Community

The Village Within

On the multiple identities within each of us, and how gender and other factors impact the way that we are seen by others - and seen by ourselves.

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My Height and My Mother

A few weeks ago I was out having lunch with my mother, who is a constant source of love and support, but also a bit of a force of nature in that she has an impressive ability to alter the environment around her until it meets her standards. The topic of an upcoming event came up, along with the fact that I needed to buy a new suit, and I made a good natured joke about having to go to the kids' department (I'm 5'6" on a good posture day). She was startled by the comment and adamantly asserted that I was, in fact, 5'9", which is actually about 5% off – a difference that we would consider "statistically significant" in research. In fact 5'9" is much closer to my wife's height; I used to be insecure about that, but honestly now it's a bit of a badge of pride.

Carla Bruni and Nicolas Sarkozy

Not at all a bad comparison of my and my wife's relative heights.

A Fundamental Perceptual Disconnection

I reflected on that exchange for a while, and the more I considered it, the more I recognized that there is a fundamental perceptual disconnection between the way that my mother sees me (slightly above average), the reality (slightly below average), and the way that I see myself (hobbit). In 1949, the actor Glenn Ford – who played Superman's adopted father Pa Kent in the 1978 film, in case that helps you win a trivia game – was famously quoted as saying that we are all three people: "The person we think we are, the person the world thinks we are, and the person we really are."

Regarding height, I clearly have at least three different identities. This made me wonder if everyone else had the same experience, so I decided to collect some anecdotal data from friends in service of an impromptu, very unofficial research study. I wanted to know how accurately parents guessed the height of their children, and whether there was a correlation between the accuracy of their guess and the gender of their child. Here are the results (rounded to the nearest whole number):

Gender	Parent guess	Actual	Difference
Female	5'6"	5'4"	+2"
Female	5'6"	5'5"	+1"
Female	5'5"	5'5"	+0"
Female	5'6"	5'7"	-1"
Female	5'8"	5'9"	-1"
Female	5'7"	5'9"	-2"
Female	5'2"	5'4"	-2"
Female	5'0"	5'3"	-3"
			-7" Total
			-1" Average

Gender	Parent guess	Actual	Difference
Male	5'9"	5'6"	+3"
Male	6'2"	6'0"	+2"
Male	5'11"	6'1"	+2"
Male	6'2"	6'0"	+2"
Male	6'1"	6'0"	+1"
Male	6'1"	6'0"	+1"
Male	5'11"	5'11"	+0"
			+11" total
			+1.6" average

So what does it mean?

We seem to have a trend! In this extremely limited data sample, parents judged their daughters to be about one inch shorter than they actually are. Parents judged their sons to be about 1.5" taller than they actually are.

There was much more variability among the females: Women were judged to be both taller and shorter than reality, while men were universally judged to be taller (with one accurate guess on each side as the exception). Aside from the obvious caveat of this sample being solely drawn from my group of friends, I should also note that I didn't take parent gender into account while collecting data, which could be another factor, and all but one of the participants reported their family relationship as "good" (and even the exception was a male who still was judged to be taller). In other words, let's not give this little survey too much value.

