

s of narratives about all Mommy what you s to mothers than to lge of children's lives. ut fathers' reportable dressed their lives to ot find mothers – or he children what you imply being unknow- imary-recipient selec-

to be positioned – often by women – to evaluate them), these apparently gender-based distinctions are part of a *triadic* interaction, or larger picture, wherein children are often the subjects of these narrative moves. Neither women's nor men's control is merely a control over each other but particularly encompasses and impacts children. Furthermore, a narrative role such as that of introducer (seen here to be more aligned with women, at least as initial teller) may have a complex relationship to power, both empowering the holder in terms of agenda-setting, choice of protagonist, and topic, but also disempowering to the degree that the introducer sets up someone else (here more often the man) to be ultimate judge of the narrated actions and protagonists.

### Problematizer/problematizee

The narrative role of *problematizer* is here defined as the co-narrator who renders an action, condition, thought, or feeling of a protagonist or a co-narrator problematic, or possibly so. The role of *problematicizee* (or *target*) is defined as the co-narrator whose action, condition, thought, or feeling is rendered problematic, or a possible problem. As such, in this study, we consider only problematizing that targeted co-present family members.

An action, condition, thought, or feeling may be problematized on several grounds. For example, it may be treated as untrue, incredible, or doubtful, as when, in (1), the father problematized Jodie's TB shots narrative with mock disbelief (*no, couldn't be, and I don't believe it*). In other cases, it is problematized because it has or had negative ramifications (e.g., is deemed thoughtless or perilous), as when, in (2), the wife implicitly problematized her husband as thoughtless for not warning her about the broken chair (*Oh You knew that it was split?*).

We also see in (2) how an action, condition, thought, or feeling may be problematized on grounds of incompetence. When the husband indicted his wife for being overweight as the cause of the chair's breaking (*That's a real sign? that you need to go on a diet?*), we suggest he was implicitly problematizing her for lack of self-control. In (4), the same father again problematizes his wife, this time as too lenient a boss and thus incompetent in her workplace as well:

#### (4) Mom's Job Story (excerpt)

*Same family as in (2). At the end of dinner, Mom is at the sink doing dishes as Dad eats an ice cream sundae and seven-year-old Josh does homework at the table opposite Dad. This excerpt comes near the end of a story about Mom's hiring a new assistant at work, which Dad has elicited and already probed considerably.*

Dad: ((*eating dessert*)) Well – I certainly think that – you're a – you know you're a fair boss – You've been working there how long?

Mom: fifteen years in June ((*as she scrapes dishes at kitchen sink*))

Dad: fifteen years – and you got a guy ((*turns to look directly at Mom as he continues*)) that's been workin there a few weeks? and you do (it what) the way he wants.

Mom: hh ((*laughs*))

(0.6) ((*Dad smiles slightly?, then turns back to eating his dessert*))

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ntrol by designating me, such designation mary recipient is in a oth the tale and how ls a panopticon-like rm *panopticon* refers ider its constant pur- uggest that narrative rratators, especially to (Taylor 1992b). Given further suggest that it knows best" because her family members'

ese first three narrat- dy present an overall ut women, men, and ily context, issues of en versus women as n and men manifest ally as mothers and c observations here ive topics; men tend

- Mom: It's not a matter of my doin it the way he:wa:nt – It does help in that I'm getting more work? done It's just that I'm workin too hard? I don't wanta work so hard
- Dad: ((*rolls chair around to face Mom halfway*)) Well – You're the bo:ss It's up to you to set the standards...

Further grounds for problematizing were on the basis that an action is out-of-bounds – e.g., unfair, rude, excessive. In (5), the father problematizes his wife for her wasteful consumption (e.g., *You had a dress right?*; *Doesn't that sound like a – total: – w:aste?*) and for her lack of consideration toward his mother (e.g., *Why did you let my Mom get you something (that you–); Oh she just got it for you?*):

(5) Mom's Dress Story (Round 2 of two-round story)<sup>7</sup>

*Same family as in (1). The children have finished eating and just gone outside to play; Dad is helping himself to more meat; Mom had begun a story about her new dress, interrupted by a phone call from his mother.*

Round 2 ((*begins after Mom hangs up phone and sits at table*))

Dad: So as you were saying?

