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The "Father Knows Best" Dynamic in Dinnertime Narratives

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Historical and sociological studies of gender have pursued the plethora of ways in which cultural concepts of gender impact social life, especially institutions such as the family, the church, the workplace, and the state. Of critical importance to all gender research is the idea that gender ideologies are closely linked to the management of social asymmetries. As Marie Withers Osmond and Barrie Thorne (1993:593) concisely put it, "Gender relations are basically power relations." Notions of patriarchy, male authority, male domination, and gender hierarchy have gained considerable intellectual vitality within feminist argumentation. The import of gender pervades all levels of analysis, from historical and ethnographic studies of gender ideologies, structures, and customs to interactional studies of gendered activities and actions. From a poststructuralist perspective, we need both macro- and microanalyses to illuminate continuity and change in the rights, expectations, and obligations vis-à-vis the conduct, knowledge, understandings, and feelings that constitute the lived experience of being female or male in society.

The present chapter addresses gender asymmetry in middle-class European American families through an examination of a single social activity: narrating a story or a report over family dinner. While recognizing that family interaction is socially and historically enmeshed in the prevailing interests of economic and political institutions (e.g., Hartmann 1981; Stack 1974), we offer a window into how family hierarchies are constituted in day-to-day family life. Our position is that family exchanges do not simply exemplify gender relations otherwise shaped by forces outside the family but, rather, are the primordial means for negotiating, maintaining, transforming, and socializing gender identities. Certainly from the point of view of a child, routine moments of family communication are the earliest and perhaps the most profound medium for constructing gender understandings (Cole & Cole 1989; Dunn 1984; Freud [1921] 1949; Goodwin 1990; Kohlberg 1966; Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Schieffelin 1990). Awakenings to gender asymmetry may occur from infancy on, for example, in two-parent families, through such everyday activity as

watching how mothers and fathers interact with each other and with their daughters and sons.

Our particular attention has been captured by the pervasiveness and importance of collaborative narration, wherein children interact with others in co-narrating, as a locus of socialization (Ochs, Smith, & Taylor 1989; Ochs & Taylor 1992a, b; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith 1992). In the present study, we examine how such narrative practices may instantiate gender-relevant narrator and family-role identities of women and men as mother and father, wife and husband, in white middle-class families in the United States.[1] Indeed, our observations of these households suggest that children are overhearers, recipients, and active contributors to gender-implicative, asymmetrical storytelling exchanges dozens of times in the course of sharing a single meal together.

One of the important tenets of this research is that all social identities, including gender identities, are constituted through actions and demeanors. Individuals come to understand a range of social identities primarily by learning, first in childhood, to recognize and/or display certain behaviors and stances that are permitted or expected by particular community members in particular activity settings. We suggest that, among other routes, children (and adults, taking on new roles as spouses and parents) come to understand family and gender roles through differential modes of acting and expressing feelings in narrative activity.

Another important perspective we propose to be essential to a fuller understanding of gender instantiation concerns the attention we place on family interactions – that is, families as multiparty activity systems (Engeström 1987). In gender research on social interaction, the exchanges analyzed have tended to be dyadic ones, i.e., female–male, female–female, or male–male interactions. This design lends itself to dichotomous comparisons between female and male conduct in these communicative arrangements. While two people may wear many hats within one dyad, which we also recognize, dyadic identity construction seems inherently less complex, less hierarchical than multiparty, and also less representative of the contexts in which most people are socialized into gender notions and roles.

Our study of family narrative-activity interactions examines multiparty two-parent contexts in which participants construct themselves and one another simultaneously as spouse, parent, child, and sibling – as mother and wife, father and husband, daughter and sister, son and brother. Within the variety of dynamics and alignments available, on the one hand, women and men may often work together to inquire about and control their children – and women can be seen as part of a dominating force. On the other hand, these parental alignments may co-occur with sustained internal-dyad exchanges wherein one spouse dominates the other – and women may regularly be part of (and a model for) the dominated.

We argue that the narrative practices of all family members in this study instantiate a form of gender asymmetry that we call a "Father knows best" dynamic. Within this dynamic, the father is typically set up – through his own and others' recurrent narrative practices – to be primary audience, judge, and critic of family members' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings as narrative protagonists (actors in the past) or as co-narrators (actors in the present). In our corpus, we are particularly struck by the practices of the women as mothers and wives that contribute to this dynamic, instantiating and modeling in their conduct as narrators a

orientation toward fathers as evaluators. In this chapter, we focus especially on those specific practices.

