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Yellow Paper Series

Mansplaining, Manterrupting & Bropropriating:

Gender Bias and the Pervasive Interruption of Women

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Mansplaining, Maninterrupting & Bropropriating: Gender Bias and the Pervasive Interruption of Women

INTRODUCTION

1980s

Researchers were exploring and writing about how often women get interrupted by men in academic and professional conversations. As Catherine Krupnick reported in 1985: *“women prove to be extremely vulnerable to interruption. Numerous studies have demonstrated that in mixed-sex conversations, women are interrupted far more frequently than men are...the comments of women students often were confined to “bursts” lasting only a few seconds, while male students typically kept on talking until they had finished. Moreover, once interrupted, women sometimes stayed out of the discussion...”*¹

1990s

This topic had become such a sophisticated area of inquiry that researchers finessed the definitions of interruptions to better focus their studies on “bad” interruptions: *“there are multiple ways in which interruptions have been defined. When interpreting interruption as a form of domineering behavior, the type we refer to as intrusive interruptions may be most relevant. Intrusive interruptions function to usurp the speaker’s turn at talk with the intent of demonstrating dominance. In contrast, interruptions that include back-channel listening responses or affiliative overlaps may demonstrate enthusiasm, agreement, or rapport.”*²


2015

At the 2015 South by Southwest festival, a panel discussion on technology and innovation that included Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google, Walter Isaacson, Steve Jobs’ biographer, and Megan Smith, the Chief Technology Officer for the United States and a former Google executive, turned to the topic of the technology field needing to attract, develop and advance more women. In this conversation, Schmidt and Isaacson interrupted Megan Smith repeatedly as she tried to talk about...the need for women to have a voice in technology. In the audience Q&A, a woman stood up and asked Schmidt and Isaacson if they were aware of their own gender biases as reflected by how much they both interrupted Smith. The questioner was Judith Williams, the Global Diversity and Talent Programs Manager at Google. Neither Schmidt nor Isaacson answered her question.³

¹<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/krupnick.htm>

²<http://people.uncw.edu/hakanr/documents/genderandinterruption.pdf>

³<http://tech.blog.austin360.com/2015/03/16/sxsw-talk-how-innovation-happens-with-walter-isaacson-eric-schmidt-and-megan-smith/>



Immediately, articles entitled “Google Executive Guilty of ‘Manterruption,’” “Google To Stop ‘Manterrupting’ With Unconscious Bias Training,” and “Google Chairman Manterrupts Female Tech Leader at SXSW to Mansplain Need for Diversity in Tech” took over the media coverage of this awkward but illustrative moment.⁴ One of the articles even suggested that Schmidt had “bropropriated” Smith’s ideas when Smith talked about how she would float ideas in meetings that would not be acknowledged but when a man repeated the same ideas at a later point, his ideas would be heard as if she had not said the same thing earlier.⁵

When social behaviors like this are observed, studied and discussed for a lengthy period of time without the behaviors changing or even being acknowledged as needing to change, the people impacted by the behavior respond in creative ways (like inventing new words) that grab our attention and make us listen.

Women have been talking for decades about the realities of consistently being interrupted by men when they speak in the workplace; however, the focus on men interrupting women at work has recently intensified to a point where new vocabulary has emerged to better describe the nuances of women’s interrupted realities. This new vocabulary is deliberately sarcastic, not to disrespect or demean, but to highlight the frustration that the interruptive behavior continues to engender. What does this new vocabulary tell us about what women are experiencing in the workplace and how these experiences shape the careers of these women?

In 2008, Rebecca Solnit wrote an essay entitled “Men Explain Things to Me” where she defined “mansplaining” as a man interrupting a woman to explain to her something that she actually knows more about than he does. She recounts an experience where a man once interrupted her to tell her about a very important book that had come out in her field only to realize that he was telling Rebecca about...Rebecca’s book.⁶ In 2015, Time published an article explaining the terms “manterrupting” (unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man) and “bropropriating” (a man taking a woman’s idea and taking credit for it) with Kanye West’s “manterruption” of Taylor Swift’s acceptance at the 2009 VMA Awards as a prime illustration of the term.⁷

DEFINITIONS

Intrusive Interrupting:

intentionally or unintentionally usurping the speaker’s turn at talk with the intent of ceasing the speaker’s ability to finish organically

Mansplaining:

a man interrupting a women to explain to her something that she actually knows more about than he does

Manterrupting:

unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man

Bropropriating:

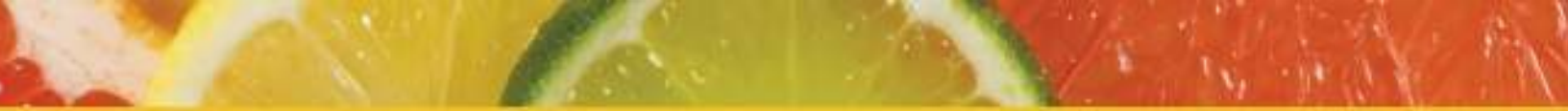
a man taking a woman’s idea and taking credit for it

⁴<http://www.hcamag.com/hr-news/google-executive-guilty-of-manterruption-198203.aspx>; <http://2paragraphs.com/2015/03/google-to-stop-manterrupting-with-unconscious-bias-training/>; <http://www.payscale.com/career-news/2015/03/google-chairman-manterrupts-female-tech-leader-at-sxsw-to-mansplain-need-for-diversity-in-tech>

⁵<http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/digital-life-news/eric-schmidt-caught-out-by-google-diversity-manager-for-manterrupting-at-sxsw-conference-20150317-1m0ume.html>

⁶<https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/>

⁷<http://time.com/3666135/sheryl-sandberg-talking-while-female-manterruptions/>



We can now add Schmidt's and Isaacson's interruptions of Megan Smith to the list of illustrations that help us understand and use this new vocabulary.

People interrupt people frequently in conversations, in meetings, and in other verbal contact in workplaces!

So, is the interruption of women by men different from interruptions in general?

Does this particular universe of behavior go beyond regular interruptions to give us a deeper look at implicit gender bias and how that impacts perceptions, development and advancement of women in the workplace?

In 2014, Kieran Snyder, an empirical linguist, decided to create a simple informal experiment to test if women did indeed get interrupted more than men in meetings at work.⁸ She observed interactions in meetings where there were at least 4 other people in the room to study four key areas: how often interruptions happened, whether men or women were interrupted more, whether men or women interrupted others more, and who were people most likely to interrupt when they did interrupt someone.

Snyder found that men interrupted at twice the rate that women did, and men are three times more likely to interrupt women as they are to interrupt another man. When women do interrupt, they interrupt other women 87% of the time.

Snyder's informal study inspired me to do a similar study of observing interruptions in meetings of senior leaders (where I was not an active participant as a speaker or advisor) to see if my findings would illustrate the same patterns as Snyder's. I also interviewed several of the men and women after the meetings to see if they were aware of their interruption behaviors and/or how they had been affected by being interrupted.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Is there a gender difference in meetings, conference calls and/or panel discussions at conferences, especially at the higher visibility leadership levels, in:
who is interrupted more,
who interrupts more,
who is more likely to interrupt whom,
who is more likely to realize the interruption behaviors, and
how interruptions are perceived and managed?

⁸http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2014/07/23/study_men_interrupt_women_more_in_tech_workplaces_but_high_ranking_women.html

METHODOLOGY

I observed/listened to 15 live meetings, 11 conference calls, and 3 panel discussions at conferences between July 2014 and January 2015 for a total of approximately 41 hours (2460 minutes) of conversations. All of the meetings, calls and plenaries included people in leadership organizations within their organizations – Vice Presidents or above in corporate entities and Partners/Managing Directors or above in professional service firms. Each conversation had at least 5 people with at least 2 of the people being women. The number of women generally ranged from 20% to 45% of the group being observed/heard; women were not the numerical majority in any of the groups. I was not an active participant in any of the meetings, but I was an invited guest given an ongoing advisory role with the organizations involved. Neither the organizations nor the individuals in the room were aware that I was observing the number of interruptions. I informed them of my observations at the end of the conversation.

15 Live Meetings
11 Conference Calls
3 Panel Discussions

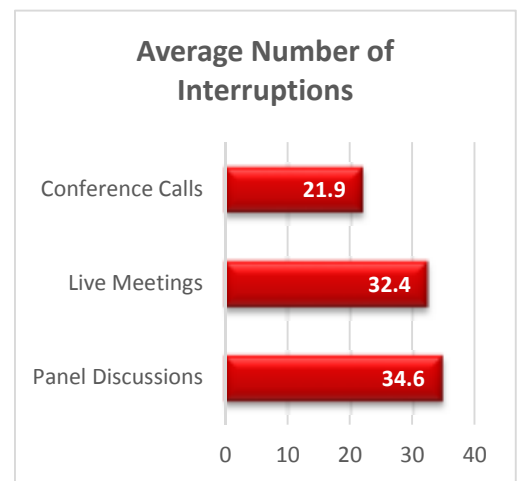
2460 Minutes of Conversations

In addition to observing/listening to these conversations, I interviewed 14 women and 13 men who had participated in the observed conversations.