Mom: (As I was) saying ((*turning abruptly to face Dad*)) What was I telling you

Dad: I ?don't? know

Mom: oh about the ?dress?

Dad: (the) dress

(1.2) ((*Mom is drinking water; Dad looks to her, to his plate, then back to her*))

Dad: You had a dress right?

Mom: ((*nodding yes once*)) Your mother bought (me it) – My mother didn't (like) it.

(0.4) ((*Mom tilts head, facing Dad, as if to say "What could I do?"*))

Dad: ((*shaking head no once*)) You're kidding

Mom: no

Dad: You gonna return it?

Mom: No you can't return it – It wasn't too expensive – It was from Loehmann's  
(0.8)

Mom: So what I'll probably do? – is wear it to the dinner the night before – when we go to the (Marriott)?

(1.8) ((*Dad turns head away from Mom with a grimace, as if he is debating whether he is being conned, then turns and looks off*))

Dad: (Doesn't that) sound like a – (total:) – w:aste?

Mom: no?:

Dad: no

Mom: ((*with hands out, shaking head no*)) It wasn't even that expen?sive  
(1.2)

Mom: ((*shaking head no, facing Dad*)) even if it were a complete waste

(0.4) ((*Dad looks down at plate, bobs head right and left as if not convinced*))

Mom: but it's not. ((*looking away from Dad*))

(0.6) ((*Mom looks outside, then back to Dad*))

Mom: (but the one) my mom got me is gr:ea:t –

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((*Dad eats from son Oren's plate next to him*))

Mom: (Is the ((*inaudible*)) okay?)

Dad: ((*gesturing with palm up, quizzical*)) (Well why did) you have –  
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Mom: Your mo:ther bought it – I hh –

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Dad: Oh she just got it for you?

Mom: ((*turning away from Dad, nodding yes*)) (yeah)

Dad: You weren't there?

Mom: I was there (and your mom) said "No no It's great Let me buy it for you" ((*turning back to face Dad*)) – I didn't ask her to buy it for me?

(5.0) ((*Dad is eating more food from son's plate; Mom looking toward table*))

Dad: So they're fighting over who gets you things?

Mom: ((*nods yes slightly*)) – ((*smiling to Dad*)) tch – (cuz I'm) so won?derful

(9.0) ((*no visible reaction from Dad; Mom turns to look outside; the subject of the dress is dropped*))

In the narratives in our corpus, exactly half of them involved someone problematizing a family member at the dinner table. Those fifty narratives generated a total of 229 problematizations of oneself or, much more often, of another family member.<sup>8</sup> Problematizing displays the most significantly asymmetric narrator-role distribution found in this study and reveals a "Father knows best" dynamic in family interaction. Men took on the role of problematizer 45 percent more often than women did and 3.5 times as often as did children. Strikingly, this pattern was mirrored in female and male children's uptake of the problematizer role. Among children, boys did 50 percent more problematizing than girls (even though there were nine girls and eight boys in the corpus who were old enough to co-narrate). With regard to family members' role constitution vis-à-vis narrative problematizing, men were problematizers almost twice as often as they were problematizees; women were as often problematizees as problematizers; and children were predominantly positioned as problematizees.

Examining individual instances to assess who problematized whom (i.e., the preferred target for each family member), we found that the bulk of narrative problematizing occurred between spouses. In 80 percent of the eighty-four instances in which mothers were problematized, the problematizer was the husband. In 63 percent of sixty-seven instances in which fathers were targeted, the problematizer was the wife. Thus, although women also targeted their spouses, men did so 60 percent more often. The targeting of women by their husbands represents the largest allocation of problematizings in our corpus of narratives. The differential in both absolute numbers and percentages of cross-spousal problematizing suggests in more detail the across-the-board nature of men's domination.<sup>9</sup> That is, both women and men vastly outproblematized their children, but men also considerably outproblematized their wives. Examples (1), (2), (4), and (5) above illustrate how men problematized their spouse or their child.

In addition to this overall quantitative difference, there were differences as well in the qualitative nature of women's versus men's problematizations. Notably, there was a distinction in spouses' use of two domains of problematizing: the problematizing of someone's actions, thoughts, or feelings (in the past) as a protagonist versus the problematizing of someone's comments (in the present) as a co-narrator. The latter category includes counterproblematizing in self-defense, as a response to a previous problematizing (here, by the spouse). The distribution of cross-spousal use of these problematizing strategies indicates that husbands criticized their spouse as protagonist far more often than was the case for wives (thirty-six times versus fourteen times).



