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Mansplaining explained: The role of the better-than-average effect and the interpretation bias in acts and accusations of mansplaining

Mansplaining, the phenomenon of men degradingly explaining something to women, is widely recognized in popular culture but has received little scholarly attention so far. To address this gap, we conducted two studies to test the hypotheses that the better-than-average effect and the interpretation bias can help explain why mansplaining occurs and is remarked. Study 1 ($N = 204$) did not show that men think they know more than women, nor that men are more likely to offer an explanation in conversations. Study 2 ($N = 247$) showed that women are more likely to interpret an explanation as insulting than men, regardless of whether the explanation was given by a man or a woman. The current study provides empirical evidence to give mansplaining its proper conceptual grounding in communication theories and shows that communication biases are a viable avenue to understand mansplaining and similar communication phenomena.

Key words: mansplaining, better-than-average effect, interpretation bias, opposite-gender interactions, miscommunication

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In a 2008 essay, author Rebecca Solnit observed that “men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they’re talking about” (Solnit, 2015). Her observation was quickly picked up as the prototypical definition of mansplaining (Rothman, 2018). The term has become increasingly common in recent years and can occur regardless of conversation topic: women have reported being mansplained about how to spell their own name (Colins, 2024) but also how periods work (Beresford, 2022). However, the question as to whether mansplaining actually exists remains contested, as evidenced by the comment sections inextricably linked to all YouTube videos, Twitter threads, and Facebook posts on mansplaining. Critics have argued that the term itself is sexist and that it is misused to silence everything men say (e.g., S. Smith, 2021). Proponents claim it allows women to challenge subtle sexist behaviors (Johnson, 2020). Mansplaining is also symptomatic of the lack of nuance in societal debates on communication differences between men and women. Though the idea that men are from Mars and women are from Venus has been propagated in movies, books, and TV series, most academic research shows that men and women are much more similar than different on most psychological variables (Plug et al., 2021).

Despite the ubiquity of mansplaining in popular culture and societal debate, academic research on the topic is still scarce. The majority of academic articles are essays (e.g., Dular, 2021; Johnson, 2020) or opinion pieces (e.g., Vongalis-Macrow, 2015) and offer subjective or anecdotal content. There are only a handful of peer-reviewed research articles focused on mansplaining, but these mainly aim to give a first idea of how the term is currently being used (Bridges, 2017; Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Lutzky & Lawson, 2019; Smith et al., 2022) or discuss it as one of many examples of sexist behaviors (Briggs et al., 2023) rather than research how mansplaining itself can be explained. Mansplaining is taken as a given and critical evaluation of the term lacks.

As mansplaining has become such a contentious topic of debate and exemplary of a broader societal trend of labeling forms of miscommunication, more research is needed to fully understand the communicative components and underlying mechanisms of mansplaining. To do so, we tested two key assumptions about mansplaining that remain to be confirmed: Firstly, that men presume they know more than women and are therefore also more likely to offer an explanation in conversations with women. Secondly, that women are more easily offended by explanations than men, especially when that explanation is given by a man. The following two sections detail each assumption and the theories that exist in support of them.

Mansplaining and the Better-Than-Average Effect

A key assumption of the phenomenon is that mansplainers think they are more knowledgeable than the women to whom they explain. We checked [Urbandictionary.com](https://urbandictionary.com), a crowdsourced online dictionary where users can upload

their own definitions for slang words and phrases (Nguyen, 2018), for definitions of mansplaining. There, proponents of the term define mansplaining as something done by men who falsely assume they are more knowledgeable than the woman they are explaining to. For example: “Usually the word describes a conversation in which, due to sexist bias, a man automatically assumes he is more knowledgeable than the woman he is talking to” (Babydoll75, 2019). But also, critics mention that the man thinks he is more knowledgeable and define mansplaining as something done by well-meaning men who explain complex things to women. For example: “When a stupid person (in this case a female) asks a disturbingly poorly thought-out question and then blames her embarrassment, using the “mansplaining” scapegoat, on the fact that a somebody (in this case a male) answered their question sufficiently” (Redpillallofthem, 2019). These definitions imply that the man doing the mansplaining falsely or accurately assumes he has superior knowledge compared to the person being mansplained to.

