Gendering Talk

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A TALE OF DIFFERENCE: I'M ON THE POT, PREPARING FOR A BATH. AS I GET OUT A
new roll of tissue, a little box drops on the floor. It is hotel soap. My bath
soap is almost gone, so I unwrap the soap and put it on the bathtub soap
tray. A moment later Kay shambles in and we have this exchange:

[1] Field Note

Kay: Oh you got out another soap.
Rob: Yes the other one was almost gone.
Kay: You didn’t like the one I got out.

(There is another soap on the edge of the tub. I had
not noticed this soap.)

Rob: Well, I almost never use your big schlocky soaps.

In this brief dialogue, Kay and I have discovered and sketched out a little dif-
ference between us as members of a couple: We pursue differing tastes in
soap. Kay and I may sometimes each have a soap going and a different shamp-
oo. We keep things in slightly different places, since she’s a shower person
and I’m a tub person. I enjoy sandalwood soaps and scented shampoo; her
shampoos are organic and scent-free. My soaps may be smaller than the
Camay bars that Kay buys.

However, until this morning I’d never made a distinction about any of
this. It was only when she startled me with the notice that I got out a new
soap (which I’d done sort of by accident) and when she asked if I didn’t like
her soap (which I hadn’t noticed was there and might otherwise have used)
that I responded as I did. By the time I said that I didn't like her soap, I had constructed her sequence of two "statement questions" into some possible pre-reproach. All these circumstances led to my abrupt reply, in which I called her soap choice big and schlocky and stated that I "almost never" shared soap with her.

My remark about her soap being big and schlocky was the last word before Kay left the room. In this utterance I created a historical document of a difference between us, a little icon in our relational culture. Finding difference is an interactive staple in a couple relationship. Sometimes, as in this story, the partners' differences seem comic. Sometimes, as in Matisse's painting The Conversation, these differences between couple members come to seem more cosmic.

This interactive creation of differences between members of a couple may come about partly in reaction to the interactive construction of similarities during the early phases of progressive commitment. As couples stick together, partners share many routine yet relationship-defining moments. Partners evolve from a biased belief in their similarity toward believing that they are quite different from one another. There is something about couple interaction that serves as a difference-creating engine.¹

To exemplify how members of a couple make perceptions of interpersonal difference, consider these two university students who consider themselves a couple and who are making a meal to share. They discuss studying for a test.

[2] Corbin DP2

Tim: My room's absolutely spotless
Ann: Why
Tim: Cause I have a test tomorrow (1.6)
Ann: Heh heh heh, See I'm not like that I don't do that thing, that clean the house- clean the room thing ❯

Tim makes a joke to his partner. The point of the joke is that he has put off studying by cleaning his room. Ann laughs at his joke, then uses it to state a perceived contrast between their personalities: "I'm not like that." You study
for tests in a certain way that differs from mine. During the next few seconds this discovered contrast between study styles is documented as a personality difference.

[3] Corbin DP2
Ann: Well anyway so... u:h you haven't studied at all
(1)
Tim: No
Ann: Okay well here's the plan. (1) We're going to do chapter eight, and chapter nine tonight

The difference articulated earlier is played out here. Ann outlines a study plan for the evening, indicating that she is a person who makes a list and does what is on the list. Tim and Ann go on record as having different study habits. Any daily activities can provide grounds for such contrasts.

[4] Field note
Lisa: Oh shoot my car is in a no parking zone and I'll get a ticket after 7:30 in the morning. Oh well, I'll just get up a little early and move it.
Ben: But you should move it now.
Lisa: But I can move it in the morning.
Ben: What if you oversleep and get a ticket?
Lisa: I won't oversleep
Ben: Yeah, I've heard that before. I'll wake you up so you won't get a ticket, but you should move it tonight and get it over with.

