

# 8 Gender and Family Interaction

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## 1 Introduction

In the quarter century since Lakoff's (1975) and Key's (1975) pioneering studies, there has been a mountain of research on gender and discourse – research well documented in the present volume. In recent years, discourse analysts have also undertaken studies of language in the context of family interaction. For the most part, however, the twain haven't met: few scholars writing in the area of language and gender have focused their analyses on family interaction, and few researchers concerned with family discourse have focused their analysis on gender and language. This is a gap this chapter addresses.

Drawing examples from an ongoing research project in which dual-career couples with children living at home recorded all their interaction for a week, as well as videotaped excerpts of naturally occurring family interaction that appeared on public television documentaries, I examine (1) how gender-related patterns of interaction influence and illuminate family interaction, and (2) what light this insight sheds on our ideology of language in the family as well as on theoretical approaches to discourse. In particular, I question the prevailing inclination to approach family interaction as exclusively, or primarily, a struggle for power. I will argue – and, I hope, demonstrate – that power is inseparable from connection. Therefore, in exploring how family interaction is mediated by gender-related patterns of discourse, I will also suggest that gender identity is negotiated along the dual, paradoxically related dimensions of power and connection.

## 2 Power and Connection in the Family: Prior Research

Researchers routinely interpret family interaction through the template of an ideology of the family as the locus of a struggle for power. In my view, this ideology needs to be reframed. Power is inextricably intertwined with connection. Discourse in the family can be seen as a struggle for power, yes, but it is also – and equally – a struggle for connection. Indeed, the family is a prime example – perhaps *the* prime example – of the nexus of needs for both power and connection in human relationships. Thus, a study of gender and family interaction becomes a means not only to understand more deeply gender and language but also to reveal, contest, and reframe the ideology of the family and of power in discourse.

Among recent research on discourse in family interaction, three book-length studies stand out. The earliest, Richard Watts' *Power in Family Discourse* (1991), is unique in analyzing conversations among adult siblings and their spouses rather than the nuclear family of parents and young children living in a single household. For Watts, as his title suggests, power is the force defining familial relations.

Published a year later, Herve Varenne's *Ambiguous Harmony* (1992) examines a conversation that took place on a single evening in the living room of a blended family: mother, father, and two children – a teenage son from the mother's previous marriage and a younger child born to this couple. Varenne, too, sees power as a central force. He writes: "The power we are interested in here is the power of the catalyst who, with a minimal amount of its own energy, gets other entities to spend large amounts of their own" (p. 76).

Shoshana Blum-Kulka's *Dinner Talk* (1997) is unique in comparing family dinner conversations in three cultural contexts: Americans of East European Jewish background; Israelis of East European Jewish background; and Israeli families in which the parents were born and raised in the United States. Although Blum-Kulka does not directly address the relationship between power and connection, she discusses the parents' dual and sometimes conflicting needs both to socialize their children in the sense of teaching them what they need to know, and at the same time to socialize with them in the sense of enjoying their company. This perspective indirectly addresses the interrelationship of power and connection in the family.

Psychologists Millar, Rogers, and Bavelas (1984) write of "control maneuvers" and note that in family therapy, "Conflict takes place within the power dimension of relationships." I do not question or deny this assumption, but I would complexify it. I have emphasized, in a number of essays (especially Tannen 1994), the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity, which are in paradoxical and mutually constitutive relationship to each other. Thus family interaction (including conflict) also takes place within the intimacy dimension,

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power	solidarity
hierarchy	equality
distance	closeness

**Figure 8.1** Unidimensional view of power and connection

and we can also speak of “connection maneuvers.” My goal in this chapter is to explicate how what researchers (and participants) would typically regard as control (or power) maneuvers can also be seen as connection maneuvers, in part because connection and control are bought with the same linguistic currency.

### 3 The Power/Connection Grid

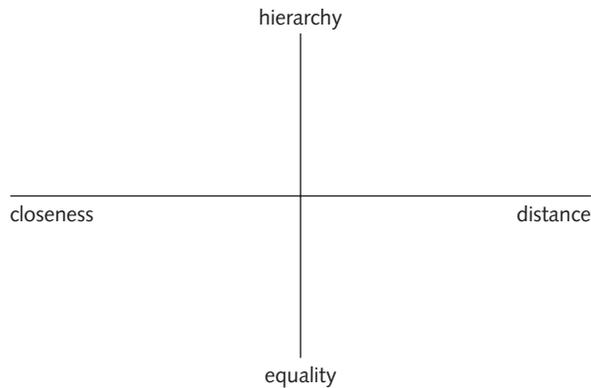
Elsewhere (Tannen 1994), I explore and argue for the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity – or, in different terms, of status and connection. Here I briefly recap the analysis developed in that essay.

In conventional wisdom, as well as in research tracing back to Brown and Gilman’s (1960) classic study of power and solidarity, Americans have had a tendency to conceptualize the relationship between hierarchy (or power) and connection (or solidarity) as unidimensional and mutually exclusive (see figure 8.1). Family relationships are at the heart of this conception. For example, Americans frequently use the terms “sisters” and “brothers” to indicate “close and equal.” So if someone says “We are like sisters” or “He is like a brother to me,” the implication is, “We are as close as siblings, and there are no status games, no one-upping between us.” In contrast, hierarchical relationships are assumed to preclude closeness. Thus, in work and military contexts, most Americans regard it as self-evident that friendships across levels of rank are problematic and to be discouraged, if not explicitly prohibited.