FINDINGS: A Summary

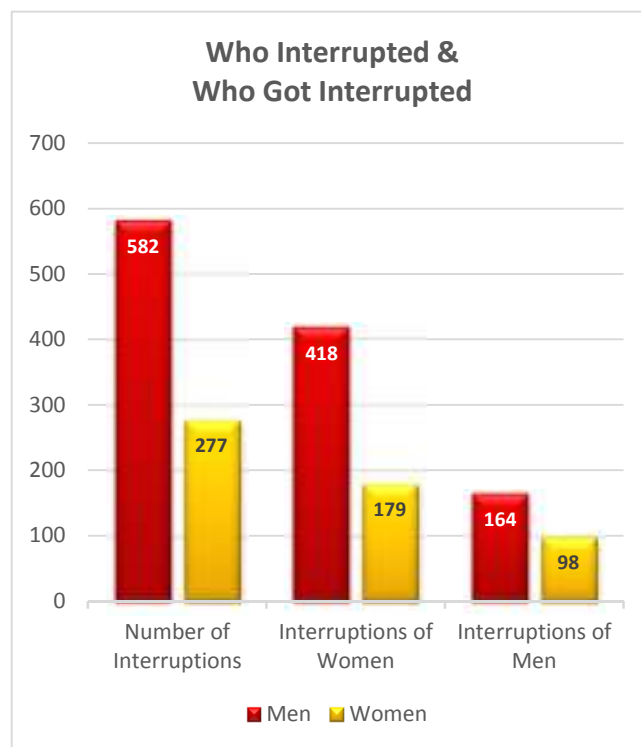
The general findings of this informal study were consistent with Snyder's findings and added a few additional nuances that provide insights as to which contexts can lead to more interruptions of women and how women internalize these interruptions, especially the intrusive interruptions.

Over the course of observing and listening to 15 live meetings, 11 conference calls and 3 panel discussions, I noted a total of 859 interruptions for a total average of 29.6 interruptions per meeting/call/plenary. As Snyder suggests in her study, people generally interrupt each other a lot. People also seem to interrupt each other more when they are face to face than on the phone. The plenaries averaged the highest number of interruptions with 34.6 interruptions per plenary. The live meetings followed with 32.4 interruptions per meeting, and the conference calls averaged the least interruptions with 21.9 interruptions per call.



Of the 859 interruptions I noted, 582 (67.8%) were by men and 277 (32.2%) were by women. Men definitely interrupted more than women, and they were also far more likely to interrupt women than they were to interrupt men. Of the 582 interruptions by men, 418 of them (71.8%) were interruptions of women who were speaking and 164 (28.2%) were interruptions of other men. Interestingly, women also are far more likely to interrupt other women than they are to interrupt men. Of the 277 interruptions by women, 179 (64.6%) interruptions were women interrupting other women who were speaking and 98 (35.4%) were women interrupting men.

Overall, men interrupted significantly more than women, and both men and women were far more likely to interrupt women than they were to interrupt men. An overwhelming majority (89.3%) of the men's interruptions of women were intrusive interruptions, but only 42.6% of men's interruptions of men were intrusive. Less than 20% of women's interruptions of men or women were intrusive.



CONTEXT MATTERS

Women were most likely to get interrupted by men in panel discussions followed by live meetings and then conference calls.

FINDINGS: Context Matters

As previously noted, the average number of interruptions was highest on plenaries followed by live meetings and then conference calls. This also aligned with how likely women were to get interrupted intrusively in these different contexts. Women were most likely to get intrusively interrupted on panel discussions, and they were least likely to get interrupted on conference calls.

On panel discussions, women were likely to be interrupted by men regardless of whether they were specifically asked a question by the moderator/audience member or they were adding their commentary to a point made by someone else. Almost all of the interruptions of women by men on plenaries were intrusive interruptions. Women mostly responded to these interruptions by ceding the floor to the

interrupter, but when men interrupted other men, there was usually a series of interruptions as each man sought to be heard. Finally, in addition to the high levels of “maninterrupting,” panel discussions were the contexts in which there was also the highest level of “mansplaining” and “bropropriating.” The plenaries were very similar to the Schmidt, Isaacson, and Smith panel at the South by Southwest festival.

**ALL
INTERRUPTIONS
ARE NOT THE
SAME**

Men were more likely to interrupt to make their opinions heard, and women were more likely to interrupt to ask questions and seek clarifications.