Lisa and Ben, engaged to be married, discuss a classic problem: Do a job now or put it off. Lisa decides to put it off, though Ben suggests she should move the car now. When Lisa predicts that she will not oversleep, Ben claims to have "heard that before," and offers to prompt Lisa in the morning. Ben takes the role of a person who gets things done now instead of putting things off and taking a chance.

Couple members almost inevitably contrast their dietary habits. Here is a couple talking while they make supper:
Corbin DPS
Don: You don't like mushrooms, do you
Sue: Umf (no)

Don: These are big.
Sue: So what are you tryin to say?
Don: You can [pick em out
Sue: [You want to stick em in it?
Sue: I'd rather not uhhhh
Don: Right

Don: I'll just put em in my own, maybe

This couple explores differences in their food tastes and negotiates how these differences should be handled: for example, pick the offending items out at the table versus cook them separately. This negotiation over tastes identifies differences between members of the couple and distills these differences into social facts.

Could coupling provide a two-person lab for difference generation? Example [6] turns upon conflict, and this time blame travels both directions. Nan attacks Bob for having said too much to friends. Bob counters that his disclosures were reasonable, but as the disagreement continues Bob reveals a different perspective than Nan's about "leaving people out."

UTCL D9
Nan: You go and have to tell Brenda the whole- (1) story
Bob: But I didn't t'll her the whole story.
Nan: You did

Bob: That I would call him that Valerie was excited.
Nan: He's Jewish? He works at the Air Force base

Bob: Right. And he's a doctor

(1)

That's not the whole story

(1)

Nan: So how d'you- (2)

Bob: The whole story is all of background, how Valerie was dying for him

(1)

[She wants his body]

Nan: [Yeah well you said that]

(0.6)

Bob: Did you: give Valerie the advice I suggested

(1)

Nan: No

Bob: Are you going to?

(0.3)

Nan: No

(0.5)

Bob: I don't believe you ❯

(long pause)

Nan: You're irritable ❯

(0.5)

Bob: What?

Nan: You're irritable

Bob: Sorry I'll drink more tea

Nan: That makes you more irritable

(0.2)

Bob: T'a makes me irritable?

Nan: Mm hm it's got caffeine

(0.3)

Bob: I'm sorry

(5)

So why else are you mad at me?
That the only reason why you’re mad at me
(1)
Nan: Yeah, it really bothered me
(1.4)
Bob: Ahhh then don’t bring these things up with me [around
Nan: [Okay I’m sorry I didn’t mean to blabbermouth
Bob: Tchhhhhh u:::::h, well I always hate being the one left out
therefore I don’t like to leave out people

After Nan attacks Bob for making overcandid remarks, Bob argues that his disclosures were reasonable and asks whether Nan gave her friend some advice he’d suggested. Nan admits she has not and will not give the advice. Bob then emphasizes difference in their perspectives: “I don’t believe you.” Nan discredits Bob’s critique by calling Bob irritable. Eventually Bob defends himself on the basis of a personal characteristic: He does not like to be left out or to leave out other people. Each move in this squabble highlights notions of individual difference to explain problems.

Couple members’ discovered differences often conform to gender stereotypes, and this reinforces a general belief in sex differences. In example [7] the stereotype is that men won’t ask for directions.

[7] Field note
Candy: What took you so long?
Kurt: I got lost accidentally thanks to your directions.
Candy: Did you write them down? Why didn’t you stop and call me?
Kurt: Look, I found it, okay? Just be happy I’m here.

Kurt and Candy rely upon gender stereotypes to blame each other, though the gendering of the blame is not made explicit. In [8] the blame is gender-attributed to “a typical male”:

[8] Field Note (couple grocery shopping)
Carla: Here’s the chicken stuff and the Shake & Bake mixtures.
Jepp: I don’t see the Lipton mixes though.
Carla: Maybe it's with the soups.
Jepp: No, I don’t know why it would be there.
Carla: Well, let’s go ask someone so we can find it. I’m sure they have it somewhere.
Jepp: No, that’s okay. Let’s just go. Don’t worry about it.
Carla: If you want it for dinner let’s just go ask someone where it is and I’ll fix it for you later.
Jepp: No, that’s okay.
Carla: You’re just like a typical male (.) You won’t go and ask. This is just like you not stopping and asking for directions. ◄
Jepp: (shocked) I can’t believe you would say that.