The idea that men think they know better also resounds in academic works on mansplaining. Dular (2021) defines mansplaining as “a kind of epistemic violence (...). It is more than merely a refusal to hear the knowledgeable agent (women) when they speak or treat them as knowledgeable: it is a refusal to treat them as a potential giver of knowledge” (2021, p.10). Based on a content analysis of 300 tweets mentioning ‘mansplain’ Smith et al. (2022) come to an elaborate definition of mansplaining: “providing an unsolicited or unwelcome, condescending or persistent, explanation to someone, either questioning their knowledge or assuming they did not know, regardless of the veracity of the explanation” (Smith et al., 2022). In this definition too, the fact that the mansplainer thinks he is more knowledgeable is evident in them “questioning the knowledge” of the other person.

The online realm also offers numerous examples that illustrate the key role of supposed expertise in mansplaining situations. Some of the most popular mansplaining tweets detail instances in which a woman was explained something she was obviously more knowledgeable about, such as how to pronounce her own name (Mei, 2017), whether or not she likes rum (Rutherford-Morrison, 2016), and the proper term for her genitals (Sharia, 2019). But mansplainers have also assumed to be more knowledgeable than female experts such as in the case of astronaut Jessica Meir who was “explained to” how thermodynamics work (Bates, 2018), or Olympic cyclist Annemiek Vleuten who was explained she should keep her bike steady to avoid accidents (Spelman, 2016). All in all, UrbanDictionary, real-life examples, and academic analyses all show that men thinking that they know more than women is a quintessential characteristic of mansplaining.

From a theoretical perspective, this assumption of superior knowledge could be explained by the better-than-average effect (BTAE), the idea that people perceive themselves to be more skilled and have more favorable traits in comparison to the average other (Moore, 2005). The better-than-average effect has been widely documented and is one of the most robust effects found in

social psychological literature (Zell et al., 2020). The BTAE has been found for a variety of attributes and abilities, including intelligence, leadership, physical attractiveness, and morality (Pelham & Swann, 1989; Sedikides et al., 2014; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). This effect may play a role in mansplaining behavior if men are more prone to the better-than-average effect than women.

BTAE studies typically do not study gender effects, but there is some indirect evidence that makes it plausible that men are more susceptible to this bias. A 2020 meta-review of the BTAE showed a moderate association with self-esteem (Zell et al., 2020) and self-esteem studies show that, in general, men have slightly higher self-esteem than women (Zuckerman et al., 2016). Moreover, men frequently provide higher estimates of their own intelligence than women (Reilly et al., 2022) despite widespread consensus in cognitive psychology that men and women do not differ in general intelligence. Other studies have shown that in general, men's intelligence is rated higher than that of women: fathers are rated as more intelligent than mothers (Furnham & Rawles, 1995) and sons are rated as more intelligent than daughters (Furnham et al., 2002). This also makes it likely that men may display a larger BTAE than women when judging their own knowledge.

There are also a few studies that have found a direct relationship between gender and the BTAE. Kim et al. (2017) found that men tended to rate themselves more favorably in scientific abilities than women, a domain that is generally perceived to be difficult. Perhaps men are more likely to perceive something as easy because they are more confident in their own abilities than women (; Sanders, 2003). Other experiments have shown that the BTAE is particularly pronounced when abilities and tasks are perceived as easy (Kruger, 1999) and less pronounced in tasks that are perceived as difficult (Windschitl, 2003). These findings support the idea that mansplaining occurs because men are more likely to perceive something as easy, in which case the BTAE is more pronounced.

Another possible explanation is that perhaps both men and women are equally prone to the BTAE, but that men who score high on the BTAE are more likely to engage in giving an unwanted explanation whereas women who think they are better-than-average simply keep that to themselves. After all, the BTAE means thinking that you are better than average, mansplaining is also acting like you are better than average. Research has already shown that men are more likely to speak up in group discussions (Sommers & Lawrence, 1992) and that women are more concerned about facing negative consequences when speaking (Brescoll, 2011). The tendency to explain is also central to many popular theories on mansplaining. Journalist Jill Krasny says: "Men like to explain because they're trying to establish a hierarchy of who sounds the smartest" (Krasny, 2014). Blogger Mark Greene explains mansplaining as being driven by men's "relentless impulse to explain things and prove our expertise" (Greene, 2017). Academic research, too, shows that explaining is something typical to men. Smith et al. (2022), without using the word mansplaining, asked men and women whether they had ever been offered unsolicited explanations about their work or

whether anyone had ever explained something to them in a condescending tone. Both men and women reported that unsolicited explanations were more often given by a man (72%) than by a woman (28%). Ergo, men seem to have a strong tendency to explain.