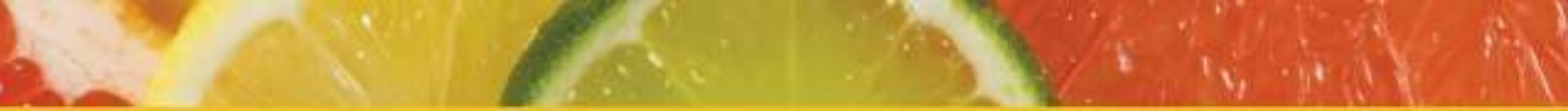
In live meetings, there was a lot of variance in interruptions based on the topic of the meeting, the seniority levels of the men and women in the room, the gender of the meeting leader, the length of the meetings and the number of people who joined the meeting remotely via videoconference or teleconference. While the men interrupted twice as much as women and were significantly more likely to interrupt women than men (about 75% to 25%), there was also a difference in the types of interruptions made by men and women in live meetings. The majority of interruptions by men were to state a disagreement/agreement, accelerate a conversation or add personal perspectives; the majority of the interruptions by women involved asking questions, asking for points to be repeated or chiming in with logistical details about where people were, clarifying deadlines, etc.

There was no significant change in the number or patterns of interruptions if a woman was leading the meeting, but if the woman leading the meeting was the most senior person in the room, there was a reduction in the overall number of interruptions which resulted in fewer interruptions of women by men.

On conference calls, the overall number of interruptions decreased, and men were not that much more likely to interrupt women (60%) as they were to interrupt other men (40%). The lack of visual cues that trigger interruption behaviors seemed to have impacted how interruptions worked.

FINDINGS: Conscious vs. Unconscious Interruptions


In the individual interviews with several of the men and women who had participated in these meetings/calls/plenaries, most of the men reported not being aware of either interrupting anyone or having been interrupted. Although a couple of the men did remember being interrupted (both by other men), and they recalled a quick conscious decision making moment when they chose to respond to the interruptions by getting back into the conversations, most of the men's interruptions of others and/or responses to being interrupted were not conscious or deliberate for them.



The women, however, were overwhelmingly conscious of being interrupted, and they reported devoting considerable cognitive energy to processing the interruptions and choosing how to respond or not respond to the interruptions. When women were interrupted in meetings and on panel discussions, they reported feeling like they definitely were interrupted because they were women and they felt:


- "...put in the spotlight with everyone looking at me waiting to see if I'm going to be the doormat that just lets someone walk over me or if I'm going to be the bitch that pushes back, and either way is not really going to work out in my favor..."
- "...disrespected...I have more knowledge, experience and time put into this, and I still get interrupted like I'm an intern guessing at an answer...what really upsets me is that no one else says anything..."
- "...invisible...I just said the thing that the guy next to me is now saying, and people are nodding at him like he came up with some bright idea instead of repeating what I just said..."
- "...stuck...it's like this every meeting...I'm interrupted...no one notices...and I get told in my reviews that I need to be more assertive..."
- "...frustrated...I worry so much before I interrupt anyone, and when I do, it's because I really needed to...someone was just on a bad path with where they were going...just wrong, you know...so I have to interrupt to get the meeting on track again..."

Interestingly, most of the women who were interrupted on conference calls did not report these same feelings of disrespect, frustration or invisibility. They attributed the interruptions more to the difficulties in having effective group conversations via conference call than on their gender per se.





IDEAS FOR INCLUSION

- **Create and use agendas for meetings.** An increase in structure leads to a decrease in interruptions. When the meeting's purpose, leader, outcomes, etc. are defined well, there is greater clarity as to who should be speaking and why. This is absolutely more applicable in meetings that don't involve a lot of brainstorming, but even in "free thought" meetings, an informal agenda can decrease interruptions. Additionally, when a woman sets the agenda for the meeting and/or leads the meeting, it is easier for her to reclaim the floor if she is interrupted.
 - **Take turns.** In meetings where the meeting leaders asked people to go around the table and give their perspectives, the clarity around who should be speaking was sharpened, and if someone interrupted, the interruptions were neutralized much faster because it was clear who should be speaking and who was next in line to speak. The "take turns" approach was more likely to be implemented when women led the meetings, and there was a markedly less number of interruptions overall in these meetings, especially by men. This approach to leading meetings and conversations makes the decision to talk more conscious than in an unstructured exchange.
 - **Remind people at the beginning of the meeting that interruptions prevent an effective exchange of ideas and make meetings longer than necessary.** When interruptions are evoked at the beginning of meetings as undesirable behaviors that need to be avoided, people more actively seek to avoid those behaviors. While this does not eradicate interruptions, it does decrease them.
 - **Separate "divergent thinking" from "convergent thinking" conversations.** A primary concern raised by men and women alike about conversations that are structured in ways to prevent interruptions is that this structure reduces creative thinking or a free flow of ideas. Separating divergent thinking (unstructured brainstorming and idea generation) from convergent thinking (idea analysis and decision making) allows for structure in the latter without compromising the organic nature of the former. While there will be the inevitable interruptions in the former, the reduction of interruptions in the latter will allow for women's voices to be included as an active – and uninterrupted – part of the leadership and decision making processes.
 - **Men, get engaged!** There is nothing that stops an interrupting man more than another man pointing out the interruptions. The more we can pull men into this conversation, the better the conversations will get. A well-placed "Excuse me, but 'X' was saying something. Let's hear her out." can go a long way.
- 

