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COMMENTARY

## The Feminine Technique

**Men attack problems. Maybe women understand that there's a better way.**

By Deborah Tannen

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In asking why there aren't more female newspaper columnists, Maureen Dowd confessed that six months into the job, she tried to quit because "I felt as though I were in a 'Godfather' movie, shooting and getting shot at."

"Men enjoy verbal dueling," said Dowd, who is the only female Op-Ed columnist at the New York Times. "As a woman," she explained, "I wanted to be liked — not attacked."

Dowd put her finger on one reason fewer women than men are comfortable writing slash-and-burn columns. But she didn't take her argument to the next level and question the fundamental assumption that attack-dog journalism is the only kind worth writing.

That is the blind spot that explains why women are missing from many of the arenas of public discourse, including science (as noted by Larry Summers of Harvard) and opinion writing. (The Los Angeles Times was recently criticized for not running more women on its opinion pages.)

No one bothers to question the underlying notion that there is only one way to do science, to write columns — the way it's always been done, the men's way.

There is plenty of evidence that men more than women, boys more than girls, use opposition, or fighting, as a format for accomplishing goals that are not literally about combat — a practice that cultural linguist Walter Ong called "agonism," from the Greek word for war, *agon*.

Watch kids of any age at play. Little boys set up wars and play-fights. Little girls fight, but not for fun. Starting a fight is a common way for boys to make friends: One boy shoves another, who shoves back, and pretty soon they're engaged in play. But when a boy tries to get into play with a girl by shoving her, she's more likely to try to get away from him. A recent New Yorker cartoon captured this: It showed a little girl and a little boy eyeing each other. She's thinking, "I wonder if I should talk to him." He's thinking, "I wonder if I should kick her."

Older boys have their own version of agonism, using fighting as a format for doing things that have nothing to do with actual combat: They show affection by mock-punching, getting a friend's head in an armlock or playfully trading insults.

Here's an example that one of my students observed: Two boys and a girl are building structures with blocks. When they're done, the boys start throwing blocks at each other's structures to destroy them.

The girl protects hers with her body. The boys say they don't really want their own creations destroyed, but the risk is worth it because it's fun to destroy the other's structures. The girl sees nothing entertaining about destroying others' work.

Arguing ideas as a way to explore them is an adult version of these agonistic rituals. Because they're used to this agonistic way of exploring ideas — playing devil's advocate — many men find that their adrenaline gets going when someone challenges them, and it sharpens their minds: They think more clearly and get better ideas. But those who are not used to this mode of exploring ideas, including many women, react differently: They back off, feeling attacked, and they don't do their best thinking under those circumstances.

This is one reason many women who are talented and passionate lovers of science drop out of the profession. It's not that they're not fascinated by the science, don't have the talent to come up with new ideas or are not willing to put long hours into the lab, but that they're put off by the competitive, cutthroat culture of science.

The assumption that fighting is the only way to explore ideas is deeply rooted in Western civilization. It can be found in the militaristic roots of the Christian church and in our educational system, tracing back to all-male medieval universities where students learned by oral disputation.

Ong contrasts this with Chinese science and philosophy, which eschewed disputation and aimed to "enlighten an inquirer," not to "overwhelm an opponent." As Chinese anthropologist Linda Young showed, Chinese philosophy sees the universe in a precarious balance that must be maintained, leading to methods of investigation that focus more on integrating ideas and exploring relations among them rather than on opposing ideas and fighting over them.

Cultural training plays a big role too. Mediterranean, German, French and Israeli cultures encourage dynamic verbal opposition for women as well as men: Japanese culture discourages it for men as well as women. Perhaps that's why Japanese talk shows rarely include two guests (they'll have one or three or more), to avoid the polarized debates that our talk shows favor.

This brings us to our political discourse and the assumption that it must be agonistic in method and spirit. If we accept this false premise, then it is not surprising that fewer women than men will be found who are comfortable writing political columns. But looking for women who can write the same kind of columns that men write is a waste — exactly the opposite of what should be the benefits of diversity: introducing new and different ways of doing things.

In a book about female lawyers, Mona Harrington interviewed successful female attorneys who said they were more successful when they were not being as aggressive and confrontational as possible but instead listened, observed and better "read" opponents. In taking depositions, they got better results by adopting a "quiet, sympathetic approach" (instead of grilling and attacking) so that witnesses tended to forget that the attorney deposing them was their adversary. But, Harrington noted, they couldn't tell this to potential clients, who assumed aggression was the only way.

Instead, they had to emphasize that they were seasoned veterans of large aggressive firms who could slug it out with the best of them.

Of course a political columnist must be ready to expose wrongdoing, look critically at events and public figures and be ready to offend if necessary. But attack-dog journalism is not the only way to do this, and it probably is not the best way either.

As Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics, has put it, we tend to think that if you're not an attack dog, you're a lap dog, taking everything politicians say at face value.

But the true role of journalism should be a third way: a watchdog. And a dog who is busy attacking is not watching.

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