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ABSTRACT

How do people know what gender they are? An action or physical characteristic becomes meaningful only when interpreted through its cultural framework. The difference between male and female communication styles has recently engaged national attention, and the frameworks that men and women use to understand the world have been observed by scholars. These behavior, in turn, may be understood as performances of the different frameworks used. During undergraduate and graduate study, a teacher (who had always sought to flee gender limitations) used male-linked communication characteristics to insure her success. She entered the field of speech communication and media criticism, a discipline that valued the masculine. Through a university debate she organized, she began to doubt the effectiveness of male "report" talk. The debate opened the door to the discovery of different options for communication. The teacher came to assume her own validity and to make decisions that were neither reactions against nor concessions to power. Now, in her public speaking courses at a community college, she focuses on the interdependence of speaker and audience. She has operationalized the feminine and come to believe that gender identity is negotiable and is determined within a changing social context. (Nineteen references are attached.) (SG)

ON BECOMING A WOMAN

Teaching As Transformation

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Presented at the National Council of Teachers of English convention.
Seattle, November, 1991

How do you know what gender you are? No, don't look down. Don't grab and scratch. I'd like this to be a more cerebral exercise. I want you to think about what you do everyday that tells you what sex you are. Some of you may clothe yourselves in ways that reference gender. Others may have activities that call gender to mind -- activities like sewing, woodworking, or peeing. But these activities cannot be slipped into a category that doesn't exist. An action or physical characteristic becomes meaningful only when it is interpreted through its cultural framework. Until we know that people who assume different positions to relieve themselves achieve different positions in the world, we don't know that ***here*** is a difference that makes ***the*** difference.

So how do we learn about this difference? I want you to take a moment to relax and think about the first time you were told that you were a little girl or a little boy. You may not be able to remember the exact moment. That choice of pink or blue happens too early for most of us to recall once we reach the age of conference going. But those early stories and responses become part of our reality. The sign of difference becomes flesh even as it finds flesh as its seed. And throughout our lives, the perception of our difference is maintained by the feedback of others. This essay is the story of a little girl who rejected the feminine narratives correlated to her chromosones until she began to see their moral and utilitarian value. It's the story of someone who privileged male forms of behavior and being until she found that they didn't help her to create the world she wanted. It will be a gentle stripping away of the subtly coded formats of bureaucratized masculinity to the newly framed ideology of feminine empowerment.

As I format this paper, I join the ranks of feminists "reclaiming the first person" to both good and ill effect, as Elisabeth Young-Bruel notes in her recent essay in *Lingua Franca* (Young-Bruel, 1991). Not only am I locating myself in my research, but I am articulating myself as the object of analysis. In doing so, I hope to provide some understanding about the ways in which texts, organizations, and interpersonal communication shape what we call our Selves. As Young-Bruel notes, "Identity is not insight. And autobiography that ends where it began, that defensively or offensively armors an identity rather than journeys in search of one, is simply a weapon, not an education" (p. 17). My hope is that my story can give you insight into your own.

A narrative about the development of an individual into a woman suggests a beginning place of non-femininity. Filmed and written romances like to show us that womanhood is achieved through menstrus or the loss of virginity. One becomes a woman having been a child. In my story, femininity is the as yet incomplete acquisition of new methods of communicating. These methods stand in opposition to, or, as an option to, the masculine identified methods I know all too well.

The difference between American male and female communication styles has recently engaged national attention with televised harassment and rape investigations the presence of Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* on the best seller lists (Tannen, 1990). Tannen has summed up the differences between men and women's communication styles by talking about "report talk" and "rapport talk," or the accomplishment of skilled public and private speaking. She argues that misunderstanding between men and women in America arises from a misunderstanding of these two interpretive frameworks.

According to Tannen, men's "report talk" is the public use of language to:

> preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information. From childhood men learn to use talking as a way to get and keep attention (p. 77).