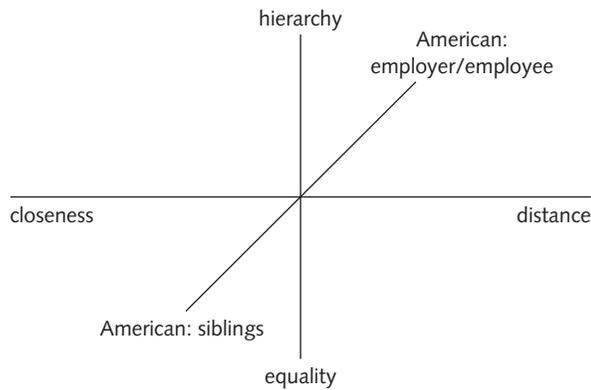
I suggest that in reality the relationship between power (or hierarchy) and solidarity (or connection) is not a single dimension but a multidimensional grid (see figure 8.2). This grid represents the dimensions of power and of connection as two intersecting axes. One axis (I represent it as a vertical one) stretches between hierarchy and equality, while the other (which I represent as a horizontal axis) stretches between closeness and distance.

Americans tend to conceptualize interpersonal relationships along an axis that runs from the upper right to the lower left: from hierarchical and distant to equal and close. Thus we would put business relations in the upper right quadrant (hierarchical and distant) and relationships between siblings and close friends in the lower left quadrant (egalitarian and close) (see figure 8.3).

In contrast, members of many other cultures, such as Japanese, Chinese, and Javanese, are inclined to conceptualize relationships along an axis that runs from the upper left to the lower right: from hierarchical and close to equal and



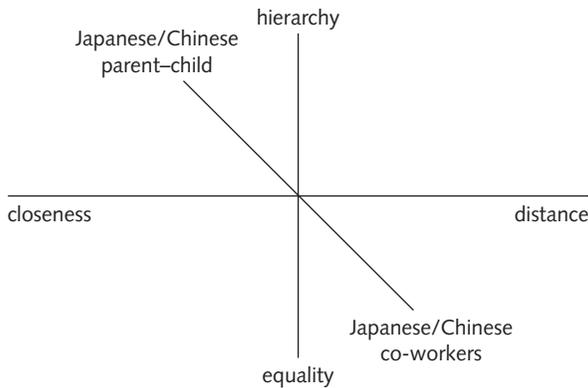
**Figure 8.2** The power/connection grid



**Figure 8.3** American view of the power/connection grid

distant. In this conception, the archetypal hierarchical relationship is the parent-child constellation: extremely hierarchical but also extremely close. By the same token, sibling relationships are seen as inherently hierarchical. Indeed, in Chinese (and in many other non-Western languages, such as Sinhala), siblings are addressed not by name but by designations identifying relative rank, such as “Third Eldest Brother,” “Fifth Younger Sister,” and so on (see figure 8.4).

It is also instructive to note that Americans are inclined to see power as inherent in an individual. Thus, Watts defines power as “the ability of an individual to achieve her/his desired goals” (1991: 145). Yet this, too, reflects peculiarly Western ideology. Wetzel (1988) points out that in Japanese cultural conceptions, power is understood to result from an individual’s place in a network of alliances. Even in the most apparently hierarchical situation, such as a workplace, an individual’s ability to achieve her/his goals is dependent on connections to others: the proverbial friends in high places. In other words, power is composed in part of connection, and connection entails a kind of power.



**Figure 8.4** Japanese/Chinese view of power and connection

#### 4 Mother: A Paradigm Case of the Ambiguity and Polysemy of Power and Connection

The family is a key locus for understanding the complex and inextricable relationship between power (negotiations along the hierarchy–equality axis) and connection (negotiations along the closeness–distance axis). And nowhere does this relationship become clearer than in the role of a key family member, mother. For example, Hildred Geertz (1989 [1961]: 20) writes that there are, in Javanese, “two major levels of language, respect and familiarity.” (I would point out that, in light of the grid presented above, these are two different dimensions: respect is situated on the hierarchy–equality axis, whereas familiarity is a function of the closeness–distance axis.) Geertz observes that children use the familiar register when speaking with their parents and siblings until about age ten or twelve, when they gradually shift to respect in adulthood. However, she adds, “Most people continue to speak to the mother in the same way as they did as children; a few shift to respect in adulthood” (p. 22). This leaves open the question whether mothers are addressed in this way because they receive less respect than fathers, or because their children feel closer to them. I suspect it is both at once, and that trying to pick them apart may be futile.

Although the linguistic encoding of respect and familiar registers is a linguistic phenomenon not found in English, nonetheless there are phenomena in English that parallel those described by Geertz. Ervin-Tripp, O’Connor, and Rosenberg (1984) looked at the forms of “control acts” in families in order to gauge power in that context. They found that “effective power and esteem were related to age” (p. 134). Again, however, “the mothers in our sample were an important exception to the pattern . . .” (p. 135). “In their role as caregivers,” the authors note, mothers “received nondeferent orders, suggesting that the

children expected compliance and believed their desires to be justification enough." As with Javanese, one could ask whether children use more bald imperatives when speaking to their mothers because they have less respect for them, or because they feel closer to them, or both.

## 5 Power Lines – or Connection Lines – in Telling Your Day

A great deal of the research done on family discourse has focused on talk produced in the context of dinner-table conversation. The dinner table is a favorite site, no doubt, both because dinner is a prime time that family members typically come together and exchange talk, and also because it is a bounded event for which speakers gather around a table and which is therefore relatively easy to tape-record. Both Blum-Kulka and Elinor Ochs and her students (for example, Ochs and Taylor 1992) identify a ritual that typifies American dinner-table conversation in many families: a ritual that Blum-Kulka dubs "Telling Your Day." When the family includes a mother and father (as the families recorded in both these studies did), mothers typically encourage children to tell their fathers about events experienced during the day.