Though there is indirect evidence that men are more susceptible to the BTAE, direct evidence to support this hypothesis is still scarce and little BTAE research exists that has directly tested a gender effect. The focus of most BTAE research is on comparison with the average peer of the same age and gender (Zell et al., 2020), but no BTAE studies exist that asked participants to directly compare themselves to members of the opposite sex. Another factor that has received little scholarly attention is whether there is a relationship between the BTAE and communication. Previous research has found relationships between the BTAE and risky behavior, confidence levels (Zell et al., 2020), and life satisfaction (Dufner et al., 2018). However, no studies exist that have investigated whether the BTAE also affects how one behaves in conversations and whether this varies depending on whether the conversation is with someone from the same or opposite sex. To find out whether the BTAE indeed predicts the tendency to explain and hence plays a role in mansplaining behavior, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1a: Men are more prone to the BTAE than women, especially when the reference target is a woman.

H1b: Men who score high on the BTAE are more likely to offer an explanation in a conversation than women.

Mansplaining and the Interpretation Bias

A second assumption that is central to the mansplaining phenomenon is that women are more prone to negatively interpret a well-meaning explanation. This negative interpretation can be ascribed to the interpretation bias, the tendency to interpret ambiguous social events negatively and to “catastrophize even mildly negative social events” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 1119). An example of such an event is “you receive a text from your friend saying: ‘I heard about last night’” (Kingsbury & Coplan, 2016). Study participants are then asked to give their interpretation of the situation. Participants more prone to the interpretation bias are more likely to choose a negative interpretation (e.g., “I did something embarrassing last night”), rather than a neutral or positive interpretation (e.g., “my friend is excited to hear about last night”).

The interpretation bias shares features with the accusation of mansplaining. Critics often explain the accusation of mansplaining as a negative interpretation of a positive or benign situation. For example, in this definition of mansplaining provided by UrbanDictionary user Ijiwaru_Sensei: “When a man speaks to a woman exactly the same way he speaks to a man (...) Feminists, who champion equality among the sexes, expect men to change how they speak to accommodate their feminine sensibilities” (Ijiwaru_Sensei, 2016). The situation itself is

described as positive or benign (women are being treated as equal to men) and it is implied that women are more likely to interpret this situation negatively because of their "feminine sensibilities", suggesting that men would not be offended by the interaction.

Academic studies also provide various reasons to believe that the interpretation bias might play a role in accusations of mansplaining. Kingsbury and Coplan (2016) found gendered effects in their study on the interpretation bias in computer-mediated communication (CMC) between young adults. Participants were presented with hypothetical texts (vignettes) such as "I'm out with Jamie, you can join us if you want" (p. 378). Interpretation of the message was dependent on the gender of both the sender and the recipient. Overall, females interpreted messages more negatively than males. The study also showed that "messages from opposite-gender peers elicit greater interpretation bias than messages from same-gender peers" (p. 376). Similarly, in a study on the interpretation bias in Dutch adolescents, girls endorsed significantly more negative interpretations of ambiguous scenarios than boys (Miers et al., 2008). This evidence led us to hypothesize that:

H2: Compared to men, women are more likely to negatively interpret an explanation, especially when that explanation is given by a man.

We tested our hypotheses in two separate survey studies. In Study 1, we tested whether men show a stronger BTAE than women and whether men have a stronger tendency to give unsolicited advice than women. In Study 2, we tested whether women show a stronger interpretation bias than men. With this two-fold approach, we can identify the roots of mansplaining accusations.