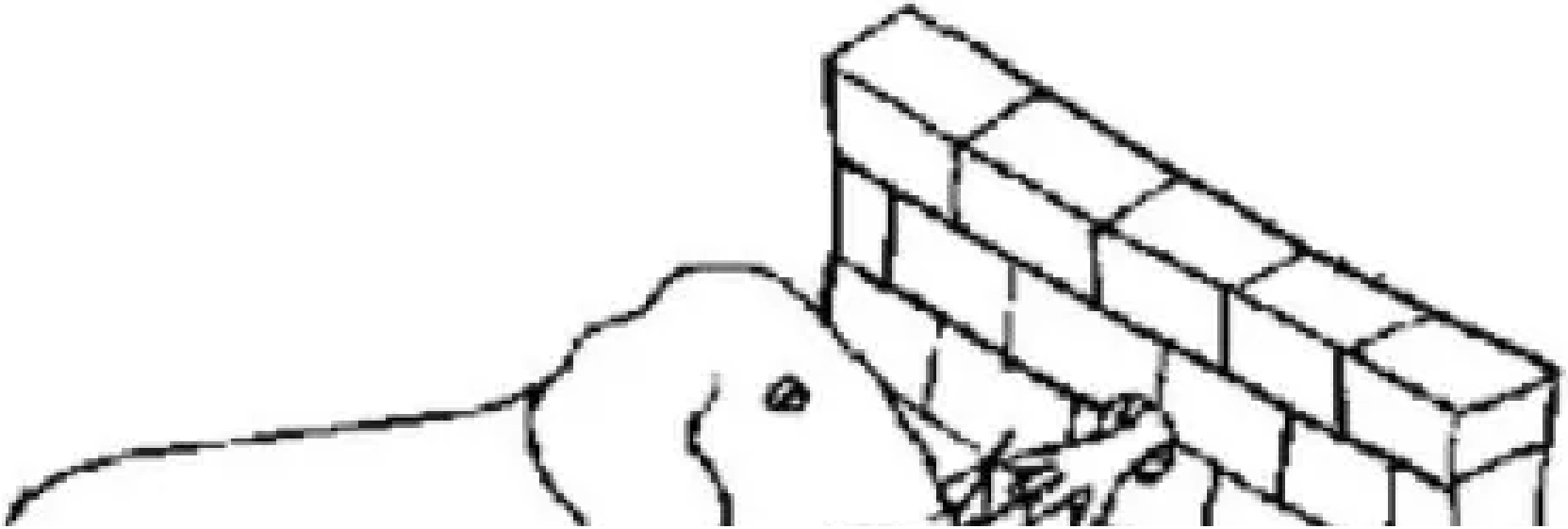
Let's take a moment, though, to give it some - particularly in the current political climate, where critical, mindful discussion about gender is urgently needed - and let's relate it to the linguistic constructs that we use to think about the world. Two cognitive linguists named George Lakoff and Mark Johnson coined the term "conceptual metaphor" in their 1980 book Metaphors We Live By. They describe how our figurative language contains a source domain, meaning the root metaphor representing the general societal bias (e.g., "up is good") and the target domain, which is the application of that bias to our understanding of the world. In the domain of emotional well being, when we're happy or healthy we're "feeling up," but when we're sad or sick we're "feeling down." When we have something under control, we're "on top of it," but if we're overwhelmed we're "in over our head." In social standing, we want to move "up" in status, but a

faux pas can be our “downfall.” When we learn something fundamentally changing, we “wake up.” Good people are “morally upright” or “upstanding.” In our colloquial expressions, up is good – and down is not so good, and sometimes even downright bad.

So how does our societal bias for “up is good” affect gender perception? Why are men judged as tall (up) and women are short (down), even in a happy family? Is it another example of “up is good,” or is it (likely) something far more complex about how we view the physicality of gender? The honest answer is that I don’t know, but I think it’s an important conversation to have – and an interesting trend to be aware of, even in such a small data sample.

Gender perception and gender expression are nuanced and multifaceted social constructs. Examining and testing our assumptions about our world, even in such an informal way, represents the very core of what science is all about. As a speech/language scientist, the relation of height to gender is only one example of a vast array of hypotheses, tests, and reflections that need to occur as I work with individuals with communication and learning challenges. How do I view children with disabilities? How do their families view them? How do they view themselves

