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4

The "Father Knows Best" Dynamic in Dinnertime Narratives

Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor

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 pervasive 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) Jodie'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] Fathers' 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
[
((microwave? buzzer goes off))
Dad: I? know=
((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 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 *problematizee* (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 rea:l si:gn! that you need to go on a di:et.*), 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 bo?ss - 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))*

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)[7]

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 -

[

((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 - Why did you let my mom get you something (that you-)

Mom: Your mo:ther bought it - I hh-

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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10]

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 counterproblematizing 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.[11] 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.[12] 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'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." - I:f THE:Y feel hardship it's on thei:r 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:nd 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)

Dad: [You: give her the money and then you let it bother you then - you - get all ups-set You'll be upset for weeks

Mom: [No no no - I'm not upset - it's just

(0.4) *((Mom plops corncob down, raps knuckles on table))*

Mom: I guess I just wish I would have s:aid - I'm not upset with what happened - I just wanted- I think I - would feel better if I had said (something)....

In questioning her own actions as protagonist (*Do you think I should've stuck to that? or just done what I did?*), Marie invites her husband's evaluation and exposes herself to his critical uptake as he problematizes both her past actions (*You: give her the money*) and her present feelings (*... you let it bother you then - you - get all ups-set You'll be upset for weeks*). She is left to backtrack in self-defense, countering his portrayal of her present state and (re)defining her self-problematization on her own terms (*... I just wish I would have ...*), no longer as a question inviting further dumping on.[13]

In our corpus, the uptake on self-problematizing further distinguished women's and men's narrative practices; in contrast to this dumping-on response, women did not further problematize men after the men problematized themselves. When women took the opposite tack and presented themselves as problem-solvers rather than self-problematizers, another asymmetric practice entailed the husband's dismissing his wife's solution and problematizing it until she conceded at least partially. An example of this is seen in (5), Mom's Dress Story, when Mom offers her own solution to the two-dress situation (*So what I'll probably do? - is wear it to the dinner the night before ...*), to which Dad responds, "(Doesn't) that sound like a - (total:) - w:aste?" Mom initially rebuts (*no?:*) but, in the face of Dad's skepticism, concedes "... even if it were a complete waste," thus implicitly problematizing herself by Dad's terms in acknowledging that she might have been wasteful.

Our data also suggest that women's self-problematizing may have socializing effects. This was vividly illustrated in a lengthy story focusing on a mother and her son in a restaurant (the same family as in Jodie's TB Shots Report and Mom's Dress Story). In this narrative, the son, Oren, recalls eating a chili pepper his mother thought was a green bean. Although Oren initially frames the experience as funny, his mother tells him it wasn't funny, that his mouth was burning and hurting. While problematizing his

stance as narrator, she also implicates herself as a culprit, thereby self-problematizing as protagonist. In the course of the story, Oren eventually takes on his mother's more serious framing of events, to the point of shouting, "YOUR FAULT - YOUR FAULT." She agrees, nodding her head and saying, "It was my fault." While she is saying this, he leans over and pinches her cheeks hard. She gasps and pulls his hands away, saying, "OW That really hurts honey?" As she holds a napkin to her mouth and cheeks, her son comments, "Your fault - I get to do whatever I want to do once - (That was my fee?)," laughs, and adds, "Just like it happened to me it happens to you." Just as husbands piled on to wives' self-targeting, Oren thus follows up on his mother's self-problematizing, extending condemnation and executing punishment for her self-problematized actions. In so doing, he seems to be assuming a dramatic version of what, in this corpus, was a male narrator role.

This discussion calls attention to an appropriate ending caveat to our findings throughout this chapter. Namely, there is family variation even within this sample of seven families of similar socioeconomic status and racial-cultural background. There were men who took up the role of monitor and judge with what seemed almost a vengeance; there were others who displayed much less assertion of the prerogatives of power as primary recipient. Furthermore, we do not wish to fix particular men's (or women's) narrator personae based on two evenings in the lives of these families. Our aim is not to polarize the genders, but, rather, to shed potential new light on some underexplored aspects of gender construction and socialization in everyday narrative activity.