Study 1

To test H1, we developed a two-part questionnaire based on methodologies used in previous BTAE studies but explicitly asking respondents to compare themselves to members of the same and of the opposite sex rather than the average peer. A second addition of our method was that we tested whether the BTAE not only applies to skills and abilities but also to general knowledge on a variety of everyday topics.

Participants

The questionnaire was distributed using the online survey tool Qualtrics. Most of the respondents ($N = 159$) were recruited from the personal network of the first author. These participants participated voluntarily and were not compensated. Additionally, we recruited 65 male participants and 35 female participants from Prolific to even out the unequal gender distribution of the first part of the sample. These participants received £ 1.10 (which corresponded to a £ 16.5 reward per hour). Eight respondents who identified as non-binary were

excluded from analysis as mansplaining is understood to be something done by cisgender men and because this group was too small for any generalizable conclusions to be drawn. A total of seven incomplete surveys were also excluded from analyses. Eventually, 247 respondents were included in the analyses, 121 men and 126 women with a mean age of 36.8 ($SD = 13$). The hypotheses and analyses were preregistered on [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/2C3_RY7) under reference number 110076: https://aspredicted.org/2C3_RY7.

Materials and Procedure

The first part of the questionnaire listed 15 common conversation topics to reflect the wide variety of contexts within which mansplaining can occur. Participants were asked to indicate how much they know about each topic compared to the average man or woman on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*far less*) to 7 (*far more*). The topics included in the questionnaire were based on studies by Schulster (2006), Haas and Sherman (1982), and Aries and Johnson (1983) that have culminated into a list of everyday conversation topics called "Things I Talk About." For the questionnaire at hand, we selected gender-neutral topics from this list on which someone can be knowledgeable, such as music, food, and films. The questionnaire was conducted in Dutch. Participants were randomly presented with a version of the survey that either read "average man" or "average woman" The scale had an acceptable internal consistency of $\alpha = .71$ (comparison with average man) and $\alpha = .61$ (comparison with average woman).

To test H1b we designed six different conversation scenarios (e.g., "A friend tells you that they bought an electric bike") with three response options: (a) giving an explanation (e.g., "I explain to him that he needs to discharge the battery completely before charging it again"), (b) a request for more information (e.g., "I ask him where he bought the bike." or (c) a supportive answer (e.g., "I tell him that I am happy for him"). Respondents were asked to use a 7-point Likert scale slider to indicate how likely they were to give each response: 1 meaning highly unlikely, 7 meaning very likely. Participants were presented with a scenario in which they were having a conversation with a woman or with a man, depending on the survey version they were assigned. If participants compared themselves to men in the first part of the survey, they were presented with conversation scenarios featuring men. If participants compared themselves to women in the first part of the survey, they were presented with conversation scenarios featuring women. We also asked participants about their gender and their age at the beginning of the questionnaire. At the end of the survey participants were fully debriefed and we explained that we are studying the phenomenon mansplaining. The whole survey took about 3 minutes to complete and can be found here: https://osf.io/rgam4/?view_only=7f9ccee9a8ef440e80429cd1640202c8.

Results

The mean scores on the better-than-average effect and the mean scores of each of the three response options are listed in Table 1.

We first tested whether we indeed found a BTAE for being knowledgeable with a one-sample *t*-test testing against the midpoint of the scale (4). The test showed only a small better-than-average effect: $M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.58$, $t(246) = 2.02$, $p = .045$, $d = 0.13$.

Second, we used a 2 (respondent gender) $\times$ 2 (referent target gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the hypothesis that men are more prone to the BTAE than women, especially when the reference target is a woman. The analysis showed no statistically significant difference between the BTAE scores of men ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.58$) and women ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.57$), $F(1, 243) = 1.51$, $p = .22$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .006$. There was also no statistically significant effect of referent gender on BTA scores ($M_{\text{female}} = 4.06$, $SD = 0.54$; $M_{\text{male}} = 4.09$, $SD = 0.61$), $F(1, 243) = 0.10$, $p = .75$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} < .001$. There was also no statistically significant interaction between the gender of the respondent and the gender of the referent target, $F(1, 243) = 2.46$, $p = .12$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .01$. Thus, the current study found no support for the hypothesis that men show a stronger BTAE, and that this would be especially strong if the other person is a woman.

