trying this, it is important to make the distinction between what we truly think and feel as opposed to what society tells us we should be experiencing. When we are acting like a “ Man” or acting like a “ Woman” in the manner that society condones, we are usually playing a part that is contrary to human nature. The types of interactions that are described in *You Just Don’t Understand* are similar to those illustrated in the book *Games People Play* by Eric Berne, first published over forty years ago. In this earlier work we learn that people have a tendency to take on certain “ ego states”. Berne explains that everyone has a “ Parent ego state” which could be understood as a speech style where a person falls

into a pattern of saying things that their parents would say. When two such affected individuals get together they start having conversations like the people in Tannen's book. Tannen tells us that we have a choice to make in regards to our words. We can perpetuate the psychological patterns that have been handed down to us from our predecessors and continue this battle of the sexes, or we can do something different. " Understanding the other's ways of talking is a giant leap across the communication gap between women and men, and a giant step toward opening lines of communication." Tannen (298)

#### Works Cited

Berne, Eric. *Games People Play*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Tannen, Deborah. *You Just Don't Understand*. New York: Ballantine, 1990.