Suzette Haden Elgin has also discussed the problems caused by different frameworks of gendered understanding in her book, *Success with the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (Elgin, 1989). She argues that women see

organizational conflict as a "real life" problem while men tend to see it through the lens of the "game" metaphor:

> most American men today define anything that involves negotiation as a game, at least temporarily, and they switch to game playing behavior for the duration of the negotiation. American women, by and large, don't apply that principle (p. 58).

American women, according to Elgin, are less likely to see the negotiation around conflict as a game. Tannen argues that this is because women engage in "rapport talk:"

> For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences. From childhood, girls criticize peers who try to stand out or appear better than others. People feel their closest connections at home, or in settings where they feel at home -- with one or a few people they feel close to and comfortable with -- in other words, during private speaking (Tannen, p. 77).

Anything that violates the connection between people may be considered questionable behavior.

The frameworks that American men and woman variously use to understand the world have been discovered by scholars watching specific communication behaviors (Gilligan, 1982; Wood, 1986; Lips, 1991; Pearson & West, 1991). The behaviors, in turn, may be understood as performances of these different frameworks. Textbooks created for courses on gender and communication usually contain the latest findings and lists of sexed communication variables. Laurie Arliss' text, *Gender Communication*, runs down sites of difference and non-difference in language, kinesics, paralinguistics, haptics, proxemics and interactional aspects of communication like turn taking and topic selection (Arliss, 1991). Among the differences she discusses are several which will be useful to my story. Women use less colorful language, weaker expletives, interrupt and control topics less frequently than men. They tend to ask more questions than men. The data from the research, Arliss argues, supports the idea that "women are more other-centered than men, at least in conversation" (p. 65). In nonverbal communication, the differences are equally visible.

> The empirical research concerning sex differences in kinesic nonverbals, then, seems to provide support for the possibility that there is a male style and a female style of interaction. Taken together, stereotypically masculine bodily actions tend to

communicate dominance and power, while stereotypically feminine bodily actions tend to communicate affiliation and warmth (p. 90).

So current theory and research suggests that American men and women see the world differently and send messages based on their visions. Or perhaps it shows us that men and women act differently and they create frameworks based on those visions. The argument sounds like the chicken and egg of the nature/nurture arguments. But whether behavior precedes identity or vice versa, I agree with Arliss when she notes that people interested in being effective communicators would do well to become proficient at expressing both affiliation and power because "the inevitable conclusion is that all individuals who behave according to sex-appropriate prescriptions are substantially limited" (p. 90).

Throughout my life I have tried to flee those limitations. I was born in 1953 into a household and educational system that privileged boy stuff over girl stuff. My parents had expected and hoped for a boy, someone to pick up my Dad's typewriter and become a newsman. In a house with three other girls, I became the boy surrogate. As the journalist's heir, I was taught to value language, reading, humor, direct speech, and inquisitiveness. I fought my first battle over gender in kindergarten. The teacher assumed that on rainy days the little girls would play house in the little kitchen/living room area on the side of the room, while the boys would take the rest of the floor to build or play with balls or trucks. I refused to go into the kitchen area. I wanted to play in the big area with the blocks. As I recall, I hollered some. (My folks may have hollered some, too.) After that, no one asked me to go into the "girls" area again. During my school years, I participated in both boy-type and girl-type activities. Before seventh grade, I played football, softball, and dodgeball: team oriented sports that trained me to see life through the "game" metaphor. At home I played at Revolutionary War, World War II, and cowboys and indians. Arliss notes that active and occasionally violent "war" games help boys build a hierarchical world at an early age (p. 45). So I too learned how to give and receive orders and to value being "on top." Besides the war games, I also played a variety of "imagination games" with my good male friends. These games involved role playing and the verbal, unstructured activities most often linked to girl's play (p. 45). Though I increased my verbal and connecting skills, I did so while denying any interest or pleasure in girl activities.