The "Father knows best" ideology is usually associated with a prefeminist, presumably passé 1950s conceptualization of idyllic domestic order that was popularized and concretized by the television program of the same name. In that situation comedy, the title was often ironic, given that its episodes regularly served to point out that Father did not, in fact, know best but often learned that Mother had been right all along. Yet lip service to a "Father knows best" ideology was often maintained on the surface in that Mother would modestly defer to or indulge Father's ego. In the 1980s, variations on this formula for domestic gender relations included its extension to Black middle-class families, most popularly in *The Bill Cosby Show*. Our appropriation of this title is intended to suggest that the ideology may still be getting daily reinforcement in the everyday narrative practices of postfeminist 1990s American families – with considerable (perhaps unwitting) help from wives and mothers. Indeed, it seems to us that the ideology was instantiated even more strongly in the everyday dinnertime discourse in our study than it was or is in mass-media fictionalized versions of family life – that is, more implicitly and without the irony.

Database

For several years, we have been analyzing discourse practices in twenty middle-class, European American families, focusing especially on dinnertime communication patterns in narrative activity. The present study isolates a subcorpus of these families: seven two-parent families who earned more than $40,000 a year during the 1987–1989 period in which the study was conducted. Each family had a five-year-old child who had at least one older sibling.[2] Two fieldworkers video- and audiotaped each family on two evenings from an hour or so before dinner until the five-year-old went to bed. During the dinner activity, fieldworkers left the camera on a tripod and absented themselves.

The specific database for this study consists of the exactly one hundred past-time narratives (stories and reports) that the seven families told during thirteen dinners where both parents were present. As we elaborate in Ochs and Taylor (1992a, b) and Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, and Smith (1992), we define a *story* as a problem-centered past-time narrative (e.g., the narrative activity eventually orients toward solving some aspect of the narrated events seen as problematic), whereas a *report* does not entail such a problem-centered or problem-solving orientation.

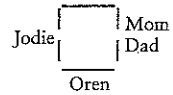
Narrative Instantiation of Gender Roles in the Family

The narrative roles that we address here as relevant to the construction of gender identities within families are those of *protagonist, introducer* (either elicitor or initial teller), *primary recipient, problematizer,* and *problematizee* (or *target*). Below we define each of these roles and discuss the extent to which that role was assumed by particular family members in our study.[3]

Protagonist

A *protagonist* is here defined as a leading or principal character in a narrated event. Our examination is limited to those narratives where at least one protagonist in the narrative is present at the dinner table, such as in (1), where the chief protagonist is five-year-old Jodie:

(1) zJodie's TB Shots Report (introductory excerpt)[4]



Participants:

Mom
Dad
Jodie (female, 5 years)
Oren (male, 7 years, 5 months)

The following excerpt introduces the first past-time narrative told at this dinner, when the family has just begun eating.

Mom: *((to Jodie))* =oh:: You know what? You wanna tell Daddy what happened to you today? =
Dad: *((looking up and off))* =Tell me everything that happened from the moment you went in – until:
[
Jodie: I got a sho::t?=
Dad: = EH *((gasping))* what? *((frowning))*
Jodie: I got a sho::t
[
Dad: no
Jodie: *((nods yes, facing Dad))*
Dad: *((shaking head no))* – Couldn't be
Jodie: (mhm?) *((with upward nod, toward Dad))*
[
Oren: a TV test? *((to Mom))*
(0.4)
Oren: TV test? Mommy?
Mom: *((nods yes))* – mhm
Jodie: and a sho:t
Dad: *((to Jodie))* (what) Did you go to the uh:: – *((to Mom))* Did you go to the ?animal hospital?
Mom: mhh – no:?.
Dad: (where)
Jodie: I just went to the doctor and I got a shot
Dad: *((shaking head no))* I don't believe it
Jodie: ri:?lly:: . . .

Protagonist is an important role with respect to the "Father knows best" dynamic in that the protagonist is presented as a topic for comment (e.g., in Jodie's case above, for belief or disbelief) by family members. While being a protagonist puts one's narrative actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings on the table as a focus of attention, this attention is not always a plus, given that protagonists' actions, thoughts, and feelings are not only open to praise but also exposed to familial scrutiny, irony, challenge, and

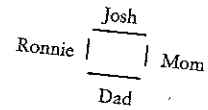
critique. Furthermore, if there is asymmetric distribution in the allocation of protagonist status, one family member may be more routinely exposed to such evaluation by others than the rest, impacting the degree to which some members' identities are constructed as protagonists more than others. In our corpus, such an asymmetry existed, whereby children were the preferred narrative protagonists, as exemplified in the report of Jodie's activities in (1). Children composed nearly 60 percent of all family-member protagonists; mothers figured as protagonists 23 percent of the time; fathers, 19 percent.[5] Father's being least often in the role of protagonist meant that their past actions, thoughts, and feelings were least often exposed to the scrutiny of others and, in this sense, they were the least vulnerable family members.