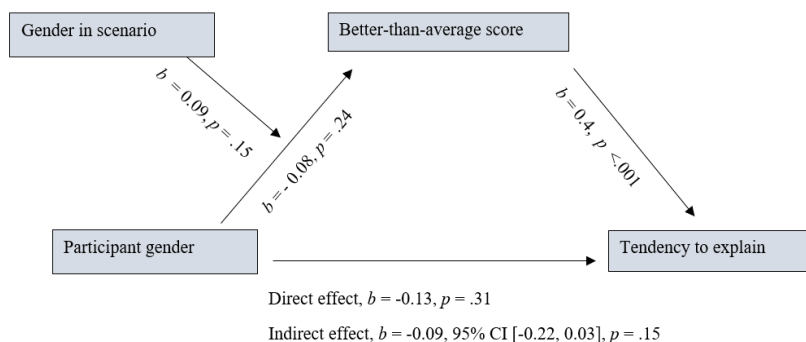
To test H1b, we performed a moderated mediation analysis with the gender of the participant as independent variable, the BTAE score as mediator, the tendency to explain as dependent variable, and the gender of the person in the scenarios as moderator. The coefficients of this model can be found in Figure 1.

The indirect effect of gender on the tendency to explain via the BTAE was not statistically significant ($p = .24$), nor was there a statistically significant indirect effect of the interaction between participant gender and the gender of the person in the scenario ($p = .15$). There was also no direct effect of gender on the tendency to explain ($p = .31$). The only statistically significant effect was a strong link between the better-than-average effect and the tendency to explain ($p < .001$). This indicates that men were not more likely to offer an explanation than women. And although people who think they know better than others were more likely to choose an explanation as a response, this effect held to the same extent for males and females.

Table 1. Mean Scores of the Better-Than-Average (BTA) Effect and the Three Response Options

Respondent gender	Referent gender	Mean BTAE score		Mean score explanation		Mean score sympathy		Mean score question	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male	Female	4.05	0.67	3.08	1.08	4.97	0.98	4.95	0.84
	Male	4.19	0.59	3.21	0.93	4.80	0.79	5.00	0.72
Female	Female	4.07	0.52	2.98	1.12	5.14	0.67	5.23	0.60
	Male	3.98	0.61	2.97	0.94	5.11	0.63	5.11	0.69

Figure 1. *Moderated Mediation Analysis Detailing the Relationship Between Participant Gender, Scenario Gender, Better-Than-Average Score, and Tendency to Explain.*



As planned in our preregistration, we also tested whether men and women differ in how likely they think they are to ask for more information and to give supportive responses in the scenarios. We performed a 2×2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with gender of the participant and gender of the person in the scenario as independent variable and “asking for more information” and “saying something supportive” as dependent variables. The multivariate for gender of the participant was statistically significant $F(2, 242) = 3.815, p = .02$, the other two effects were not (Gender of the person in the scenario: $F(2, 242) = 0.49, p = .61$; interaction effect: $F(2, 242) = 1.16, p = .32$). The univariate tests for gender showed statistically significant differences both for asking for more information, $F(2, 243) = 4.91, p = .03$, and saying something supportive, $F(2, 243) = 5.76, p = .02$. As can be seen in Table 1, women reported a higher tendency for both response options. This shows that with our study setup, it is possible to find gender differences, but that they did not emerge for the tendency to explain.

Because the idea that men are more likely to offer an explanation than women is central to the mansplaining idea, we performed an equivalence test to see whether we could rule out the existence of a meaningful difference on this variable. We used the Toster package in Jamovi and it showed that a difference of -0.5 or $.05$ points can be ruled out: Lower bound: $t(244.91) = -2.58, p = .005$; upper bound: $t(244.91) = 5.12, p < .001$. However, we cannot rule out a difference of 0.2 (the size of the difference we found for the other two response options): Lower bound: $t(244.91) = -0.27, p = .39$; upper bound: $t(244.91) = 2.81, p = .003$. This indicates that there may be a small difference in the tendency to explain, which we cannot rule out with the data at hand.

Study 2

To test H2, we designed a study that is similar to other interpretation bias

studies, with scenarios that describe a situation in which one receives an unsolicited explanation.