Many of the husbands' problematizings of wives as protagonists entailed targeting the wife on grounds of incompetence, as exemplified in (4), Mom's Job Story. In contrast, wives did not problematize husbands on the basis of incompetence as protagonists; as noted above, wives relatively infrequently problematized their spouses as protagonists at all. Rather, women most often problematized men as narrators and much of that was of the counterproblematizing type, either in self-defense or in defense of their children. In other words, fathers would target what mothers had done in the reported events and then mothers would refute the fathers' comments as co-narrators. Men's problematizing focused on "You shouldn't have done *x*"; women's problematizing was more a form of resistance – to being problematized. Women were more often saying in essence, "No, that's not the way it happened..."; "Your interpretation is wrong..."; "You don't see the context." Thus, women – to the degree that they are regularly targeted for problematization – may get the impression that they cannot *do* anything right (and wind up defending past actions, as seen in the Mom's Job and Mom's Dress Stories), whereas men – to the degree they are regularly targeted more for their comments as co-narrator – may get the impression that they can't *say* anything right.

Men's preeminence as problematizers is further seen in the fact that they problematized their spouses over a much wider range of narrative topics than did women. Wives' conduct and stance concerning child care, recreation, meal preparation, and even their professional lives were open to husbands' critiques. Narratives about men's workdays, however, were exceedingly rare and were virtually never problematized. This asymmetry, wherein men had or were given "problematizing rights" over a wider domain of their spouses' experiences than were women, further exemplifies how narrative activity at dinner may instantiate and socialize a "Father knows best" worldview, i.e., it is men as fathers and husbands who scrutinize and problematize everything.<sup>10</sup>

Given men's presumption to quantitative and qualitative dominance as problematizers *par excellence* in this corpus, an important issue to raise is the extent to which men's prominence as problematizers was related to their role as preferred primary recipients. There was clearly a strong link between the two roles for them: 86 of men's 116 problematizings occurred when they were primary recipients of the narrative. However, the status of primary recipient does not, in itself, completely account for who assumed the role of problematizer.

Three observations in particular dispute such an interpretation. First, men exploited the primary-recipient role to do problematizing to a far greater extent than other family members did. As primary recipient, fathers problematized a family member, on average, 1.6 times per narrative; women did so only 0.55 times per narrative, and children only 0.05 times per narrative. In both degree and range of problematizing, men used their recipient status distinctively. Second, the whole level of problematizing went up when the father/husband was primary recipient. Of the 229 problematizings in the corpus, 155 occurred when he was primary recipient; averaging 2.8 problematizings per narrative, considerably more than when either women or children were primary recipients (1.6 per narrative and 0.5 per narrative, respectively). As already suggested in the discussion of counterproblematizing, this heightened level of problematization overall occurred largely because men's problematizing of women (as protagonists) triggered women's own counterprob-

lematizing of their husbands. As a result, women became problematizers much more often when men were primary recipients than when the women themselves were primary recipients (54 times versus 22 times). Third, we note that men problematized more than women did even in narratives where the woman was primary recipient (24 times versus 22 times).

For all these reasons, a primary recipient-becomes-problematizer explanation is too simplistic an account. Rather, our corpus suggests conceptualizations of recipientship that differentiate women, men, and children, i.e., differing dispositions and perhaps entitlements to problematize, with men in privileged critical positions. The role of problematizer seems to be a particular prerogative of the family role of father/husband, manifesting the ideology that "Father knows best," socializing and (re)constituting paternal prerogative and point of view in and through narrative activity.

