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The Sounds of Silence: How Men Silence Women in Marital Relations

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I want him to tell me what he's thinking, what he's feeling. . . . About a month ago I said, 'Hal talk to me, just don't sit there like a bump on a log. Talk to me. . . . He'll, when we're arguing mostly, I'll say, 'just explain to me now, what are you saying, what is it?' And he won't. He takes it as an insult I guess that I don't understand what he's saying and he won't explain. . . . (A 21-year-old Hispanic woman describes communication with her husband.)

Part of the impetus for this research project was my personal dissatisfaction in conversing with some men; a dissatisfaction similar to that expressed above by a woman in the present study. This project was also influenced by the growing body of research on gender and conversation. Many earlier studies have seemed to accept gender differences as a given and have failed to consider social or relational contexts (see critiques by Rakow, 1986; Spitzack and Carter, 1989; Thorne et al., 1983). Instead, the research which seemed most insightful and challenging to me was that which attempted to link larger social hierarchies to the less assuming, day-to-day interactions between women and men (e.g. Davis, 1988; Fishman, 1983; Henley, 1977; Hite, 1987; Rubin, 1976, 1983; Sattel, 1983; Spender, 1980; West and Zimmerman, 1983). Nancy Henley (1977) called this the study of micropolitics, meaning that larger social inequalities can be observed in the microcosm of our personal relations where these inequalities are created, maintained and even justified.

An example of such research is Pamela Fishman's more naturalistic examination of ongoing interactions in white heterosexual couples' homes. She examined a number of conversational devices used to build conversation or to detour it and found that for the three couples studied, the women worked harder to initiate and maintain conversation than the men, but were less successful in their efforts. Her conclusion was that women do the 'shitwork' of conversation. This controversial thesis made an important connection between other domestic duties traditionally ascribed to women and the work of conversational development and relational maintenance.

However, like much communication research on conversation, Fishman's work still omitted an important source of information: the individual speaker's views. I chose

Handwritten notes:
 - subject
 - gender
 - power
 - status
 - role
 - interaction
 - communication
 - relationship
 - conversation
 - gender inequality
 - social hierarchy
 - day-to-day interactions
 - larger social hierarchies
 - white heterosexual couples
 - Pamela Fishman
 - conversational devices
 - women worked harder
 - men
 - less successful
 - efforts
 - controversial thesis
 - connection
 - domestic duties
 - traditionally ascribed
 - women
 - work of conversational development
 - relational maintenance
 - omitted an important source of information
 - individual speaker's views
 - I chose

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question-asking (Fishman, 1978a, 1983); topic initiations (Fishman, 1978b; Tannen, 1984; West and Garcia, 1988); topic success/failure (Fishman, 1978a, 1978b, 1983); and turn-taking violations, including interruptions (Dindia, 1987; Kennedy and Camden, 1983; Roger, 1989) and turns at talk which seem minimal, delayed or complete failures to respond (labeled the no-response - Fishman, 1978a, 1983; West and Zimmerman, 1983).

Criteria for Identifying Conversational Components

I began with the assumption most gender and conversation research has been based upon Sacks et al.'s (1974) model of turn-taking. Underlying tenets of this model are that a turn at talk is seen as a right and an obligation to speak. Generally one person speaks at a time, and speaker turns recur. Conversational partners are said to be conscious of their speaker/listener roles, as turns at talk tend to occur with few or no silences between. Thus behavioral failures to follow these norms may be considered uncooperative, inattentive and turn-taking violations. I included in my analyses of turn-taking violations those which seemed delayed (1-3 seconds average); minimal (monosyllabic turns at talk, 'mhm', 'yeah', not to be confused with active-listening cues); complete failure to take one's turn at talk, the 'no-response' violation (Fishman, 1983, 1978a); and interruptive (the listener begins to speak at a point that is unlikely to be a completion point in the current speakers' utterance).

While Sacks and his colleagues' (1974) model served as a guideline for identifying these violations, I soon realized, as others have noted (Murray, 1985), that the tenets of their model were not universal. Consequently, identifications were also based on information gleaned from the tapes and the interviewees' reactions (Murray, 1985). Topic changes were identified by criteria adapted from previous research (Fishman, 1978b; Tannen, 1984) and from contextual information. A number of indicators were used to distinguish successful and unsuccessful topics. These included responses which directly shut off an attempted topic; topics which received a higher frequency of interruptions, minimal, delayed or no-response violations from the other speaker, and indicators that the original speaker knew her or his topic was in trouble, such as increases in verbalized pauses (Fishman, 1978b: 14). Talk time was measured with a hand-held stopwatch and total word count.