Participants

We again recruited participants from our personal network and Prolific. The participants from our network were not compensated, the participants from Prolific received £ 0.74 (which corresponded to a £ 16 reward per hour). Twelve participants indicated “other” as their gender and were excluded from analyses, as were seven incomplete surveys. The total sample size was 204 and the mean age was 31.26 years ($SD = 9.84$). The gender distribution was almost equal, with 104 male and 100 female participants.

Materials and Procedure

We designed ten scenarios, similar to other studies on the interpretation bias. Typically, participants read about socially ambiguous situations and were asked to provide their response either via an open-ended format, by selecting from a list of choices, or by indicating for each interpretation how likely they are to apply it. For the current study, we used the two-choice answer design, modeled after interpretation bias studies by Hirsch et al. (2016) and Amir et al. (2012), as this method has been found to show good reliability in similar settings (Hirsch et al., 2016). We based our scenarios on interactions that were branded as mansplaining on Twitter and YouTube.

For example, the Tweet in Figure 2 was converted to the following scenario:

You have had a cycling accident and are now in hospital. Your friend Peter

Figure 2. *Tweet That Was Converted to an Interpretation Bias Scenario (Mei, 2016).*



visits you and tells you that you should have kept your bike steady to avoid accidents.

Peter's response is

A. Helpful

B. Condescending

The survey was distributed using the online survey tool Qualtrics. All scenarios had a male version and a female version. For example, the friend in the example scenario was either called Peter or Anna. The survey answers were coded so that the negative interpretation had a value of 1 and the benign interpretation had a value of 0. The interpretation bias score was calculated as the sum of all interpretations. To test the hypotheses, we used a 2 (male / female respondent) $\times$ 2 (same-gender / opposite-gender) ANOVA. The complete survey can be found here: https://osf.io/rgam4/?view_only=7f9ccee9a8ef440e80429cd1640202c8. The hypotheses and analyses were preregistered on aspredicted.org under reference number 110078: https://aspredicted.org/2F1_WP6. We also asked participants about their gender and age at the beginning of the questionnaire. At the end of the survey, participants were fully debriefed and we explained that we were studying the phenomenon of mansplaining. The whole survey took about 3 minutes to complete.

Results

To test the hypothesis that women are more likely to interpret an explanation as insulting than men (especially when the explanation is given by a man) we performed an ANOVA with participant gender and gender of the person in the scenario as independent variables and the sum of the negative interpretations as the dependent variable. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 2.

The ANOVA revealed no main effect of the gender of the person in the scenario, $F(1, 200) = 3.20$, $p = .075$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.02$, indicating that it did not matter for the interpretation whether the speaker was male or female. There was a statistically significant main effect of the gender of the participant, $F(1, 200) = 7.42$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.04$, indicating that women interpreted more scenarios as condescending than men. In fact, while men thought on average that 5 of

Table 2. *Results of the Interpretation Bias Questionnaire*

Respondent gender	Referent gender	Interpretation bias score	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male	Female	4.69	1.65
	Male	5.33	1.80
Female	Female	5.55	1.86
	Male	5.80	1.73

the 10 scenarios were condescending, women on average thought that 5.7 were condescending. We did not find the expected interaction effect, $F(1, 200) = 0.62$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.003$, indicating that it is not especially when the other person is male that women interpret an ambiguous comment as condescending.

Conclusion and Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to provide empirical evidence to explain the mansplaining phenomenon. What we found is that mansplaining appears to lie in the eye of the beholder: mansplaining is a perceived behavior rather than a measurable construct. No evidence was found that men think they know better, and men and women were equally (un)likely to respond with an explanation. Women were somewhat more likely to interpret explanations negatively but were not more likely to do so when the explanation was given by a man.

We found no difference in the BTAE: men and women were equally likely to think that they knew slightly more than the average man or woman. This was somewhat surprising given that men are more confident and have higher self-esteem (Asher, 2017) and men often give higher estimates of their intelligence than do women (Furnham, 2017). Moreover, even though the BTAE has been described as one of the most robust effects measured in social psychology (Brown, 2012), we only found a small effect in our sample. This may be because we asked participants about topics such as art and restaurants, whereas other BTAE research asks about traits (e.g., sociability) and skills (e.g., reasoning). The BTAE has been explained by the need to uphold a positive self-image (Brown, 2012). Having knowledge about restaurants arguably may not affect one's self-image as strongly as one's sociability, which may explain why we found a smaller BTAE than other studies. Nevertheless, our findings do further corroborate the BTAE and show that it even applies to the domain of general knowledge.