Ochs and Taylor give the examples of a mother who urges, "Tell Dad what you thought about gymnastics and what you did," and another who prompts, "Chuck did you tell Daddy what happened at karate when you came in your new uniform? What did Daisy do for you?" (p. 310). Ochs and Taylor note that in a majority of the instances recorded in this study, fathers responded to the resultant stories by passing judgment, assessing the rightness of their children's actions and feelings, and thereby setting up a constellation the researchers call "father knows best."

In the families Ochs and her students observed, mothers usually knew what the children had to say. This was true not only of mothers who had been at home with the children during the day but also of mothers who worked full-time, because generally they had arrived home from work earlier than the father, and they had asked the children about their day during the time they had with them before Daddy came home. At the dinner table, Daddy could have asked "How was your day?" just as Mother did before dinner. But in these families, he usually didn't.

Ochs and Taylor identify the roles in these narrative exchanges as "problematizer" and "problematizee." The "problematizer" reacts to a family member's account of an experience in a way that is critical of how the speaker handled the situation. For example, when an eight-year-old child, Josh, who has been doing homework, announced, "I'm done," his father asked in a "disbelieving tone," "Already Josh? Read me what you wrote." Thus the father questioned whether Josh really was finished or not (p. 313). In Ochs and Taylor's terms, he "problematized" Josh's announcement "I'm done."

The family power structure, Ochs and Taylor observe, is established in these storytelling dynamics. Just as Mother typically prompted a child to tell Daddy what happened, older siblings were much more likely to urge younger ones to tell about something that happened than the other way around. In this sense, older siblings were treating their younger siblings more or less the way parents treat children – something that, I would note, younger siblings often perceive and resent, especially if the older brother or sister is not all that much older.

Ochs and Taylor found that children were most often problematizees – the ones whose behavior was judged by others. Rarely were they problematizers – the ones who questioned others' behavior as problematic. This puts children firmly at the bottom of the hierarchy. Fathers were the most frequent problematizers and rarely were problematizees: rarely was their behavior held up to the scrutiny and judgment of others. This puts them firmly at the top of the hierarchy. In keeping with the findings of Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor, and Rosenberg, mothers were not up there, as parents, along with fathers. Mothers found themselves in the position of problematizee (the one whose behavior was held up for judgment) as often as they were problematizer (the one who was judging others). Thus fathers were in the position of judging their wives' actions in addition to their children's, but mothers judged only their children's behavior, not their husbands'. In other words, the storytelling dynamic placed mothers in the middle of the family hierarchy – over the children, but under the father.

The authors also observe that mothers often problematized their own actions. For example, a woman named Marie owns and runs a day care center. At dinner, she tells of a client who was taking her child out of the center, and paid her last bill. The client handed over more money than was needed to cover the time her child had spent in day care, so Marie returned the excess. But she later wondered whether she had made a mistake. After all, her policy required clients to give two weeks' notice before withdrawing a child, and this mother had not given notice. So perhaps the client had intended the overpayment to cover those two weeks, and Marie should have kept it, enforcing her policy. The father made clear that he endorsed this view: "When I say something I stick to it unless she brings it up. . . . I do not change it" (p. 312). Marie was the "problematizee" because her action was called into question. She had "problematized" herself by raising the issue of whether she had handled the situation in the best way; her husband then further problematized her by letting her know that he thought she had not. Ochs and Taylor found that this pattern was common: if mothers questioned their own actions, fathers often "dumped on" them by reinforcing the conclusion that the mothers had not acted properly. In contrast, the authors found that in the rare instances when fathers problematized themselves, mothers did not further problematize them.

In this revealing study, Ochs and Taylor identify a crucial dynamic in middle-class American families by which the family is a power structure with the father at the top. They further show that mothers play a crucial role in setting up this dynamic: "Father as problematizer," they argue, is "facilitated . . . by

the active role of mothers who sometimes (perhaps inadvertently) set fathers up as potential problematizers – by introducing the stories and reports of children and mothers in the first place and orienting them towards fathers as primary recipients” (p. 329).

For me, the most important word in this excerpt is “inadvertently.” I would argue that the father-knows-best dynamic results from gender differences in assumptions about the place of talk in a relationship, and that it reflects the inextricable relationship between power and connection. When a mother asks her children what they did during the day, she is creating closeness by exchanging details of daily life, a verbal ritual frequently observed to characterize women’s friendships (see, for example, Tannen 1990; Coates 1996). In other words, it is a connection maneuver. If the father does not ask on his own, “How was your day?” it does not mean that he is not interested in his family, or does not feel – or wish to be – close to them. It just means that he does not assume that closeness is created by the verbal ritual of telling the details of one’s day, and he probably does not regard closeness as the most important barometer of his relationship with his children.

When Mother prods a child, “Tell Daddy what you did in karate today,” she is, it is true, initiating a dynamic by which the father will assess the child’s actions and thus be installed as the family judge. But I would bet that her goal was to *involve* the father in the family, bring him into the circle of intimacy she feels is established by such talk. From this point of view, the father-knows-best dynamic is as much a misfire as is the common source of frustration between women and men that I have described elsewhere (Tannen 1990): for example, a woman tells a man about a frustrating experience she had that day, performing a ritual common among women friends that Gail Jefferson (1988) dubs “troubles talk.” Since troubles talk is not a ritual common among men friends, he thinks he is being asked to solve the problem, which he proceeds to do – to her frustration. She protests, which frustrates him. Similarly, the mother who prods her children to tell their father what they did that day, or who talks about her own day, is trying to create connection. But the father, not recognizing the ritual nature of her comment, thinks he is being asked to judge.