It was in grade school that I also learned to be the teacher's pet. I performed that role not only by doing the erasers after school, but by talking a lot during class as well. I was learning that public speaking is rewarded. I paid attention to that lesson through junior high and high school. While I was not the highest scholastic achiever in my class, I was a highly visible presence at school as I pushed my teachers both inside and outside of the classroom. My hand was up often, and I learned the subtle skills of getting a teacher off track and turning his or her interest onto my chosen topic. My mother would occasionally warn me that smart girls hid their intelligence from boys. I didn't buy that. (But then, I didn't date, either.) By my senior year, I was editor of the school newspaper and heavily invested in being a muckraker. A few romantic misadventures had taught me that I was more skilled at public than private speaking. These public skills would stand me in good stead through my undergraduate and graduate school years.

I entered Idaho State University, one of my Dad's schools, in 1971. I completed a B.A. in photojournalism in 1976. Between 1976 and 1981 I held a variety of jobs and come down with a few of the pains so prevalent in the seventies. I fell prey to the decades decadent dalliance with drugs, alcohol, and disco. It was a time of slipping and sliding. But I got back on track with a master's program in speech and theatre. I received my MA from the small and achingly traditional department at Idaho State in '84. A couple of weeks later, I jumped a few decades into the highly theoretical communication program at the University of Utah. I'm still working on my dissertation for them.

During my years as a successful graduate and undergraduate, I used male linked communication characteristics to insure my success. The most important aspect of my communication behaviors was my ability to ask questions and argue publicly with my professors. Researchers have linked classroom question asking to masculinity. According to a study done by Judy C. Pearson and Richard West, "self-reported masculinity, which includes elements of independence, assertiveness, and a task-orientation, was associated with a greater likelihood of question asking" (1991, p. 22). I argued with teachers because I was obsessed with the hierarchy in the classroom and determined to test the teacher's strength at every opportunity. Remember that Tannen regards an overwhelming focus on hierarchy as an aspect of the masculine way of being in the world. I also was able to use my verbal skills to

discover a teacher's interests and point of view and learned how to shape my verbal responses to her or his needs. These verbal messages were accompanied by assertive nonverbal behaviors like confident masculine coded postures, interrupting, direct eye contact, aggressive touch, and a large personal space bubble. While they sometimes put people off, both the verbal and nonverbal behaviors made me more visible than the individuals who set quietly in the back of the room.

When I decided to do my work in speech communication and media criticism, I was entering a discipline that valued the masculine. Speech communication arises from traditions of rhetorical criticism. This tradition values a framework that is predominantly male in its worldview. Karen and Sonja Foss discuss that framework in their wonderful *Women Speak* (1991). They argue that rhetorical criticism has focused on texts considered significant because they are finished products produced by noteworthy, historical individuals in the public realm. Significant communicators are usually male and are assessed by standards usually considered male.

This commitment to institutionally defined significance was the dominant paradigm in the program I attended at Utah. A local, corollary paradigm was the institutionally sanctioned understanding that the department at Utah was on the cutting edge of communication theory. It had a strong deconstructionist, interpretive, marxist tone to much of its program and the theoreticians and liberals on staff worked at opening up the communication canon. But the acceptable format of institutional communication while I was there remained "report talk." In the first year, all new graduate students were taught how to manage the business side of the discipline. In Comm. 600, Introduction to Graduate Studies, we were instructed in the basics of paper writing to that we could frame our ideas for conferences and journals. Those presentations and papers inevitably had to be like this one -- one speaks, the other listens. The performer shares information and shows how she or he is one up on the audience, many of whom may have submitted papers only to be turned down. I relearned how to use reason and argument and how not to use "I" in a paper. I had one professor who told the class not to use "I" because "nobody cares what you think," they only care about the information I can provide. I learned how to take criticism as though it had nothing to do with my Self. And, most importantly, I became ever more adept at arguing a position opposed to the

one being taken at the front of the classroom. While this proved thorny and irritating, it also got me noticed. My second year at Utah one of my male professors, an old buffalo in the business, told me that the worst thing a student in our department could do was be quiet. People needed to make themselves visible. And I did that.