These partners disagree about tracking down a product they would like to buy. Carla suggests asking for help to find it, but Jepp is unwilling to go to the trouble. Carla explicitly attributes the problem to a gender difference.

In example [9] an engaged couple who are making supper manage within just a few moments to articulate three domestic themes in which they differentiate themselves from each other: responsibility for a Mother’s Day gift, grocery shopping, and avoiding fatty food.

[9]  DP Corbin 3.1
Jen: I have to get Mother’s Day gifts [’cause I’m gonna be seeing them Sunday
Ed: [When’s Mother’s Day
Jen: Huh?
Ed: When’s Mother’s Day
Jen: Sunday
(1)
Ed: What ya gonna get
Jen: So if she comes Monday I need to have her a gift
Ed: tch!
Jen: Well I <do:?
(1) (Ed turns away)
Well, and so- wan have some golden bread?
Ed: D you have some?
Jen: No but I can make some with the hamburger buns
Ed: You didn’t buy French bread
Jen: No I didn’t buy French bread, I forgot
Ed: You want to share some butter
Jen: No, you can have some on yours if you want. I hate that liquid butter, that is so disgusting.
Ed: It’s good.
Jen: You- no good, it’s unnatural

And they’re telling you to stop eating stuff like that- those margarine products

At the start of this segment, Jen announces that she has to shop for Mother’s Day gifts. Ed does not know when Mother’s Day is and seems to make fun of Jen’s insistence on having at least one of the gifts ready in case of a visit (“tch”). Jen drops the gift topic and offers to make some golden bread (toast). Ed asks whether she bought French bread, and Jen says she forgot—by which she takes responsibility for food shopping. Seconds later, Ed suggests adding butter to the food, and Jen delivers a speech against fatty foods. All of this takes place in an even-tempered exchange with no hint of ruffled feelings. These partners embellish the differences between them in these ways aligned with gender stereotypes: She shops for Mother’s Day gifts for both mothers, takes responsibility for buying bread, and watches out for fatty foods. He cannot remember when Mother’s Day is, fishes for her shopping apology, and asks for butter.

One area that is famous for discussion of male-female difference is that of shopping for clothes. This instance was overheard in a clothing store.

[10] Field note

Woman: (holding up a dress) What do you think of this?
Man: Wow, you’d have to have some curves to wear that dress.
Woman: Who the @## do you think you are? You can go to @##$, just go to @##$.
Man: What are you talking about? What did I do?
Woman: Shut up! You’re in the doghouse, mister.
This man sounds insensitive to tact in shopping talk. One of the most common idioms couples share has been labeled “sexual teasing,” and this teasing often centers on appearance issues. One couple member often finds such a tease funny, whereas the other finds the tease to be discomfiting. It is rare for couple members to agree on the meaning of a tease that adds to the sensation that women and men differ in perspective.

Best-selling sociolinguist Deborah Tannen argues that male-female interaction is like intercultural communication. Men and women spring from different style-cultures, and so members of couples recurrently have difficulty understanding what the intimate other is saying. Here is one of Tannen’s examples supporting that claim:

Tannen summarizes the lesson of this story: “Eve wanted the gift of understanding but Marc gave her the gift of advice. He was taking the role of problem solver whereas she simply wanted confirmation of her feelings.” Tannen argues that men act as objective problem solvers who see the world made up of theories and correct answers. Women, on the other hand, perceive the social world as a network of personal connections, emotions, and mutual support. In this view, communication problems are mere consequences of these male/female differences. Tannen’s view is illustrated in this film scene:

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Eve had a lump removed from her breast. Shortly after the operation she told her sister that she found it upsetting to have been cut into and that looking at the stitches was distressing because they left a seam that changed the contour of her breast. Her sister said, “I know; when I had my operation I felt the same way.” Eve made the same observation to her friend Karen who said “I know it’s like your body has been violated.” But when she told her husband Marc how she felt he said, “You could have plastic surgery to cover up the scars on your breast.”