In this view, it is not the mothers’ initiation of the “Telling Your Day” routine in itself that sets fathers up as family judge. Instead, the “father knows best” dynamic is created by the interaction of gender-related patterns. Fathers take the role of judge of actions recounted in stories because they figure that’s why they are being told the stories. Fathers are less likely to talk about their own work problems because they don’t want advice about how to solve problems there, so they see no reason to talk about them. Many men feel that rehashing what upset them at work forces them to re-live it and get upset all over again, when they’d rather put it out of their minds and enjoy the oasis of home. They may also resist telling about problems precisely to avoid being placed in the one-down position of receiving advice or of being told that they did not handle the situation in the best way. On the few occasions that Ochs and Taylor found fathers “problematizing” themselves, it is no surprise that mothers did not further dump on them – not necessarily because mothers felt

they had no right to judge, but more likely because they took these revelations in the spirit of troubles talk rather than as invitations to pass judgment. These clashing rituals result in mothers finding themselves one-down in the family hierarchy without knowing how they got there.

I have discussed this example from Ochs and Taylor at length to demonstrate how gender-related patterns of discourse can explain a phenomenon observed in family interaction in prior research, and how what has been accurately identified as a matter of negotiating power is also simultaneously and inextricably a matter of negotiating connection. This analysis supports my contentions that (1) power and connection are inextricably intertwined; (2) the relationship between power and connection is fundamental to an understanding of gender and language; and (3) the relationship between gender and language is fundamental to an understanding of family interaction.

## 6 Self-Revelation: A Gender-Specific Conversational Ritual

The “How was your day?” ritual, for many women, is just one way that connection is created and maintained through talk. Another way is exchanging information about personal relationships and emotions. Here, too, conversations that take place in families reflect the divergent expectations of family members of different genders.

For example, one way that many women create and maintain closeness is by keeping tabs on each other’s lives, including (perhaps especially) romantic relationships. When male and female family members interact, gender differences in expectations regarding the use of talk to create closeness can lead to unbalanced interchanges. The following example, which illustrates just such a conversation, comes from the research project in which both members of dual-career couples carried tape-recorders with them for at least a week, recording all the conversations they felt comfortable recording. (The digital recorders ran for four hours per tape.)

In this example, one of the project participants recorded a conversation with her unmarried brother. The sister (a woman in her thirties) is asking her brother (who is a few years younger) about his girlfriend, whom I’ll call Kerry. Clearly the sister is looking for a kind of interchange that her brother is not providing:

Sister: So how’s things with Kerry?

Brother: Cool.

Sister: Cool. Does that mean very good?

Brother: Yeah.

Sister: True love?

Brother: Pretty much.

Sister: PRETTY much? When you say PRETTY much, what do you mean?

Brother: I mean it’s all good.

The conversation takes on an almost comic character, as the sister becomes more and more probing in reaction to her brother's minimal responses. Evident in the example is a process I call, adapting a term that Gregory Bateson (1972) applied to larger cultural processes, complementary schismogenesis. By this process, each person's verbal behavior drives the other to more and more exaggerated forms of an opposing behavior. In this example, the sister asks repeated and increasingly probing questions *because* her brother's responses are minimal, and his responses may well become more guarded *because* her questions become increasingly insistent. Indeed, she starts to sound a bit like an inquisitor.

Moreover, this conversation between sister and brother sounds rather like a mother talking to a teenage child. It is strikingly similar to the conversation represented in the next example, which took place between a mother and her twelve-year-old daughter. This conversational excerpt was identified and analyzed by Alla Yeliseyeva in connection with a seminar I taught on family interaction. The excerpt comes from a documentary made by filmmaker Jennifer Fox entitled "An American Love Story." The documentary aired in five two-hour segments on the USA's Public Broadcasting System in September 1999. In preparing the documentary, Fox followed the family of Karen Wilson, Bill Sims, and their two daughters, in Queens, New York, over two years beginning in 1992. In this episode, the younger daughter, Chaney, was anticipating her first "date" – a daytime walk – with a boy, despite her parents' misgivings. But the boy (who is thirteen) failed to appear on the appointed day. After the entire family spent several hours waiting for him, Chaney got a telephone call explaining that his grandmother had refused permission for him to go. Karen tries to discuss this development with Chaney, who responds minimally:

- Karen: That's too bad. Aren't you mad?  
Chaney: No.  
Karen: I mean just in general.  
Chaney: What do you mean?  
Karen: Not at him, just in general.  
Chaney: No, not that much.  
Karen: Disappointed?  
Chaney: No, not that much.  
Karen: Relieved?  
Chaney: No. [*laughs*]  
Karen: What- [*also laughing*]  
Give us a feeling here, Chaney!

Through her questions and comments, Karen is showing her daughter the kind of conversation she expects to have – a conversation about how Chaney felt about what happened to her. I doubt that Chaney is unable to hold such conversations; I would bet she has them frequently with her best friend, Nelly. But, like many teenagers, she seems reluctant to divulge her feelings to her mother.