Even though I achieved my greatest and most hard won academic success at Utah, it was also there that I began to question the effectiveness of report talk. Two situations led me to those questions, one was a minor event that opened my door to questions, the other is an ongoing frustration.

I was led to doubt the efficacy of report talk during a debate I organized and performed toward the end of my second year at Utah. At that time I was writing a monthly book review column for the *Triangle*, the local gay newspaper. The U of U's Gay and Lesbian Student Union leaders asked me to create a panel for the annual regional meeting. I decided to set up a debate on Lesbian Separatism. I found a woman happy to argue against separatism, but I couldn't find anyone to take the separatist position. So, being an old speech student, I volunteered myself for the job. I didn't personally believe in separatism, but thought someone should educate the male members of our community. I studied, I read, I took notes, I had cards that laid out three clear arguments complete with supporting material. Yes, it was a report. A report that celebrated the choice made by those women who choose not to live around men. Today, the irony makes my eyes hurt. Then, I didn't see it. On the day of the debate, I came in full of fire and ready to argue. My opponent simply sat and talked about her life and her feelings. She was personable. She was disclosive. It was all too obvious from the audience's smiles that even though she didn't have an iota of evidence and she wasn't coming close to a reasonable syllogism, she had the audience on her side. I had all the best arguments and no one smiled at me that way. I felt betrayed by my education. For a while I put my obvious loss down to a lack of critical consciousness on the part of the audience. But, after I became a woman, I knew better.

That debate opened the door to the discovery of different options for communication. Unfortunately, it didn't open the door for my professors, who were all deeply committed to the discipline's report dominated

communication style.[1] Even a woman I admired a great deal, who was clearly commited to the ideals of feminism, dealt with people in male terms and continues to do so. She is not available for friendly discussion. She stresses independence and individuality in student tasks. She assumes her hierarchical position and does not make the way open for discussion. Now I don't believe she intends to live a behavior in opposition to her articulated ideology. I simply think that her desire to be a respected member of a male designed hierarchy influences her behavioral choices. Now, if I were still a male-identified graduate student, with the desire to fight to prove myself, I would probably be able to accept and identify with these behaviors. But in the past three and a half years since I left Utah, I have become transformed. Rapport has become more valuable than report. My femininity has come like a changing of clothes. I took off the masculine costume of the university researcher in communication studies and replaced it with the more colorful and graceful garb of the community college communication instructor.[2] And as my outward signs changed, so have my inward perceptions.

I came to COCC as the single tenure track position in speech communication. That role gave me an autonomy I had not experienced before. I was free to experiment with my teaching methods, as long as I got good student evaluations. I was not at the bottom of a disciplinary hierarchy, as I had been when I was a teaching fellow at Utah. Now, that didn't mean that I ignored the chair of my department at COCC. I paid attention to him as he explained the rules of the humanities department. But my chair inhabits a different discipline. He did not tell me that my view of communication theory and practice was wrong. So I was finally able to make decisions that were neither a *reaction against* or a *concession to* power. I could assume my own validity, as Libby Falk Jones adivises feminists and others to do "If you're on the margin, don't *argue* that you're as good as the center; rather, assume that what you want to prove is true and then act on that truth." (1990, p. 132)

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[1] I think that some might say that they don't have a choice.

[2] When I performed this paper at the Nation Council of Teachers of English Convention in Seattle, November, 1992, I actually performed a strip. During the second part of the paper, as I talked about the effect of the community college, I gradually took off my man tailored suit and revealed a green satin blouse and slacks underneath. I slipped two billowing blouses over this, one of matching green satin, the other a semi transparent fuschia and black plaid with gold thread.