Conclusion

Synthesizing these findings—with the caveats noted above—we construe a commonplace scenario of narrative activity at family dinners characterized by a sequence of the following order. First, mothers introduce narratives (about themselves and their children) that set up fathers as primary recipients and implicitly sanction them as evaluators of others' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings. Second, fathers turn such opportunities into forums for problematizing, with mothers themselves as their chief targets, very often on grounds of incompetence. And third, mothers respond in defense of themselves and their children via the counterproblematizing of fathers' evaluative, judgmental comments.

In the first stage, we see mothers' narrative locus of power; in the second, however, we see that such exercise of power is ephemeral and may even be self-destructive by giving fathers a platform for monitoring and judging wives and children. In the third stage, we see mothers striving to reclaim control over the narratives they originally put on the table. Given our impression of the recurrence of these preferences and practices, it seems that the struggle of the third stage is not ultimately successful in that the fathers reappear as primary recipients and the cycle of narrative reenactment characterized by this generalized scenario prevails. It may be that all parties obtain a particular type of satisfaction or stasis through this interplay such that it serves underlying needs, self-conceptions, and communicative goals. However, in this generalized scenario, mothers seem to play a pivotal role in enacting and socializing a hegemonic activity system (Engeström 1987; Gramsci 1971) in which fathers are regularly reinstantiated as arbiters of conduct narratively laid before them as in a panopticon.

In the family interactions we observed, when women directed their narratives to their husbands (or when children directed their narratives, voluntarily or not, to their fathers), they disadvantaged themselves by exposing their experiences to male scrutiny and standards of judgment. They performed actions as narrators that rendered them vulnerable to repeated spousal/paternal criticism of them, especially as protagonists. Through such means and with such effects, "Father knows best"—a gender ideology with a deeply rooted politics of asymmetry that has been contested in recent years—is still in reverberating evidence at the two-parent family dinner table, jointly constituted and re-created through everyday narrative practices. In this chapter, we hope to have raised awareness of the degree to which some women as wives and mothers may wittingly or unwittingly contribute to—and even set up—the daily reconstruction of a "Father knows best" ideological dynamic.

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Notes

1. Clearly, our findings are implicative for certain family cultures and are not inclusive of the range of linguistic, ethnic, economic, and other forms of group variation within the United States. This study is offered as a basis for possible future studies of family narrative activity as a medium for constituting gender relations in other socioeconomic and cultural settings for which we do not presume to speak here. At the same time, while we suggest a certain resonance in these findings, we recognize the limits of our corpus and do not wish to overgeneralize regarding narrative practices even for white middle-class families.
2. This choice of five-year-olds follows from our interest in the roles played by children of an age to be fully capable of collaboration in family talk but still in their earliest, most pivotal years of language socialization (prior to much formal schooling). We also wanted at least one older child in the families so as to capture sibling as well as parent-child interaction.
3. For simplicity, we will often refer to participants by only one family role, e.g., to women as *mothers,* men as *fathers,* and girls and boys as *children,* but we note again, in keeping with our introductory perspectives, that at any one moment each participant may be constructing more than one family identity, e.g., also as spouses, as siblings, as females, as males.
4. All family names are pseudonyms. Transcription procedures are essentially those established by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson & Heritage 1984:ix–xvi):