On a later day, the boy shows up unexpectedly, and Chaney goes out for a walk with him. When she returns, a similar conversation ensues, with different content. The trouble starts immediately, as Chaney heads for her room:

- Karen: Come sit and tell us all about it.  
Chaney: I have to call Nelly.  
Karen: Come, tell us all about it first.  
I am your first priority here.

Chaney complies by sitting down, but she volunteers nothing. She offers only cryptic and minimally informative answers to her mother's questions. Throughout the conversation, Chaney laughs or chuckles.

- Karen: Did he hold your hand?  
Chaney: Yeah. [*laughs*]  
Karen: How did that feel?  
Chaney: His hands were cold.  
Karen: Did you kiss?  
Chaney: Yeah.  
Karen: Where?  
Chaney: Where do you think? [*chuckling*]  
Karen: On your lip?  
Chaney: Just a short one.  
Karen: [*Whispering*] Oh my god!  
[*normal voice*] Where. At our door?  
Chaney: Yeah.  
Karen: What did you think?  
Chaney: Nothing.  
Karen: Did you have any feelings about it?  
Chaney: Yeah.  
Karen: A good one or a bad one, or a stupid one?  
Chaney: Good.  
Karen: Wh- When are you going to see him?  
Chaney: Mmm, probably in June.  
Karen: Mm, that's nice and safe.  
Chaney: [*laughing and trying to get up*] Bye!  
Karen: So are you happy to see him?  
Chaney: Yeah.  
Karen: Is he the same you thought he would be?  
Chaney: He's just the same.

At this point, Chaney rises and retreats to her room. To learn how she really felt about her date, we would have to listen in on her conversation with Nelly. And that must be a source of frustration to Karen as it would be to most mothers of teenagers. Although Chaney answered her mother's questions, the interchange feels more like an interrogation than a conversation.

Why is the mother in this example and the sister in the earlier one so intent on getting a family member to divulge feelings? I have argued elsewhere

(Tannen 1990), drawing on a large body of language and gender research, that women and girls typically define their relationships with friends along the connection axis: best friends tell each other “everything.” This includes not only large and small life events but also how they feel about those events. Family relationships are defined and evaluated the same way. A good family relationship is a “close” one, and that means a relationship in which one tells the other what is happening in one’s life, and how one *feels* about it. When children are small, the confidences go one way: mothers want to know what their children are experiencing and feeling, though they typically do not confide their own feelings to their small children. When daughters become adults, however, as Henwood (1993) found, both daughters and mothers typically evaluate their relationship in terms of how “close” they are – and this is gauged by relative mutual revelation about feelings (as well as by discussion of the small details of daily life).

## 7 Gender Differences Between Parents

The significance of these gender patterns in definitions of closeness, and the significance of closeness in women’s (but not men’s) evaluations of family relationships, emerges in the discourse videotaped in another public television documentary, “An American Family,” which aired in twelve weekly hour-long segments in 1973. For this series, filmmakers Alan and Susan Raymond filmed the family of William and Pat Loud and their five children in Santa Barbara, California, for seven months. My student Maureen Taylor examined conversations between the parents regarding their children, and in particular their teenage daughter Delilah.

Pat Loud had taken Delilah on a trip to New Mexico. Delilah came home early – and Pat, on her own return, tries to get her husband to tell her what Delilah said when she arrived home. A recurrent theme in Pat’s discourse is her assumption that her daughter should confide in her. Furthermore, Pat’s distress that Delilah left New Mexico without confiding her reasons for leaving to her mother is associated with Pat’s general distress at seeing her children leave home.

Maureen Taylor, in a seminar paper, pointed out that Pat and Bill have very different reactions to their teenage children growing up and growing away. In talking to Pat, Bill explains that he is not concerned because he believes the separation is inevitable: “You’ve got to learn, Patty,” he says, “that they’re going to leave you.” To back this up, he suggests that she think back to her own youth:

Bill: with your own father, with your own mother.  
You leave them when you’re fifteen,  
and you don’t come back until you’re thirty, no-

In Bill's view, their children "leaving" (at this point, emotionally: all but one are still living at home) is healthy because it signals their developing independence. But Pat does not see emotional distance as a benefit:

Pat: The thing- No.  
The only thing I see from that  
is that somewhere along the line,  
she um she's afraid of me,  
or she's uh . . . something.

I would argue that the reason it is so easy for Bill to be philosophical about his teenage children's distancing, and so hard for Pat, is that being "close" to her children is crucial to Pat but not to Bill. Furthermore, for her, but not for him, being close means confiding experiences and feelings.

For Pat, seeing that her daughter is more likely to confide in her father than in her is an added blow, because she must watch someone else getting what she wants but cannot have. Bill tries to minimize the significance of this disparity with an explanation that is not complimentary to himself:

Bill: No, she's not afraid of you at all.  
She just knows that I'm weaker-  
that I'm weaker than you, that's all.

Pat does not accept this explanation and is not comforted by it:

Pat: She isn't saying these things to you  
because she thinks you're weaker.  
She is saying those things to you  
because she feels closer to you,  
which is a very healthy thing.  
I- I understand that.  
But the only thing I feel is that  
I- I want her to be able to say those things to me,  
because it's very important for her  
to have an older woman, like her mother,  
that she can say something to.  
And she doesn't tell me anything.

Pat's and Bill's differing views are foregrounded in these comments. For Pat, the most important thing is being close, and closeness is created by self-revealing talk. Pat's complaint that Delilah "doesn't tell me anything" is not only common among mothers (and not fathers) of teenage daughters, but it is also the complaint typically heard from women in heterosexual relationships about their partners.