Introducer

In light of the vulnerability of protagonists to familial scrutiny, an important factor to consider is the extent to which family members assumed this role through their own initiative as opposed to having this role imposed on them through the elicitations and initiations of other family members. To address this issue, we consider next how narratives about family members were introduced.

The narrative role of *introducer* is here defined as the co-narrator who makes the first move to open a narrative, either by elicitation or by direct initiation. We define these two introducer roles as follows. An *elicitor* is a co-narrator who asks for a narrative to be told. In (1) above, Jodie's mother assumes this role and, in so doing, introduces the narrative. An *initial teller* is a co-narrator who expresses the first declarative proposition about a narrative event. In (1), Jodie assumed this role but, because her mother had elicited her involvement, Jodie was not the narrative introducer per se. In unelicited narratives such as (2), the initial teller (in this case, the mother) is also the narrative introducer.

(2) Broken Chair Story
Participants:
Mom
Dad
Ronnie (male, 4 years, 11 months)
Josh (male, 7 years, 10 months)



During dinner preparation, as Mom brings Ronnie a spoon to open a can of Nestlé Quik, she scoots Ronnie's chair in to the table. Josh is at his place; Dad is in kitchen area to the right of the table, as shown above.

Mom: Oh This chair? broke – today
Dad: I? know = [*((microwave? buzzer goes off))*
((Mom heads back toward kitchen, stops by Josh's chair; Josh begins looking at Ronnie's chair and under table))
Mom: =I- no:: I mean it rea:?lly broke today
Dad: [I? know (0.2) I know?

Mom: Oh You knew that it was split?
Dad: yeah?,
Mom: the whole wood('s) split?
Dad: yeah,
Mom: Oh Did you do it?
(0.4)
Dad: I don't know if I did? it but I saw that it wa:?s=
[
Mom: (oh)
((Josh goes under table to inspect chairs; Mom bends over to chair))
Ron?: (what? where?)
=[
Mom: yeah I sat down? in it and the whole thing split so I – I tie:d
[
Dad: *((with a somewhat taunting intonation))* (That's a)
rea:l si:gn? that you need to go on a di:?et.
Ron?: *((going under table too))* (where)
Mom: hh *((grinning as she rises from stooped position next to Josh's chair))*
Ron?: (where where where)=
Josh: =Mi:ne? broke?
Mom: I fixed it – I tied (it to the-)
[
Josh: mi:ne? I'm not gonna sit on that chair (if it's broken)
((Josh pushes his chair away and takes Mom's; Mom pushes Josh's chair over to her place, tells the boys to sit down; the subject of the broken chair is dropped))

The role of introducer is one that we see as pivotal in controlling narrative activity. The introducer nominates narrative topics, thus proposing who is to be the focus of attention (i.e., the protagonist), what aspects of their lives are to be narrated, and when. In (1), Jodie's mother directs the family's attention to Jodie at a particular moment in the dinner, suggesting that there is a narrative to be told as well as the tone, focus, and implicit boundaries of that narrative. For that moment, the introducer proposes what is important (to know) about that family member, as a protagonist. In addition, the introducer controls who is to initiate the narrative account itself, either self-selecting, as in (2), or eliciting a co-narrator, as in (1). Finally, introducers also exert control in that they explicitly or implicitly select certain co-narrator(s) to be primary recipients of the narrative (see following section). In both examples above, mother as introducer selected father as primary recipient.

Although the majority of the protagonists in our corpus were the children, the majority of the narrative introducers were the parents (who introduced seventy-one of the one hundred stories and reports), mothers more often than fathers. (Mothers and fathers *elicited* narratives from others almost equally; their difference derives from mothers' greater tendency to introduce by *direct initiation* as well – and often about others rather than about themselves.) All family members were vulnerable to having narratives about themselves introduced by others. Moreover, for parents, there was relative parity in this regard: for mothers and fathers equally, fully half of all narratives in which they figured as protagonists were introduced by themselves – and almost half by someone else.

A striking asymmetry exists, however, between parents and children. Only one-third of the narratives about children were introduced by the child protagonists.

themselves (for five-year-olds and younger, the figure was only one-quarter).[6] Children became protagonists chiefly because mothers introduced them as such and often by mothers' direct initiation of the narrative account. Thus, mothers were largely responsible for determining which children and which aspects of children's lives were subject to dinnertime narrative examination – and when and how. In light of this finding, we suggest that, for mothers, the role of introducer may be appropriated (at least in some family cultures and contexts within the United States) as a locus of narrative control over children – and, among family members, children may be particularly vulnerable in this sense.

