Should I Explain the Thing to the Lady? How (Mis)communication Theories can Explain Acts and Accusations of Mansplaining

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In October 2015, twitter user @ElleArmageddon tweeted a flow chart entitled 'Should I Explain the Thing to the Lady?'. Having been frequently confronted with men[1] explaining basic knowledge to her in a condescending tone, she decided to depict the decision making process of when to and when not to explain something to a woman. Her chart quickly went viral and would soon become known as the quintessential depiction of *mansplaining*. Whereas many women recognized the experiences they had had with mansplaining, many men expressed anger or frustration over the use of the word and claimed that there was no such thing as mansplaining. Though the phenomenon offers hours of Twitter fun, it also touches upon numerous communication theories from various research areas. This essay aims to move the discussion on mansplaining from the YouTube comments section and Twitter threads to the academic realm. What (mis)communication theories might contribute to a more informative approach to mansplaining?

The essay starts with a preliminary definition of the term *mansplaining*, attempting to combine various contentious interpretations of the term that can be found online. Mansplaining will then be looked at within the context of communication biases. What biases are at play when men engage in acts branded as mansplaining? And similarly, what biases are held by those people that accuse others of mansplaining? A second theory that is used to further analyse mansplaining is that of communication styles. There is a persistent idea that women and men have distinctly different ways of expressing themselves. Maybe mansplaining is miscommunication caused by friction between these communication styles. Lastly,

[1] In this article 'men' and 'women' denotes the biological distinction between men and women in terms of chromosomes, hormones and gene expression. However, I do not aim to define sex or gender as homogenous categories as these intersect with many other factors in constructing one's identity. Taking these factors into account is outside the scope of this article.

some theories will be proposed that might explain whether the word 'mansplaining' is an effective way of addressing miscommunication. Does this term enable women to effectively point out misogynistic behaviour with a single word? Or does it merely communicate and uphold existing polarizing gender stereotypes?

1. What is Mansplaining?

The Merriam Webster definition of mansplaining is "to explain something to a woman in a condescending way that assumes she has no knowledge about the topic" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Academic research on the topic is yet scarce and mostly uses the definitions given in internet discussions as point of departure. Discussion on its exact definition, its perceived sexist content, and its usefulness in addressing bias has been mostly held in YouTube comment sections and numerous Twitter feuds. On the one hand, there are those that feel the word empowers women to address sexist behaviour of men "who think they own the fucking place" (Urban Dictionary, 2020) and others that feel the word is "just another form of feminazi ovary-acting" (YouTube comment to BBC Three, 2018). In her 2008 essay *Men Explain Things to Me*, historian and activist Rebecca Solnit explains it as "the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence" (Solnit, 2020).

This may appear to be solely anecdotal evidence but the experience is recognized by thousands of women (see for example https://mansplained.tumblr.com/) and has since become an hypernym for the power imbalance between men and women in communication. Women are much more likely to be interrupted than men (Zimmerman & West, 1996), men are twice more likely to speak up in a group discussions (Wood, 2015) and various research has debunked the stereotype that women talk more than men (Hancock & Rubin, 2014). Mansplaining describes both the imbalance between male and female contributions to conversations and the existing norm than men have a more dominant role in conversations and women a more subordinate role.

The accusation of mansplaining is a way to express discontent with this imbalance or to communicate that a conversation is perceived as derogatory or insulting. The image of male dominance in conversation is also perpetuated and normalized in popular culture. To illustrate, less than half of the 89 films named Best

Picture at the Oscars have passed the Bechdel test (BBC News, 2018). A movie passes this test if it features more than two women who talk to each other about something besides a man (Bechdel Test, 2021). Similarly, dialogue in the majority of Disney movies is male-dominated, including those with a princess as the lead character (The Pudding, 2017). Though male dominance in conversation is not necessarily the same as mansplaining, these figures are illustrative of a discrepancy between the contributions men and women make to conversation.

All in all, mansplaining is recognized online, in real-life and in entertainment culture. However, little academic research exists that might contribute to a more thorough understanding of the communicative processes that underlie both acts and accusations of mansplaining. Three potential areas of research might contribute to the theoretical foundation of existing folk theories of the concept of mansplaining.

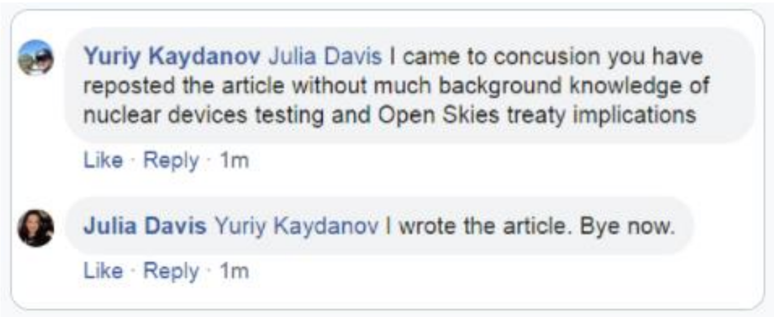
2. Don’t You Think I Know That? Mansplaining as Communicative Bias