[12] Film: White Men Can’t Jump
Gloria: (waking) Honey, I’m thirsty. Honey? My mouth is dry.
(pause, he wakes)
(He rises, disappears, returns with glass of water)

There you go honey.

Gloria: When I said I was thirsty it doesn’t mean I want you to bring me a glass of water.

(1)

Billy: It doesn’t?

(1)

Gloria: You’re missing the whole point of me saying I’m thirsty. If I have a problem, you’re not supposed to solve it. Men always think they can solve women’s problems.

This fictional woman complains that she is thirsty. Like Eve’s husband Marc, Gloria’s man Billy reacts to his partner’s disclosure by offering a solution. In both cases the woman claims to desire not a solution but empathic discussion. In both Tannen’s example and this film scene, the women argue that the man’s offering a solution instead of empathic listening occurs as a consequence of male-female differences. Tannen’s example includes a contrast between the reaction of the husband and the reaction of Eve’s female friends. This film example continues with the woman’s explaining that she has read about this male-female difference in a magazine.

Identifying a couple problem as a male-female difference is part of the performance of gender. In this film scene, Gloria’s summary of Tannen’s argument that men and women are culturally different leads to an argument in which the partners increasingly insult each other, and the man leaves, slamming the door behind him. The last lines of the argument go like this.

[13] Film: White Men Can’t Jump*

Billy: When I say I’m thirsty it means anybody in the room has a glass of water I’d like to have a sip. When I say I want to make love, it means let’s screw.

Gloria: Exactly the kind of thing I thought you would say. Besides, I don’t like the word screw, okay, I prefer make love or fuck. (.) Screwing is for carpenters.

(He throws water at her)
Gloria: Oo:h, you’re gonna get it. O::h honey hhh Hey, where you going?
Billy: Anywhere, to get the hell away from you (. ) Psycho Chiquita nut case.

First, the partners articulate (as gendered) their different perceptions of saying “I’m thirsty.” Then Gloria adds meta-talk to her rejoinder, criticizing his use of the word “screw.” He escalates by throwing water and leaving the scene. His last line is an ethnic slur of his Puerto Rican partner, suggesting that one kind of stereotypic difference in talk leads to another one.

Both Tannen’s couple instance and this film one pronounce a similar verdict: There is a communication problem because men and women are different. Are men and women really different, or do they just seem so when couple members compare themselves carefully to one another? Here is a segment from a phone call between long-distance couple partners.

[14] Field note
Amanda: Hi honey, how was your day?
Randy: It was fine. How was yours?
Amanda: Well, it started off bad because I woke up late. Then there was a lot of traffic on my way to work, but once I got there my boss cheered me up when she said she was going to take me and the other new girl out to lunch. After work my mother and I went to work out and then we came home and ate. I am really ready to see this weekend.
Randy: I am ready to see you too.

Randy reflected about this fragment of conversation:

I take it for granted that Amanda will understand what “fine” means to me. I feel that Amanda tells me everything that happens in order to bring me closer to her. . . . Amanda talks this way all day and when she calls me at night, she thinks that I am upset or tired because I am not as talkative. I enjoy talking to her but I find myself shortening my stories while she gives me the extended versions.
Randy believes that Amanda talks in much the same way all the time, a womanly way that includes details of daily events.

This position that men and women are different makes communication uninteresting except as it reflects gendered similarity or difference. My students who read Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand* as a textbook often report themselves at couple loggerheads because one member (about two-thirds of the time it is the woman) wishes a detailed supportive hearing while the other member wishes to tell brief stories or to solve a problem and move on. When a couple difference aligns with a gender stereotype, partners remember it better than when it is counter to or irrelevant to a stereotype. For instance, in examples [2], [3], and [5] in this chapter males are doing the bulk of the cooking, yet this draws no comment about differences between couple members—either from the couple members or from students who have watched the videotapes.