At Utah, the professors imparted information and the students responded to it. Although discussion was an important part of most classes, the banking metaphor of instruction was central, especially at the lower undergraduate level. As a teaching fellow, I taught classes in which I was required to bring in a GPA of 2.0 to 2.4. This screening requirement emphasized competition and elitism. I knew that the economics of the department demanded some kind of population management, but I did not like the ideological results. That sort of hierarchical thinking started slipping when I began to understand the mission of the community college. Now, I didn't learn this mission by reading books like *The American Community College* (Cohen & Brawer, 1989) and *Dateline 2000* (Parnell, 1990). I learned the mission of the college through interacting with my students and colleagues. A community college serves a variety of constituencies: community ed., transfer, and professional technical. Each of those constituencies should be valued. The college also has a policy of open admissions. Both these policies meant that I had a variety of talents and backgrounds in my classes, and I somehow had to try and reach all of them. Many of these students were returning to school. Scholastic success was important to many of these people because it meant that they could change their lives. As I talked with my colleagues, I learned of their concerns about student success and was surprised that they made themselves so available to their students, some even giving out home phone numbers. The college emphasis on learning forced me to make my ideas make more sense. It meant that I had to connect with my students to teach them, not simply expect them to connect with me.

But the mission itself was not enough to move me away from a hierarchical perception of the classroom. I might have been committed to those goals and remained a lecturer. But the material that I was teaching, and my commitment to it, prevented that choice. The two primary courses I teach are public speaking and interpersonal communication. The latter course forced me to evaluate my masculine style of classroom interaction.

The typical interpersonal communication course has two purposes. In a department of communication, it exists in part to introduce people to one field within the discipline.[3] But the other, more important purpose is

[3] Or discipline within the field, depending on how you look at communication study.

personal empowerment. Introductory texts like *Interplay* (Adler, Rosenfeld, Towne, 1989) enable individuals by showing them how much of what they know is constructed through communication and then giving them the tools to reconstruct where necessary. I used *Interplay*, and now use a different book by two of its authors, *Looking Out, Looking In* (Adler, Towne). Central to the ideology of both texts are two core concepts, one epistemological, the other utilitarian. Drawing from decades of communication research and millennia of philosophy, the authors show that human perception is variable. Every person comes to the physical world with a different set of perceptual criteria. Thus, the idea that any one person has access to the true understanding of objective existence is not tenable. An understanding of the variable nature of perception has two interesting outcomes. One is the knowledge that truth is not directly accessible to observation. This kicks a hole in notions of objectivity and in the hierarchies built on such notions. The other outcome is the understanding that we can never really know what another person is thinking or feeling. Therefore, the wise and effective communicator is the individual who works to clarify the other person's ideas. Such clarification cannot take place in an atmosphere of defensiveness and conflict. Thus, the authors are concerned with the creation and maintenance of a positive communication climate in which functional methods of conflict resolution are used.

According to Adler, et al., a positive climate is one in which people receive confirming messages which recognize, acknowledge, and endorse them (1989, pp. 259-283). The effective communicator refuses to get caught up in the defensive spiral of attack and counter attack which identifies the negative communication climate. If the climate does become cloudy because of conflict, the effective communicator focuses on problem solving instead of winning. When the authors discuss the difference between functional and dysfunctional conflicts they note that in the latter, opponents are polarized, isolated and coercive as the conflict escalates or drifts and the focus is on shortsighted win/lose results. A functional conflict, one which maintains it's host relationship, focuses on integration, cooperation, clarified purposes, agreement, and works for a win/win solution. In order to achieve a positive climate and negotiate conflict successfully, students need to learn communication methods that emphasize listening, the ownership of one's own emotions, the uses of honest expression, and assertiveness.

Because of the focus on skills, most interpersonal communication classes emphasize experiential learning and de-emphasize lectures. The best selling interpersonal texts arrive with special activities manuals and aids to help the instructor create an interactive classroom.

In short, the acknowledgement of the instability of perception coupled with an interest in effective communication have led these authors to emphasize interdependence, equality, respect, and the skills needed to make these ideals visible. *They have operationalized Tannen's notion of rapport.* The ideology of interpersonal communication courses may be thought of as a feminine ideology.