Because an important issue we are pursuing here is women's role in establishing a "Father knows best" dynamic at the family dinner table and because we have seen that women's most notable narrative role was that of introducer, we examined the introducer-problematizer relationship to discover in particular the extent to which men's problematizings occurred in narratives introduced by women. Our finding is that women's introductions may indeed have triggered men's problematizations. First, when women introduced narratives, problematizing in general was more prevalent than when men or children did the introducing.<sup>11</sup> In narratives introduced by women, family members were problematized, on average, 3.4 times per narrative, considerably more than for narratives introduced by men (2.0 times) or by children (1.1). Second, the majority of men's problematizings (72 out of 116) occurred in narratives introduced by women. Men problematized other family members 1.8 times per narrative in those introduced by women, i.e., an even higher rate than we noted above when the factor of men's status as primary recipients was considered. Furthermore, men problematized more often in narratives introduced by women than in narratives they introduced themselves. This higher number of problematizations in narratives introduced by one's spouse might seem expectable but it was not matched by women, who wound up (counter)problematizing more often in the narratives they themselves introduced.<sup>12</sup> We see in these data an asymmetrical pattern wherein women's raising a topic seems to have promoted men's problematizing but not the reverse.

Women's assumption of the role of introducer co-occurred not only with increased problematization by men but also with increased targeting of women themselves. Women were problematized most often in the very narratives they introduced: 75 percent of all targetings of women occurred in those narratives, an average of 1.6 times per narrative. These figures contrast markedly with those for men: only 33 percent of the problematizings of men occurred in narratives they themselves introduced, an average of only 0.7 times per narrative.

These findings suggest that women were especially vulnerable to exposing themselves to criticism, particularly from their husbands, and thus may have been "shooting themselves in the foot" in bringing up narratives in the first place, as illustrated in (2), the Broken Chair Story, where a woman's designation (i.e., control) of narrative topic and primary recipient boomeranged in an explicit attack on her weight. In (1), Jodie's TB Shots Report, we see an example of how mother-introduced narratives also expose children to problematization by fathers. Reconsidering

our earlier observation that women were problematized over a wider range of daily activities, including professional lives, than were men, we can posit that this may have resulted largely from women's introducing themselves as protagonists in a much wider range of contexts to begin with.

One final issue with regard to problematization concerns the extent to which family members self-problematized. In our corpus, women displayed the highest proportion of self-targetings and, in keeping with the findings just discussed, this was also associated with narratives that women themselves raised. Although such targetings account for a relatively small proportion (12 percent) of the targetings of women overall, and they came essentially from only two families, these female self-problematizings are noteworthy in their provoking of a "dumping-on" response. That is, when women did question their own past actions, it seemed to invite considerable additional problematizing by their husbands. As illustrated in (6), a wife problematizes herself as protagonist and her husband elaborates:

(6) Bev Story (excerpt)

*This family consists of Mom (Marie), Dad (Jon), and four children (who at this point in the dinner have finished eating). Mom runs a day-care center in their home; she has been recounting to Dad how one of her day-care children's mothers, Bev, had given her more money than was owed for day-care services and that she had not accepted the extra money. She then recalled how Bev had not given a required two weeks' notice for withdrawing her daughter from day care, whereupon Dad problematized Mom's nonacceptance of the money as naive (i.e., incompetent).*

Mom: ((head on hand, elbow on table, facing Dad opposite her)) You know – Jon I verbally did tell Bev two weeks' notice Do you think I should've stuck to that? or just done what I did? (0.8) ((The children are standing by their seats, apparently listening))

Dad: When I say something I stick to it. unless she: -s-brings it up. If I set a policy – and a- – and – they accept that policy – unless they have reason to change it and and say something? I do not change it – I don't automatically assume .h "We'll it's not the right thing to do" If I were to do that e-I would be saying in the first place I should never have mentioned it I should never have set the policy if I didn't believe in it If I thought it was – a hardship on people I shouldn't a brought it up? – shoulda kept my mouth shut .h If I: say there's two weeks' notice required – .h I automatically charge em for two weeks' notice without thinking twice? about it I say and i- "If you-you need – Your pay will include till such and such a date because of the two neek-weeks' notice that's required." -If THE:Y feel hardship it's on their part – it's – THEIRS to say .h "Marie I really? – you know – I didn't expect this to happen 'n I'm ((softly)) sorry I didn't give you two weeks' notice but it was really un - avoidable" – a-and you can say "We'll – okay I'll split the difference with you – it's har- – a one week's notice" – and then they s- then if they push it

Mom: [ See? you know in one way wi- in one (instance) ((pointing to Dad)) she owed me that money – but I just didn't feel right? taking it=

Dad: [ well you're – you  
Mom: =on that pretense because she (wanted) -she thought she was paying it for something ((twirling her corncob)) that (she didn't)

[