Judging the whole by a single characteristic



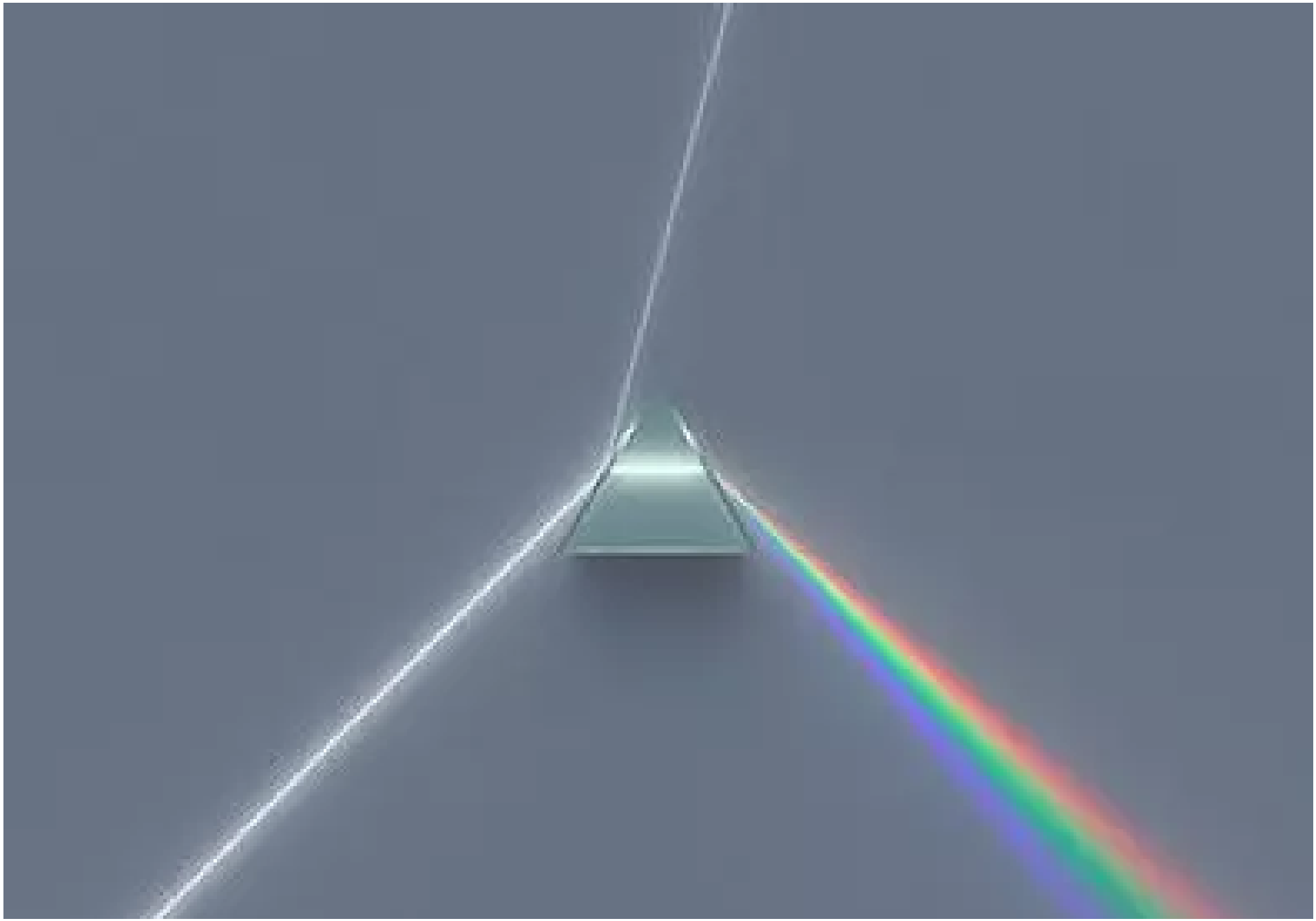
I see! Elephants are sharp and pointy!

The Many Perceptions of Self

Glenn Ford said we are three people – and based on the data above, that's certainly true; but perhaps we're a lot more than just three people. We're who our parents think we are. We're who our kids think we are. We're the person who strangers think we are – one person to the stranger on the street, and another to the stranger reading (or writing) this blog. One to our friends, one to our partner, and of course all of the "we" that constitute our identity are constantly changing based on the wide range of internal and external influences that modify not only others' perception but the nature of our actual selves.

Of course I come at this from the lens of a pediatric therapist, and in that spirit: What about the kids we work with? Who are they? The answer, and it may be hard to hear, is that they aren't who you think they are. They aren't who their parents think they are. In many ways, they aren't who they think they are, although it can be argued that they're probably a lot closer to the truth than we are.

All the Light we Cannot See



The Vast Constellation of Identity

Visualize for a moment that each of us is a prism, with a beam of light shining upon us. Within this refracted light is the composite sum total of internal and external influences, experiences, opinions, and characteristics that constitute our journey through the world. We can separate and parse these beautiful and shimmering colors into categories of “language/communication, actions/behaviors, preferences/interests, aversions/objections,” and a host of other things, depending on which terminology you’d like to use. As the light shifts and changes angles, so do the intensities and directions of the colors.

What we see of a person, a child, an individual, and even ourselves can only ever be a glimpse of the vast and luminous elements of our changing identities. We are not able to have a complete understanding of another person, nor should we attempt to; to claim that we do undervalues everything about them that we cannot see. Opening ourselves to the opportunity to see and experience each other in new ways allows for growth, change, and exploration. I believe that the closest thing to an “expert” regarding any child - or any individual - is the person themselves. They have the most holistic understanding of their identity, of all of their facets, and how their strengths shine and diminish depending on the environment around them. My job as a clinician – really my only job – is to help those strengths shine.

It’s a bit of a cliché to say that it takes a village to raise a child, but there’s truth to it. Perhaps there’s even a greater truth – we are, each of us, a village unto ourselves.

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