Bill's response ignores those dynamics, probably because he is unaware of them. For him, the focus is not connection but independence. His reassurance

is almost poetic with its soothing rhythms and mesmerizing repetitions. To capture this effect in print, Taylor, following Tannen (1989), laid out Bill's comments not only in lines representing breath groups but also in verses, as if it were a poem:

Bill: You want to feel blessed  
that they want to get out  
and go do their own thing.

And you want to feel blessed  
that people aren't hanging on your neck  
for the rest of your life.

And you want to feel blessed  
you've got a girl like that  
who doesn't want to sit around the room,  
and she wants to do,  
and she knows wh- how the hell she's going to do it.  
Don't worry about it, Patty.  
You've got your own life –  
and she'll be back again in about ten years.

But Pat is not reassured. She tries to explain her concern from the point of view of her daughter's needs rather than her own:

Pat: No- no- That isn't it.  
That isn't what bothers me.  
What bothers me is that  
I don't think that I'd be able to help her,  
or give her any assistance,  
except loaning my clothes to her,  
which, honey, is no assistance.

Bill returns to his point of view, that it is natural and fine for children to distance themselves from parents at this age:

Bill: If you haven't helped her out by now,  
the show is over.  
The blue moon went up and the sun subsided.

Pat's response comes right back to where she started: that her relationship with her daughter is defined by how close they are, and that Delilah's failure to confide in her mother is evidence of a failure of closeness:

Pat: But that's why I am so appalled and amazed is- because I always thought  
that we were extremely close  
and that she could tell me uh  
almost anything she wants to say to me.

When Pat complains again that Delilah confides more in Bill than in her, he reminds her that the reverse is true for their sons, and that this doesn't bother him at all:

Bill: Did you hear Lance tell me anything?  
No!  
Do I worry about that?  
I just could care less.  
I really could. I could care less.

Kevin?  
My boy, talk to me?  
Grant?  
Never speaks, never says his little word.  
Never, no!

Bill goes on to announce that he has decided to stop worrying. But from his point of view, that means giving up worrying not about his children's talk (whether or not they confide in him) but about their actions – whether or not they go to work and earn money:

Bill: I'm going to worry about a lot less  
than I have before.  
Pat: About what.  
Bill: About a lot less of- of anything  
that I've been worried about.

Once again, I will reproduce Taylor's presentation of Bill's comments in both lines and verses in order to capture in print the rhythmic effect of the spoken word:

Bill: Kevin doesn't want to pour the cement?  
Forget it.  
You don't have to pour the cement.  
I don't have to support him.  
He'd better start supporting himself.

She wants to dance?  
She'd better get out there  
and earn a couple of bucks,  
and do her own dancing.

Michelle doesn't want to go play with the girls?  
I'm not going to worry about it.  
She can sit in her room  
for the rest of her whole living days  
as far as I'm concerned.

I'm not going to worry about it.

Life's too short to worry about all that jazz. That's what I've learned about this vacation.

The conversation ends with a symphonic coda that pretty much sums up the way mother and father are responding to their children's growing up and leaving home:

Pat: I hate to see them go like that.

I just hate it.

I hate it.

Bill: I love it.

Taylor points out that the contrast between Pat's sense of desolation and Bill's sense of liberation at their daughter's – and all their children's – growing up reflects the gender-specific roles they took in the family. Since Pat had devoted her married life to caring for her children, she experiences their departures as abandonment. As she tells her brother and sister-in-law, "All my kids are leaving me. And what have I got left? I haven't got anything left. And that scares the hell out of me."

In contrast, Taylor points out, Bill has spent his life traveling: first in the navy and then in connection with his business. This reinforces the interpretation he gives to his children's growing up: although Pat sees them as leaving her, he sees them gaining freedom and independence for themselves. Furthermore, I would point out, Bill's description of what *he* won't worry about makes it clear that the burden of family for him has been a financial one: the responsibility for supporting everyone. His children's growing up liberates him from that burden.

Thus Bill's and Pat's different reactions can be explained not only by the different roles they took in their family but also by differences in what women and men tend to focus on in relationships in general and family relationships in particular. The example of Bill and Pat Loud, then, demonstrates that family relationships are a complex intertwining of connection and power, that responses to and interpretations of these forces pattern by gender, and that an understanding of these patterns is necessary to understand what goes on in family interaction.

## **8 Balancing Power and Connection in a Family Argument**

In this final section, I examine several examples from the family discourse recorded by one of the couples who participated in the research project I described above by recording their own conversations. (This is a different

family from the one in which the sister/brother conversation occurred.) In each of the following examples, the mother and father use complex verbal strategies to balance the needs to negotiate both power and connection as they go about the tasks required to maintain the daily life of their young family. In addition, as we will see, their discourse strategies simultaneously create gender-related parental identities.

The couple, pseudonymously called Molly and Ben, have a two-year-old daughter, Katie. Both Molly and Ben work outside the home: Ben full-time and Molly at a reduced schedule of thirty hours per week. Each regularly takes off one day a week to spend with Katie, who consequently attends day care only three days a week. At one point in the taping, Molly and Ben, both at home, become embroiled in an argument about making popcorn. Molly is in the kitchen by herself and Ben is taking care of Katie in another room when he calls out:

Ben: Molly! Mol! Let's switch.  
You take care of her.  
I'll do whatever you're doing.

Molly responds, from the kitchen, "I'm making popcorn." And then she adds, "You always burn it."