A lot of miscommunication is the result of implicit biases (Pronin et al., 2002), which are also at play in acts and accusations of mansplaining. In fact, some studies have shown that cognitive biases might even be particularly likely to occur in conversations with members of the opposite gender (Kingsbury & Coplan, 2016). However, in the act of mansplaining some of the most prevalent biases do not appear to apply. The *egocentrism account* posits that people project their own experience and point of view onto others to fill in certain gaps (Chambers & De Dreu, 2014). This would mean that the speaker assumes that what is known to them is also known to their conversation partner. Similarly, the *curse-of-knowledge bias* (assuming that your knowledge is common knowledge) over-, rather than underestimates the shared knowledge one has with a conversation partner (Pronin et al., 2002). From these accounts, then, it would not make sense to explain or elaborate on topics that are indeed already known to the conversation partner.

The *naïve realism* account might to some extent be at play in acts of mansplaining. This is the tendency to believe that we see the world around us objectively and that those who do not share the same worldview are simply uninformed or irrational (Pronin et al., 2002). Explaining obvious information could be a result of this assumption, and is simply meant as a way to help others see one’s own objective reality better. A good illustration of this idea would be the exchange in Figure 1 below. In this exchange, a male Facebook user assumes that the differing view of a female Facebook user must be caused by the fact that she is uninformed. Her reply shows the fallacy in his assumption.

Figure 1

Facebook Comments Exchange that Illustrates the Naïve Realism Bias



The fact that this is often done in a condescending tone could be explained from the *better-than-average bias* (BTA). This is the idea people are unrealistic self-enhancers; most people would say they are better than average when asked to evaluate their abilities (Taylor & Brown, 1988). This might lead men to assume that they are more intelligent than their female conversation partner and therefore entitled to explain things to them. However, more recent research has also shown that BTA is most prevalent when participants compare themselves to a more general reference point, such as 'the average student'. The effect is less pronounced in direct communication with the comparison target (Alicke et al., 1995). The *better-than-average bias* may explain in some part the mansplaining that happens online, which is a deindividuated context, but is less likely to account for mansplaining in face-to-face communication.

Both the *naïve realism bias* and the *better-than-average bias* might to some extent explain why men have the idea that they have more knowledge in general. However, little research exists on whether men are more likely to have these biases than women. In other words, it would not explain why men supposedly explain things more often to women than vice versa. Perhaps it is not the act of mansplaining that is an expression of bias, but the accusation of mansplaining.

The *curse-of-knowledge bias* posits that what we know is also known by others (Birch & Bloom, 2007). Maybe this bias is more prevalent women than in men. This would mean that women are more likely to assume that their knowledge is common or logical than men.

Differences in assumptions of shared knowledge might explain this frustration in some part. However, little evidence exists that shows whether this bias is more present in women than in men. Recent research has even concluded that the effect of the curse-of-knowledge bias is not as pronounced as was found in earlier experiments. In fact, "its impact on real-life perspective-taking may need to be revaluated." (Ryskin & Brown-Schmidt, 2014, p. 1).

One bias that has been shown to be more prevalent in women than in men is the *interpretation bias* (Miers et al., 2008). This is the tendency to ascribe negative interpretations to ambiguous social situations (Kingsbury & Coplan, 2016). A situation in which a man gives an unsolicited explanation might be perceived as socially ambiguous. It could either mean that the man is just trying to make conversation or that the man thinks his conversation partner is ignorant on the topic. Given the interpretation bias, women are more likely to perceive it as the latter. Following this line of reasoning then, not the act of mansplaining but the accusation of mansplaining is an expression of bias in communication.

3. Men Explain, Women Listen: Differences in Communication Styles

However, this ovary-acting account is too simplistic to explain the numerous mansplaining experiences that women have reported not only on twitter but also in every-day interactions. Also, given that little research exists on whether these biases are gender-dependent, it does not sufficiently explain the gender-specific acts and accusations of mansplaining. Another potential area of research that might give more insight into this phenomenon is differences in styles of communication between men and women. Ample anecdotal evidence exists that illustrate how men and women have significantly different interpretations of various social interactions and that these often lead to misunderstandings (Tannen, 2007).

Research shows that these differences are not attributable to biology or psychology alone but mostly to social constructed assumptions about gender (Knowles, 2019). Women are expected to be more hesitant, indirect, emotional, and uncertain in their speech whereas men's speech is expected to be more dominant, direct and controlling (Mulac et al., 2013). In communication, women are more focused on interpersonal relations whereas men have a more assertive style of communication (Wood, 2015). Given that humans are social creatures and learn through example and feedback (Piaget, 1952), these distinct communication styles are sustained. Men learn and are expected to be assertive. Because women are more accommodating, they are less likely to call out undesirable communicative behaviour. Through lack of feedback these communicative expectations are upheld.