As couple members celebrate their differences with each other, problematic situations may tie gender stereotypes to blame of the partner. In fact, 80 percent of the examples in the first six chapters of Tannen’s 1990 best-seller, including her most persuasive examples of male-female differences, depict members of couples—and moments when couple members face problems, reverses, or disappointments.

Similarly, when ABC-TV produced a two-hour show on John Gray’s views about Mars and Venus, they tested his ideas only with six thirty-something married couples with children. These theories depict not an actual difference between men and women but self-reports of differences between members of middle-class married couples. Is there something about couple interaction that fabricates differences?

• • •

Couple members—our most sexist dyads—become parents. Interaction practices nurtured in courtship may be instrumental in the passing of conservative gender roles to each next generation. The family’s talk provides scenes for gendering the human conversation.
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.5

Ethnographers Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor studied narratives at family dinner tables and found parents acting out stereotypical roles in a pattern they labeled "Father knows best." In this pattern, Mom introduces narratives (hers and children’s) to Dad as the primary listener and critic. Dad responds by making strong judgments, often critical of Mom. Mom plays into this situation by showing self-doubt.

[15] Ochs and Taylor6

Mom: (To Jodie, age 5) You want to 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: Couldn’t be

In this instance, Mom introduces the narrative by suggesting to Jodie that she tell Dad about something in her day. Jodie relates the event: “I got a shot.” Dad reacts with mock disbelief, and this pose is held against the child’s insistence upon self-understood experience.

When the Mom tells a story it also gets a teasing and critical reaction from the Dad. (Remember, this is happening in front of the children.)

[16] Ochs and Taylor7

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’re 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?

Dad’s ironic reaction to Mom’s story makes her look less than competent. Mom assists in problematizing her own narrative by presenting it as a thorny problem to begin with and putting her mitigated plan in a questioning tone of voice. (See )

Ochs and Taylor suggest that family narratives often follow this scenario: Mothers introduce narratives with fathers as primary recipients and evaluators. Dads react with criticism, often aimed at Moms, and Moms join in with self-criticism. Children observe this pattern and participate in it.

Men and women do not use markedly different speech patterns in setting this scenario. For instance, Dads do not talk while Moms merely support, as some writers have argued. Perhaps men and women are similar, but shared customs include showing gendered difference making. Perhaps the ways that couple members communicate to each other actually formulate some of those differences.

What have we shown in these sketches of couple interaction? Early courtship interaction produces illusions of couple members’ similarities. Partners act as they think the other expects. This leads couple members to the unrealistic belief that they are similar. As commitment increases the couple members
pass through turning points toward a culture of perceived differences: One partner is typified as a night person, one is a morning person; one partner is organized, one is messy; one partner wants sex too often, the other is not demonstrative; one partner is a stickler for discipline, the other wants the kids to be friends; one partner drives too aggressively, the other too conservatively; one partner fixes cars and the other bakes cakes; one partner wants to talk over problems in a sympathetic mode, the other wants to make a guess about how to solve the problem.

Some of these contrasts may just be taken as situational or as individual differences, but some of them reinforce gender stereotypes. Perhaps it is easiest to critique your man-partner if the critique fits your stereotypes about the way men are. When gendered exceptions occur (for example, he's the one who cooks) this has no impact on the tie between cooking and gender stereotypes. As couple member differences align with cultural stereotypes that men and women are different sorts of creatures, these interaction practices support the view that women and men (in general, not just in coupling) spring from different planets.

Couple members might more accurately conclude that early couplehood creates unrealistic expectations of similarity. Furthermore, couple members might recognize the relative rarity of accurate monologic communication. Most language users seem to assume that talk-in-interaction works fine unless somebody gets a meaning wrong. It is as if you live in Austin, Texas, for a year and you think you know your way around, because you can get to work and shopping and church and half-a dozen friends' houses. Yet if you go someplace new or if you make a wrong turn, you may find that your knowledge of the city is more limited than you had guessed.