Primary recipient

The narrative role of *primary recipient* is here defined as the co-narrator(s) to whom a narrative is predominantly oriented. This role is a powerful one in that it implicitly entitles the family member who assumes it to evaluate the narrative actions, thoughts, and feelings of family members as protagonists and/or as narrators. Anyone who recurrently occupies this position is instantiated as "family judge." As noted earlier, the introducer is critical to the assignment of primary recipient. In some cases, as in (1) and (2), the introducer designated another family member to be primary recipient; in other cases, as in (3), an introducer may select herself or himself.

(3) Lucy's Swim Team Report (introductory excerpt)

Near the end of dinner, Lucy (9 years, 7 months) has been describing her swim class when Dad raises a new, related narrative.
Dad: (Your) mother said you were thinking of uh: – getting on the swim team?
Lucy: *((nods yes once emphatically))*
(1.0) *((Mom, who has finished eating, takes plate to nearby counter and returns))*
Dad: *((nods yes))* – (good) ...

Not surprising but nevertheless striking was the privileging of parents as primary recipients of dinnertime narratives: parents assumed that role 82 percent of the time. Within this privileging of parents as preferred audience, fathers were favored over mothers. Whereas fathers often positioned themselves as primary recipients through their own elicitation of narratives (as in example 3, above), in some families mothers regularly nominated fathers as primary recipients through their narrative introductions, such as in (1): *You wanna tell Daddy what happened to you today?* When we overlay this finding on those discussed above, the overall pattern suggests a fundamental asymmetry in family narrative activity, whereby children's lives were told to parents but, by and large, parents did not narrate their lives to their children.

This preference for fathers as primary recipients is partly accounted for by the fact that the father is often the person at the dinner table who knows least about children's daily lives. Typically, even the women who work outside the home arrived home earlier than their husbands and had more opportunity to hear about the events in their children's days prior to dinner. However, there are several reasons to see that being "unknowing" is an inadequate account for fathers' prominence as primary recipients in these narratives. First, in two of the thirteen dinners studied here, mothers knew less about their children's day that day than did fathers, yet we did

not observe fathers nominating mothers as primary recipients of narratives about children (i.e., in this corpus, we did not find fathers saying, "Tell Mommy what you did today"). Second, child initiators oriented more narratives to mothers than to fathers in spite of the mothers' generally greater prior knowledge of children's lives. Third, mothers and children were typically as unknowing about fathers' reportable experiences as fathers were about theirs, yet fathers seldom addressed their lives to mothers or children as preferred recipients. (We also did not find mothers – or fathers – saying to each other the equivalent of "Honey, tell the children what you did today.") These considerations suggest to us that it was not simply being unknowing (about family members' daily activities) that determined primary-recipient selection but, perhaps, a matter of *who* was unknowing.

By considering who the initial teller was for each narrative (i.e., the one who was typically the first to address the primary recipient directly), we determined that it was neither children nor fathers themselves who accounted for fathers' assuming the role of overall preferred recipient. Instead, it was mothers who – in addition to often directing children to orient to fathers through elicitations (e.g., *Tell Daddy about . . .*) – also directly initiated many narratives to fathers as primary recipients. In fact, mothers' direct initiation to fathers was the single greatest factor in accounting for fathers' privileging as preferred recipient. Mothers initiated twice as many narratives oriented to fathers as fathers initiated toward mothers. In light of these findings, we suggest that a gender-socialization factor entered into the nonequation, prompting mothers' elevation of unknowing fathers into primary recipients – and judges – of other family members' lives, unmatched by fathers' similar elevation of unknowing mothers to such status.

We have noted above that narrative introducers exert control by designating primary recipients, but here we emphasize that, at the same time, such designation passes control to the co-narrator who is so designated: the primary recipient is in a position to evaluate, reframe, or otherwise pass judgment on both the tale and how it is told. In our view, the role of primary recipient affords a panopticon-like perspective and power (Bentham 1791; Foucault 1979). The term *panopticon* refers to an all-seeing eye or monitoring gaze that keeps subjects under its constant purview (e.g., a prison guard in a watchtower). Similarly, we suggest that narrative activity exposes protagonists to the surveillance of other co-narrators, especially to the scrutiny of the designated primary recipient (see Ochs & Taylor 1992b). Given that this role was played mainly by the fathers in our data, we further suggest that it is potentially critical to the narrative reconstruction of "Father knows best" because it sets up the father to be the ultimate purveyor and judge of other family members' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings.

The family-role preferences we have found with regard to these first three narrative roles – protagonist, introducer, and primary recipient – already present an overall picture of the way in which narrative activity may serve to put women, men, and children into a politics of asymmetry. As noted earlier, in the family context, issues of gender and power cannot be looked at as simply dyadic, i.e., *men* versus *women* as *haves* versus *have-nots*. Rather, in two-parent families, women and men manifest asymmetries of power both dyadically as spouses and triadically as mothers and fathers with children. Although there *are* interesting dyadic observations here regarding women versus men (e.g., women tend to raise narrative topics; men tend