These differences are also evident from the use of various linguistic constructs. Women use more discourse markers such as 'you know', more tag questions ('right?', 'Isn't it?') and more hedges ('sort of', 'probably', 'maybe') than men (Laserna et al., 2014). Whereas for women these linguistic cues may be interpreted as a form of politeness, men may interpret this style of communication as a sign of insecurity and/or inexperience. This could in part be explained from the egocentrism account: men project their own perspectives onto a situation and use their own perspectives when interpreting the situation (Chambers & De Dreu, 2014). For example, a man may only use 'I guess' to express uncertainty, whereas women generally use the phrase out of habit. When men interpret these linguistic cues from an egocentric perspective, they are likely to perceive them signs of insecurity or uncertainty. Men might interrupt women simply to pre-empt disagreement or to prevent loss of face on the part of the woman (Lerner, 1991).

Just as men may misinterpret linguistic cues that are typically used by women as insecurity or inexperience, so too can women interpret assertive communication by men as being condescending. When men show assertiveness amongst other men this may not be seen as undesirable, but rather as typical. What may be interpreted as mansplaining by a female conversation partner may be perceived as simply making small talk by a male conversation partner. Some argue that men simply enjoy explaining things as it is a way to exert dominance and to display expertise (Pakzadian & Tootkaboni, 2018). It is not meant as a way to belittle the female conversation partner, but rather to impress her. In a way, mansplaining might just be an attempt to gain a female's approval, rather than put her down.

4. Mansplainers and Feminazi's: Using Stereotypes to Address Stereotypical Behaviour

Communication styles then, can be seen as the expression and exertion of societal expectations. The egocentrism account then causes misinterpretation on both sides of the conversation. Nevertheless, even when assuming that mansplaining is nothing but a form of miscommunication or a type of ineffective flirtatious behaviour, it can still be experienced as degrading and condescending. Is the accusation of 'mansplaining' an effective way to address this miscommunication?

In most research on miscommunication bias, transparency and awareness are mentioned as essential to combatting biases. As some authors have argued, the term mansplaining can indeed be seen as a form of addressing this type of miscommunication. For example, Joyce et al. (2021) state that “the introduction of the term mansplaining (…) allows individuals to call out previously unchallengeable sexism.” (Joyce et al., 2021, p. 2) Similarly, Bridges (2017) finds that: “the usage of mansplain is (…) a development of the recognition by ordinary citizens that the act of mansplaining, and gendered language norms overall, persist in the communicative conventions of their society” (Bridges, 2017, p. 98).

Be that as it may, the question remains if accusing someone of mansplaining is an effective way to ease the communication process. Anecdotal as well as academic evidence suggests that it is not. The word itself reduces the accused to the stereotype of the “man whom by virtue of the authority and privilege vested in him by society feels entitled to preach or explain how the world works” (Urban Dictionary, 2020). This has also been the main point of criticism in online discussions on mansplaining. YouTube commenter Spurge83, for example, says “the problem with mansplaining (…) is that it can be applied to pretty much anything a man does by feminists to exert leverage.(…) I pity the men who have fallen for this totalitarian bilge” (Spurge83, 2016).

Addressing bias is crucial in combatting bias , but when it is done using stereotypes these stereotypes are likely to be upheld. Studies have shown that stereotypes and language is a two-directional relationship: stereotypes are reflected in language use, and language use in turn feeds social-category stereotypes in language users. Given that mansplaining is a generic label, the word facilitates the communication of stereotypic information and increases perceptions of category entitativity (Burgers & Beukeboom, 2020). In other words, it communicates that all explaining by men is condescending and arrogant. The accused is likely to perceive this as aggressive behaviour, reciprocate the behaviour which consequently leads the conversation to get stuck in ”reciprocated contentious communication” (Brett et al., 1998, p. 420). This negativity in turn reduces empathy and increases deindividuation (Friedman & Curall, 2004). This escalation is also visible in the comment section of various YouTube videos, Twitter threads and Facebook discussions on mansplaining.

In sum, the accusation of mansplaining is not an effective way of addressing miscommunication as it upholds generic stereotypes, is likely to lead to conflict escalation and will contribute to intergroup bias. Given that these intergroups each make up half of the world population, this bias is counterproductive to say the least.

5. Conclusion

It is challenging to come to a conclusive definition or interpretation of *mansplaining*. As has been shown, it is a contentious topic as the experience is subjective and because the accusation of mansplaining is generic and stereotypical. Nevertheless, as the previous treatise has hopefully illustrated, it offers a realm of potential avenues of research. The YouTube comments alone are a sociologist's goldmine. Not only that, researching bias in communication and finding to what extent gender is a moderating variable could also provide further insights into the psychological processes that are at play in acts and accusations of mansplaining. Lastly, awareness of different communication styles might be an effective way for men to avoid communicating in a way that might be perceived as mansplaining. Studying the term within the context of metapragmatics could further specify what the term conveys exactly. At the same time, it can be used to come to a more practical and effective way to address inequalities and perceived degradation in conversations. As Cookman (2017) argues: "before we go smooshing any more man-words together, it might be worth remembering that a prat is a prat, whatever their gender."

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