The routine repetitiveness of much everyday life seems to show talk working smoothly without our really taking notice. We come to assume that we are accurate communicators. Yet when we spend many hours per week in co-present interaction with a couple partner we meet difficult and detailed problems of understanding and collaboration.

If we understand communication as dialogue and accuracy as partial at best, then we might begin to see that coupling entails new adjustments and ongoing difficulties. However, it seems easier for most of us to conclude that our couple difficulties are monologic—and due to partners being different
from each other. If we can conclude that men and women are from different planets, none of our problems are anyone’s fault.

Since progressive commitment to a couple partner includes some of the most sexist things that we do as members of this culture, it is hardly surprising that those activities magnify the differences between men and women or that we explain our coupling problems in terms of sex differences.9

Couple members who wish to add rationality to relational interaction could observe the ways conclusion-jumping slides along couple talk—especially in encountering problems. Observe yourself as you adopt guesses about what is problematic. Can you observe yourself going from “Here’s a problem that came up in communication” to “We are so different you and I?” Can you slow down that slide? Can you ponder over the details of the talk a bit longer? See if there is a way that you can muddle through the situation without necessarily setting up or hardening categories of how different you are from each other. Then continue the dialogue.

Sometimes it seems like one’s mate is so different! This perception especially turns up when we learn very late of a possible difference in perception. In The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan tells of an embattled couple whose marriage has become a struggle for fairness based on detailed lists of expectations. The couple is finishing supper with the wife’s mother.


Harold: Who’s ready for dessert? (reaching into the freezer)
Lena: I’m full.
Mother: Lena cannot eat ice cream.
Harold: So it seems she’s always on a diet.
Lena: No she never eat it, she doesn’t like.
(And now Harold smiles and looks at me puzzled expecting me to translate what my mother has said.)
Lena: It’s true, I’ve hated ice cream almost all my life.
(Harold looks at me as if I too were speaking Chinese and he couldn’t understand.)
Harold: Well I guess I assumed you were just trying to lose weight, oh well.
This married man has remained ignorant that his wife dislikes ice cream. It has come up a number of times that she might eat some ice cream and she has said on each occasion something like, "Oh I'm not very hungry," or "I'm watching my weight." Her husband does not know something that her mother has known since Lena was a child. She dislikes ice cream.

Is this example about couple culture? Yes, but interestingly there are other issues of culture (for example, China vs. the United States) intertwined in this story. Here is how one protagonist puts the problem:

"At first I thought it was because I raised with all this Chinese humility," Rose said, "or that maybe it was because when you're Chinese you're supposed to accept everything, flow with the Tao and not make waves. But my therapist said, 'Why do you blame your culture, your ethnicity?' And I remembered reading an article about baby boomers how we expect the best and when we get it we worry we should have expected more because it's all diminishing returns after a certain age."

In Tan's book there seems to be something about being Chinese-American that makes being a member of a U.S. couple especially difficult. Then there's an additional source of difference: one's age cohort. Baby boomers are different from earlier or later generations. How is one of these factors selected on any given occasion as explaining any particular course of action? With such a variety of choices, why do we so often choose gender as a source of problems?

If we start with the notion that men and women come from different cultures, then when something goes wrong in a couple, how will you figure out whether what went wrong is about culture difference, your generation, or a male/female difference? And what if we humans (let alone our relationships) are not just bundles of variables that determine courses of action? What if culture, personality, and gender are largely performative accomplishments?

Exciting new couple relationships are said to have chemistry. Yet the elements of this chemistry appear on no periodic chart. Human interaction bears its own pattern in embodied performances, not just in the combining of elements and variables. That is because we perform our lives in dialogic interaction. Communication patterns are relationship builders, not just consequences.