- **Women, stay engaged!** The interruption of your thoughts and ideas by men is unconscious for the most part. Do not take it personally. Do not internalize interruptions as signals to disengage or disconnect. Get back in the conversation subtly and consistently so that your voice is heard even if you have to repeat yourself in order to be heard.
- **Disinterrupt interruptions.** One simple way to disinterrupt an interruption is to thank the interrupter for sharing his perspective and continue your original point. The interruption, then, becomes a bump in the road instead of a turn off the road.
- **Interrupt bropropriation.** If you have voiced an idea and you hear someone bring it up later in the meeting (or in another meeting), remind people of your original suggestion with a gentle “Thanks for coming back to this idea. It’s great that you think it’s a good idea. I would love to hear more of your thoughts on it.” If you hear someone else’s idea get bropropriated, chime in with “Absolutely. I’ve been thinking about it since [X] suggested it, and I agree that it’s a good idea.”
- **Speak up about interruptions.** Women are often given negative feedback if they “complain” about being interrupted in the heat of the interrupted moment; however, when an interrupter is made aware of the interruptions offline after the meeting, many interrupters do become more conscious of their tendencies.

"I was born a woman. Thirteen years ago, at the age of 40, I decided to change my sex. I did this not to gain any male advantage, but rather, because of a lifelong gender identity confusion...by far, the biggest difference I have noticed is that people who do not know that I was a woman treat me with far more respect. I can even complete a whole sentence without being interrupted by a man."

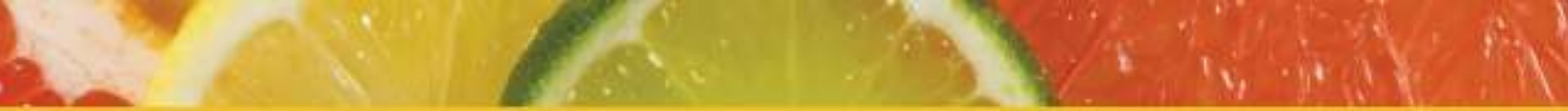
Ben Barres, PhD.

Professor of Neurobiology, and Chair of the
Department of Neurobiology
Stanford University School of Medicine

FINAL THOUGHTS

We cannot talk about women’s retention, advancement and leadership in workplaces without exploring what happens when women are consistently interrupted in the workplace. If women cannot even be heard, can they truly advance into leadership?

We also have to fully explore what the impact of being interrupted is on women. Many of the women in this study shared how difficult it was for them to continue feeling engaged in their workplaces when they were being interrupted so often by men who were seniors, peers and even juniors to them. Simply acknowledging the interrupting and the impact of it will start a very necessary conversation in our workplaces.



As I wrapped up this study, one of the study's male reviewers suggested another couple of additions to the new vocabulary based on what he has observed in meetings. I include them below for your consideration.

- **MANTERPRETATION:** a man's interpretation of something a woman says that is different than what she means but requires that she defends what she actually meant to say.
- **MANIMIZATION:** a man's minimization of a woman's thoughts or ideas which, upon the man's further reflection, leads to the man's perception of the validity/intelligence of the thoughts or ideas which more often than not eventually leads to bropropriation.

Another reviewer raised interesting questions about how dynamics would shift in meetings with all women or all men and if there was a tipping point of the number of women in a room where interruptions of women would decrease.

The energetic responses to this research from a diverse group of reviewers and early readers has helped me understand that while the study answers some questions, we are quite far from fully understanding and/or negotiating this topic. We need to do more formalized research in this area and we need to keep experimenting to see what works in reducing the interruptions.

We've come a long way in better understanding the problem. That said, we have a long way to go in solving it. This study is a small step in keeping us moving in the right direction.

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