We did find a statistically significant relation between a higher score on the BTAE and a greater likelihood of offering explanations. However, this was regardless of the participant's gender and the gender in the scenario: men and women were equally unlikely to respond with an explanation. In line with our results, Smith et al. (2022) found that women more often experience being given unsolicited explanations about their work or being explained something in a condescending tone. At the same time, they found that both men and women report that these unsolicited explanations are given by a male speaker in roughly two-thirds of the cases. Thus, although we did not find that men have a higher tendency to explain things, Smith et al. (2022) showed that interaction partners do report a gender difference. It may therefore be that our subjects answered in a socially desirable manner or that the subjects in Smith et al.'s study were more likely to remember men giving explanations than women.

Moreover, Solnit (2015) already emphasized in her initial mansplaining essay that some men, not all men, explain things to women whether or not they know

what they are talking about. It is therefore not unlikely that our sample simply did not contain any mansplainers because they are a minority, or in any case not as numerous as the women who reportedly have experienced mansplaining. To gain more insight into the psyche of alleged mansplainers, future research could instead focus on finding the “some men” Solnit referred to. Perhaps these mansplainers show certain biases more strongly than others. Previous mansplaining studies have already looked at mansplaining interactions (Bates, 2016, Joyce et. al, 2021, Smith, 2022) but to our knowledge, none have included the perpetrators themselves.

Though men and women were equally unlikely to give an explanation, there was a gender difference in how explanations given by others were perceived. Women were somewhat more likely to perceive an explanation as condescending, though it should be noted that men also deemed half of the scenarios condescending. This shows that explanations can be perceived as insulting by both men and women but that women appear to be a bit more sensitive to the interpretation bias. Earlier research on interpretation bias in adults either did not study gender differences (Amir et al., 2012; Beard & Amir, 2009; 2010; Huppert et al., 2003; Kanai et al., 2010; Stopa & Clark, 2000) or found no effect of gender (Amir et al., 1998; Constans et al., 1999). Kingsbury and Coplan (2016) did find a difference between adolescent boys and girls. Our study adds to research on the interpretation bias by showing that this difference is also evident in adults. The fact that we found a gender difference could be due to the particular type of social situation that we tested: giving explanations. Previous research that did not find gender differences in adults used more generic situations such as “you receive your cable bill and notice that...” (Amir et al., 1998) or used a vignette depicting a blind date included with several ambiguous statements concerning interpersonal behavior (Constans et al., 1999). This warrants more research to find what it is about explanations that make women interpret them more negatively.

Explanations from men were not more likely to be seen as condescending than explanations from women and so at face value there does not appear to be a direct relationship between the interpretation bias and mansplaining. However, there might be an indirect connection. As we have found, women in general are more likely to make negative interpretations and previous research has found that unsolicited explanations are more frequently given by men (Smith et al., 2022) and that men are more likely to speak up in general (Sommers & Lawrence, 1992). Perhaps the accusation of mansplaining is simple math: the more men speak, the more likely they are to explain something that is deemed offensive, especially when they are speaking to women, who are more likely to negatively interpret what men explain as mansplaining. It should be noted, however, that we did not test whether women who perceive an explanation to be insulting would also accuse someone of mansplaining.

Limitations

A factor that may have affected the outcomes of the BTAE survey is that a small number of participants we spoke to after the survey had realized that it was about mansplaining. This knowledge may have led participants to answer in a way that would not make them look like mansplainers. Future studies could use an open-ended format to assess how probable explanations are in general. For the research at hand, however, the goal was to find out how likely an explanation was given, not what response they would give in general. The multiple-choice format also allowed for a comparison between other response options and for the comparison of how likely an explanation was for men and women.