Clearly what is at stake, and what ensues, can be understood as a series of control maneuvers. Ben wants to switch roles with Molly, so that she will take over child care and he will take over popcorn preparation. Molly resists this switch. In a direct confrontation over power, Molly might simply refuse: "No, I don't want to switch." Instead, by saying "You always burn it," she resists relinquishing her task by appealing to the good of the family rather than her own preference. Insofar as she resists doing what Ben wants her to do, her statement is a control maneuver. But to the extent that she appeals to the family good rather than her own preference, it is a connection maneuver. At the same time, however, by impugning Ben's popcorn-making ability, she is putting him down. That, too, can be seen as a control maneuver.

Because Molly has based her resistance on her husband's putative deficiency, he responds on this level:

Ben: No I don't!  
I never burn it.  
I make it perfect.

Although they continue to exchange attacks, self-defense, and counterattacks focused on popcorn-making skills, Ben and Molly execute the switch: Ben takes over in the kitchen, and Molly takes charge of Katie. But she continues to try to engineer her return to the kitchen. In this endeavor, she addresses the two-year-old:

- Molly: You wanna help Mommy make popcorn?  
Katie: Okay.  
Molly: Let's not let Daddy do it.  
Katie: Okay.  
Molly: Okay, come on.

Here, again, Molly's utterances are a blend of power and connection. To the extent that she is trying to get her way – take back control of the popcorn preparation – Molly is engaged in control maneuvers. But by proposing that Katie “help Mommy make popcorn,” Molly is proposing to satisfy both herself and her husband: she would thereby return to the kitchen, yes, but she would also fulfill Ben's request, “You take care of her.” Moreover, by involving Katie in the plan, Molly is involving the child in the interaction. Furthermore, her linguistic choices (“Let's not let Daddy do it”) align herself with her daughter: “Let's” merges mother and daughter; “not let” includes the child in the mother's perspective as someone who has authority over Ben's actions, and “Daddy” includes the mother in the child's point of view. All these are connection maneuvers, though they create connection to Katie rather than Ben.

From the kitchen, Ben overhears this conversation and resists in turn. While Molly continues to urge their daughter to accompany her, Ben follows a strategy of “the best defense is a good offense”:

- Ben: I know how to make popcorn!  
Molly: Let's hurry up so Daddy doesn't . . .  
Ben: I can make popcorn better than you can!

The argument between Molly and Ben continues, as Ben retains the role of chef and maintains that his performance in this role is successful, while Molly becomes increasingly apprehensive of impending failure:

- Molly: Just heat it! Heat it!  
No, I don't want you . . .  
Ben: It's going, it's going. Hear it?  
Molly: It's too slow.  
It's all soaking in.  
You hear that little . . .  
Ben: It's not soaking in, it's fine.  
Molly: It's just a few kernels.  
Ben: All the popcorn is being popped!

Soon Molly tries another strategy to regain control of the kitchen, or to salvage the popcorn operation, or both:

- Molly: You gotta take the trash outside.  
Ben: I can't, I'm doing the popcorn.

Molly: I'll DO it, I'll watch it.  
You take the trash out  
and come back in a few minutes and –

Again, Molly proposes to reclaim the popcorn preparation, but she phrases her proposal in a way that seems to benefit him rather than her: she'll help Ben do his job of taking out the trash. This reframes the meaning of her taking over popcorn-making as temporarily spelling Ben while he fulfills another obligation.

In the end, Ben kept control of the popcorn – and he burned it. This result lends weight to Molly's reluctance to accede to his request to do it. What is interesting for my purposes here, however, is how Molly's attempts to prevent this outcome were a blend of control and connection maneuvers.

Another aspect of this example that intrigues me is Molly's use of Katie as addressee in her negotiation with Ben over popcorn-making. When Molly said "Let's not let Daddy do it," she communicated her wishes to her husband by addressing their child. Talking through the child is a strategy this mother uses frequently. By involving a third party, her attempt to get her way (a control maneuver) becomes less directly confrontational (the power play is mitigated) and also entails aligning herself with Katie (a connection maneuver).

In the next example, Molly is at home with Katie when she hears Ben's car approaching the house. She prepares Katie for her father's arrival in a way that seems designed to inspire excitement and anticipation, encouraging involvement between the child and her father in much the same way that mothers do when they encourage children to tell their fathers about their day:

Molly: Daddy's home.  
Katie: Da da.  
Molly: Daddy's gonna be home in a minute.  
Katie: Da da pop.  
Da da pop.  
Da da pop.  
Molly: You gonna give Da da a pop?  
Katie: Yes.  
Shoes. Shoes. ahh.  
Molly: You gonna tell Daddy to take his shoes off?

In this interchange, Molly is negotiating connection by orienting Katie toward integrating the father into the family circle. Katie's minimal utterances, "Da da pop" and "Shoes," could be interpreted in many different ways. The expansions Molly supplies ("You gonna give Da da a [fruit] pop?" and "You gonna tell Daddy to take his shoes off?") frame Katie's words as plans to involve her father in interaction. This too negotiates connection.

When Ben enters the house, however, he is tired, hungry, and out of sorts. As he sits at the table trying to eat something, Katie tries to climb on him, and he has a momentary eruption of irritation:

- Ben: No! I'm eating! [*very irritated*]  
Daddy eats. [*conciliatory*]  
Katie: [*cries*]  
Molly: O::h. [*sympathetic tone*]  
Ben: Da da eats. [*more conciliatory*]  
Katie: [*cries louder*]  
Ben: Wanna come up?