At one time, its ideology made interpersonal communication different from public speaking courses. My public speaking class still emphasizes individuals communicating with groups in a speaker/audience format. But a year after I got to COCC, I changed the core value of the course. At one time, I thought that public speaking was like drama -- it was about performance and theatre. Now I focus on the interdependence of speaker and audience. I've moved from the standard textbook to a trade paperback called *I Can See You Naked.* Its author, Ron Hoff, makes it clear that the public speaking relies on the relationship between speaker and audience (Hoff, 1989). Without that relationship, all the evidence and emotion in the world can't create an acceptable presentation.

Well, all this textbook material would have made no difference if I didn't have a personal belief about the relationship between teaching and truth. I believe that it is wrong to teach a skill that I will not use or to say I believe in something that I don't accept. So I began changing. How could I teach people about a positive climate if I didn't work to create one in my classroom? How could I discuss win/win conflict resolution if I didn't accept my students needs and points of view? How could I tell them to focus on relationship if I didn't care about my relationship with them? So I began to listen more, even when it hurt. In truth, I still use my masculine skills to manage my research and the assessment side of classroom teaching. As a teacher, I know that I am a functionary in a hierarchical organization and must acknowledge my position. I am paid by my students through the school to perform a certain role. I assess performances and apply grades for performances limited by time and space. As long as I am performing that role, I cannot give myself over completely to equality. It would not be honest to do so. But I do

demystify this position of authority by explaining my grading criteria and making any and all grades negotiable. Though I hold my hierarchical position, I am not deeply ego involved with it. I try to hear and respond to criticism not as attack but as legitimate comment made from a particular point of view. I have worked to make myself more open to many kinds of ideas, even deeply conservative ones.[4] I have given up sarcasm, irony, and any other display which imply that I value my own point of view more than that of my students.

In short, I have operationalized the feminine. Outside of the classroom, my identification with the feminine has been held in place by my relationships with my colleagues, especial with the two women on this panel. Over the past three years, Carol Henderson[5] has served as a critic and conscience for me. She is always aware of the blissful and unthinking performances of hierarchy, and her humorous critiques have called my attention to organization faux pas that I am sometimes too worn out to notice. At times she has also reminded me of moments when I have exhibited a return of the authoritarian repressed. I haven't always been comfortable with her critique, but it has been useful. Cora Agatucci[6] and I arrived at COCC the same year. Since that time, she has helped to change the institution. She created the school's first women's studies course and has fought to make the plight of part timers and other exploited populations visible to the powers that be. We've had many talks about the importance of collaborative education. She keeps me focused on its effectiveness even when I begin to feel overwhelmed by the risk. For three years now, Cora has been both a role model and a friend. Both these women have become part of what I think of as my feminist superego, for I carry their voices in my head.

Thus Cora and Carol help validate -- empirically and interactively -- the communication ideology I perform and teach. I am able to live my ideology because I work in a community college where I have autonomy and respect.

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4 Many of my students are fundamentalist Christians with worldviews deeply different from my own. Accepting their vision and responding to it honestly and non defensively is sometimes challenging for me.

5 A librarian at C.O.C.C.

6 Cora is the author of "The Lessons of Student Autobiography," *Teaching English the the Two Year College*, Vol. 18 (May, 1991) pp. 138-145.

But it was my life as a boy and my masculine communication skils which helped me survive and succeed in college and the university.

So I think that gender identity is negotiable. Part of me is your perception of me and the way you act on that perception. I create myself in response to you. There is a body, somewhere, but that body knows itself within its social context, and that context is always changing. I am becoming a woman now. But next summer, as I work on my dissertation, will I once again become a man? I don't know. What I do understand is that my gender is not now and never has been a matter of what's between my legs. Or even what's between my ears. ***My*** gender is a matter of what's between ***OUR*** ears.

Yours.

And mine.

Resources

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