The scenarios in our BTAE study were presented in a questionnaire format with minimal context. In this form, participants could think about their response and were not forced to report the first thing that comes to mind. This format also makes it difficult to measure implicated biases (Hirsch, 2016) and may explain the fact that we did not find men with evident explaining tendencies in our sample. In the words of Men's Health journalist Eric Spitznagel: "You'd sooner find a racist saying 'I sure do love being discriminatory' than a guy who'd cop to mansplaining" (Spitznagel, 2018). Future research might resolve this issue by incorporating existing measurement scales for implicit biases, such as the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and how they relate to communicative behavior.

Future Research Recommendations

In addition to these methodological considerations, our findings also provide several additional avenues for future research. In recent years, gender has become a more fluid rather than a binary concept denoting only men and women (Richards et al., 2016). The extent to which someone is aware of their gender, or the extent to which someone identifies with their assigned gender, may be better predictors of communicative behaviors than the social category of gender. Especially because the idea that men and women speak differently is so heavily ingrained in popular culture and public opinion, it is imperative to develop and use well-founded methods that are robust and can circumvent the biases inherent in research on gender differences in communication.

Secondly, the relatively limited academic research that has been done on mansplaining so far has mainly focused on mansplaining in computer-mediated contexts (e.g., Bridges, 2017; Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Lutzky & Lawson, 2019). Researching mansplaining in a face-to-face setting would allow us to see what other factors play a role in defining an explanation as a mansplanation. What role do body language, interruptions, and tone of voice play? There is reason to believe that the interpretation bias might even be stronger in face-to-face settings. Some researchers have hypothesized that social anxiety is alleviated in

a computer-mediated context because of the absence of nonverbal cues (Walther, 2011). Miers et al. (2020) found not only that the negative interpretation bias was stronger in face-to-face settings, but also found that compared to men, women had a greater tendency to negatively interpret real-life, rather than computer-mediated social situations. Further research is needed to find out what causes this difference and how the perception of mansplaining is affected by various factors.

Lastly, mansplaining should not be studied as the result of inherent differences between men and women but rather as a form of gendered biases. As illustrated, the perception of bias can differ according to gender but research on the extent to which men and women are more or less prone to certain biases remains limited. Mansplaining offers a valuable framework within which to research what psychological processes affect the perception of bias but also the relationship between bias, gender, and communicative behaviors.

Conclusion

Mansplaining has proven to be a contentious topic of (internet) debates, but mostly a fascinating area of research. The current study showed that there is still a lot to learn when it comes to effective communication and perceived bias. Further researching mansplaining helps us better understand perceived differences between men and women, how men and women behave in conversations, and how men and women interpret communication. As discussed, mansplaining is symptomatic of the lack of nuance in societal debates on communication differences between men and women. Researching mansplaining can combat existing speculative pseudoscientific ideas on perceived communication differences between men and women, can benefit communication by providing insights into these perceived differences, and consequently can allow for a more informed public debate on communication and perceived bias. Most importantly, doing so would add some nuance to an often foul-worded debate claiming either that all men are arrogant misogynists or that women are overly sensitive feminazis. In the words of essayist Rebecca Solnit: “There’s a happy medium between these poles to which the genders have been pushed, a warm equatorial belt of give and take where we should all meet” (Solnit, 2015). Research on mansplaining may help us find that happy medium.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

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Research Ethics Statement

Research Ethics and Data Management Committee - Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences Reference number: REDC2022.47. Participation was voluntary, participants were provided with a consent form and participants could stop the survey at any time. No priming or other forms of manipulation were used. No personal data were collected

The first page of the survey informed participants of the study objective and what would happen with their data. Participants could then choose whether to proceed with the survey or to terminate.

Data Availability Statement

Study 1 was preregistered on aspredicted.org under reference number 110076: https://aspredicted.org/2C3_RY7.

Study 2 was preregistered on aspredicted.org under reference number 110078: https://aspredicted.org/2F1_WP6.

The study materials can be found at: https://osf.io/rgam4/?view_only=7f9ccee9a8ef440e80429cd1640202c8.

The data for the current study will be stored in the data depository TiU Dataverse (<https://dataverse.nl/dataverse/tiu>) under restricted access. Researchers may access these files upon request to the corresponding author.

Authorship Details

Astrid Fokkema: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article.

Monique Pollmann: collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article.

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