[	a left-hand bracket indicates the onset of overlapping, simultaneous utterances
=	two equals signs (latches) link utterances either by two speakers where the second jumps in on the end of the first, without any interval, or by the same speaker when lengthy overlap by another speaker requires that a continuous utterance be interrupted on the transcript to show simultaneity with another
(0.4)	indicates length of pause within and between utterances, timed in tenths of a second
a - a	a hyphen with spaces before and after indicates a short pause, less than 0.2 seconds
sa-	a hyphen immediately following a letter indicates an abrupt cutoff in speaking
(( ))	double parentheses enclose nonverbal and other descriptive information
( )	single parentheses enclose words that are not clearly audible (i.e., best guesses)
___	underlining indicates stress on a syllable or word(s)
CAPS	upper case indicates louder or shouted talk
:	a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound, the more colons, the longer
.	a period indicates falling intonation
,	a comma indicates a continuing intonation
?	a question mark indicates a rising intonation as a syllable or word ends *Note:* bounding question marks (e.g., *Did you go to the ?animal hospital?*) are used (instead of rising arrows) to indicate a higher pitch for enclosed word(s).
h	an *h* indicates an exhalation, the more *h*'s, the longer the exhalation
.h	an *h* with a period before it indicates an inhalation, the more *h*'s, the longer

5. For tables detailing the quantitative findings of this study, see Ochs and Taylor (1992c).
6. For more detail and elaborated consideration of the roles of children in the narrative activity of this corpus, see Ochs and Taylor (1992b).
7. When a narrative is interrupted or dropped and taken up again after an interval of at least two other turns, we consider the restart to constitute a new "round."
8. Only 10 percent of all problematizations were "self-inflicted," meaning that 90 percent of the problematizations targeted others. The percentage of problematizing directed toward oneself was highest for women, although still only 12 percent. In keeping with our present focus on exploring women's roles in particular, we will discuss and illustrate these self-problematizations in more detail following our examination of cross-spousal problematizing.
9. Accounting for the percentage differential in cross-spousal targeting, the children, albeit infrequent problematizers, did twice as much targeting of fathers as they did of mothers.
10. Perhaps contrary to general expectation, spouses in our corpus did not tend to elicit narratives from each other about their workdays (Mom's Job Story being an exception), so that parental "what-my-day-was-like" narratives, unlike the narratives of children, tended to be directly self-initiated to the spouse without elicitation.
11. Out of the 39 narratives introduced by women, 62 percent included at least one instance of someone's problematizing a family member at the dinner table. In contrast, only 44 percent of the narratives introduced by men and 41 percent of those introduced by children evidenced such problematizing.
12. On average, men problematized in narratives that they introduced themselves only 1.2 times per narrative, i.e., less often than they problematized in narratives introduced by women (1.8 times per narrative). In contrast, women problematized in narratives that they introduced themselves 1.4 times per narrative, i.e much more often than they problematized in narratives introduced by men (only 0.5 times per narrative).
13. Regarding the roles and implications of problematization or challenges in co-narrators' theories of everyday events, and the potential here for Marie to incorporate her husband's challenge into something of a paradigm shift in her own stance, see Ochs, Smith, and Taylor (1989) and Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, and Smith (1992).

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5

Managing the Body of Labor

The Treatment of Reproduction and Sexuality in a Therapeutic Institution

Cathryn Houghton

Recent commentators (e.g., Willis 1977) have stated that domination depends on the consent of the dominated. Such a view, though tragic, seems optimistic. It is optimistic in the sense that coercive force is no longer necessary, despite a long history that would attest otherwise, in the operations of a now-civilized state. It is tragic in the sense that consent increasingly depends on the thorough brainwashing of consenting parties. In this case, what is consent? What is freedom, autonomy, or independence, the values held so sacred by the citizens of a democratically ruled society? In a paradoxical way, state incorporation of coercive power presents a more optimistic outlook than that of symbolic power, or rule through the less readily perceived mechanisms of hegemonic control. The present chapter explores a case in which certain citizens do not subscribe to dominant values and the discourses through which they are articulated. Direct and indirect mechanisms of power are combined in manufacturing the consent of women who are designated for positions upon which industrial capitalism depends most: menial wage labor. Indeed, women increasingly represent the body of labor serving the forces of production and consumption, both nationally and internationally (see, for example, Ong 1987).