In a sense, Ben's first three statements are control maneuvers: he wants to prevent Katie from doing what she wants to do – climb into his lap. But the progression of modifications to his linguistic strategies evince a subtle negotiation of closeness. When Katie begins to wail, Ben retreats from his refusal to let her climb on his lap and ends up inviting her to do so (“Wanna come up?”). In building up to that invitation, he repeats the reason for his initial resistance three times: that he is eating. But each time he repeats this proposition, the way he words it and the tone in which he speaks bring him closer to his daughter.

The first iteration, “I’m eating!” is spoken in a very irritated tone and is preceded by the harsh injunction “No!” Furthermore, in using the first-person pronoun “I,” Ben describes what he is doing from his own point of view. This contrasts with the perspective of his next iteration, “Daddy eats.” Not only is this statement spoken in a more conciliatory tone, as if trying to make amends for the harshness of his previous burst of annoyance, but he also shifts to Katie’s perspective when he says “Daddy eats,” since “Daddy” identifies him from his daughter’s point of view, not his own. The third repetition, “Da da eats,” moves even closer to the child’s perspective, since “Da da” is what she calls him. So these linguistic forms bring the father closer to the child’s point of view, even as he is softening in his resistance to her attempt to climb on him, and moving toward offering her what she wanted in the first place (but no longer wants now that he has made her cry). Ben’s responses to Katie, then, in these few brief lines, are a subtle negotiation of power and connection.

At this point, Molly joins the interaction in a way that blends power and connection in particularly complex and intriguing ways. She explains to Ben why Katie is crying, indirectly chastising him for causing this reaction. At the same time, she explains Katie’s own feelings to her and suggests how she might, when she learns to talk, use words rather than tears to express those feelings and get her way. Because Molly does all this by talking through Katie, she is connecting the three of them as a family unit:

- Molly: She got her feelings hurt.  
...  
I think she just wanted  
some Daddy’s attention.  
You were missing Daddy today, weren’t you?  
You were missing Daddy, weren’t you?  
Can you say,  
“I was just missing you Daddy,  
that was all?”

- Katie: [cries] Nnno.  
 Molly: And I don't really feel too good.  
 Katie: [cries] No.  
 Molly: No, she doesn't feel too good either.

Just as Ben moved progressively closer to Katie's point of view as he repeated his explanation that he was eating, in this example Molly's repeated explanations of why Katie is crying have the same progression. In the first line ("She got her feelings hurt"), Molly speaks of Katie in the third person, addressing Ben, so mother and daughter are linguistically distinct. She next addresses Katie directly ("You were missing Daddy, weren't you?"), bringing her into alignment with the child. She then models for Katie what the child might say to articulate her own feelings ("Can you say, 'I was just missing you, Daddy, that was all?'"). By animating Katie's feelings from the child's point of view ("And I don't really feel too good"), Molly linguistically merges with Katie. Finally, she mitigates her alignment with Katie and re-orientates to Ben by addressing him and referring to Katie rather than animating her ("No, she doesn't feel too good either").

Molly's explanation of why Katie is crying ("She got her feelings hurt") is an indirect criticism because it implies that Ben should not hurt his daughter's feelings. After a short amount of intervening talk, she makes this injunction more explicit:

- Molly: Why are you so edgy?  
 Ben: Cause I haven't eaten yet.  
 Molly: Why didn't you get a *snack*  
       on the way home or something?  
       Save your family a little stress.  
 Katie: Mm mm  
 Molly: Yeah give us a break, Daddy.  
       We just miss you.  
       We try to get your attention  
       and then you come home  
       and you go ROW ROW ROW ROW.  
 Katie: Row Row!

This last example is especially fascinating as an instance of what I call ventriloquizing – communicating to a second party by animating the voice of a third. Whereas Ben speaks only for himself ("I haven't eaten yet"), Molly speaks for (and as) Katie when she says "We just miss you. We try to get your attention . . ." Then, still speaking as Katie, she mimics how Ben comes across from Katie's point of view: "you go ROW ROW ROW ROW." In this utterance, Molly is animating Katie animating Ben. So the linguistic strategy by which Molly tells Ben that he should alter his behavior (a control maneuver) also linguistically merges the three of them (a connection maneuver).

## 9 Gender and Family Interaction: Coda

In all these examples, I have tried to show that whereas family interaction is, as researchers have been inclined to assume, an ongoing power struggle, it is also simultaneously an ongoing struggle for connection. Furthermore, family interaction is a continuing negotiation of gender identities and roles. In analyses of the interactions tape-recorded by this family, as well as others in the study, Shari Kendall has shown that whereas both mother and father espouse an ideology of equal co-parenting and wage-earning, in their ways of speaking, the mothers position themselves as primary childcare providers and their husbands as breadwinners (see Kendall, this volume). Alexandra Johnston, the research team member who spent time with Molly and Ben and transcribed their conversations, observed that one way Molly positions herself as primary caretaker is by frequently correcting Ben's parenting. In contrast, Ben rarely corrects Molly's parenting. This, indeed, is what Molly is doing in the last example when she tries to reframe Ben's interpretation of why Katie is being a pest, and to suggest how he might "save [his] family a little stress" by getting a snack on the way home.

In this way, the final example, like all those preceding it, illustrates that we need to understand family interaction – like all human interaction – not only as negotiations for power but also as negotiations for connection. Linguistic strategies that can be identified as control maneuvers must also be examined as connection maneuvers. Power and connection are the dimensions along which human relationships are negotiated, and they are also the dimensions along which gender identity is negotiated. So an appreciation of the interplay of power and connection, as well as an appreciation of the ways power and connection underlie gender identity and gender performance, are necessary to understand family interaction.

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