Results

After learning first-hand how complex and interpretive the work of identifying conversational components is, the reader is cautioned against making any conclusive judgments based on the numbers reported below. While the risks of quantifying gender differences across individuals, couples, and contexts are apparent, I conducted these frequency counts in an effort to provide preliminary parallels with previous studies of gender and conversation. Thus the following should be viewed as suggestive

and not exhaustive. Furthermore, the patterns of behaviour and other ethnographic information are what is important, not the individual results.

There are two general findings which lead to the conclusion that the men were relatively silent and that their behaviors silenced the women. First, the no-response was the most common turn-taking violation, particularly for the men. Second, results from the components of conversation combined with the ethnographic information strongly suggest that the women in this project worked harder to maintain interaction than the men, but were less successful in their attempts. Together these findings reveal the multiple ways in which these women have been silenced.

No-responses accounted for 45 percent of the total 540 violations; interruptions were the second most common violation, but only accounted for 24 percent. Among the total violations, the women were responsible for 36 percent and the men were responsible for 64 percent. The men were responsible for more turn-taking violations across all categories studied (no-response, 32 percent women, 68 percent men; interruption, 46 percent women, 54 percent men; delayed response, 30 percent women, 70 percent men; and minimal response, 40 percent women, 60 percent men).

The higher percentage of no-response violation was not expected given the previous focus in gender research on the interruption as a central dominance behavior (e.g. Dindia, 1987; Kennedy and Camden, 1983; Roger, 1989; West and Zimmerman, 1983). However, in general, these conversations were not interactive enough to necessitate interruption. The television ran the entire recording time in two couples' homes, and when simultaneous talk did occur, the participants did not always perceive it as a turn-taking violation. They heard it as a sign of their partner's enthusiasm toward the conversation. Among the fourteen participants, interruptions were rarely listed as a complaint about their partners. The problem, particularly for the women in this study, seemed to be more basic - getting a response at all.

The second point which led me to conclude that the men generally silenced the women is that, similar to Fishman's earlier work (1978a, 1978b, 1983), there were several indicators which suggested communication was more important for the women, that they worked harder at it than the men, and yet were less successful. The women talked more (139 minutes total, 63 percent; men spoke 83 minutes, 37 percent), yet seemed to have far less turn-taking violations (197, 36 percent to 343, 64 percent); and they raised more topics (236, 63 percent to 140, 37 percent), yet succeeded less often than the men in getting these developed into conversations (156, 66 percent succeeded compared to 106, 76 percent).

Certainly there may be other explanations for these results. First, talking more could have been a dominance behavior. However, when a person dominates by doing most of the talking, the person will also tend to interrupt more (Spender, 1980) and be more likely to have her or his topics succeed, neither of which occurred here. Second, merely raising a topic is not necessarily a positive effort toward conversation since some things may be better left unsaid. However, in the topic analysis, I found women and men were both as likely to raise all categories of topics except one - personal emotions or concerns. Since there were only five instances of this topic initiation on all the tapes (all raised unsuccessfully by the women), it seems reasonable to

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suggest that topic selection was generally not the problem. Furthermore, regardless of the topics' positive or negative nature, when one person seems to do most of the decision-making regarding which topics are successful and which are not, that decision-making may be a form of control and silencing.

The following is an example of the variety of strategies one man used to detour his partner's topic and her response efforts.

- 1 MARY: I went to Diana's ((food store)) today, for lunch, got a salad you know? (.)
 2 BUD: Ahhh.
 3 MARY: = Ran into your mom.
 4 BUD: = Ran into who? (1)
 5 MARY: Your mom. (1) She didn't even know who I was. (2)
 6 BUD: Ahhh. (1)
 7 MARY: She was at the, she was at the meat case and, and I was looking at, you know I was getting my salad, and I come around and she was at the meat case and then she took off, and then (2)
 8 BUD: ;Be right back ((goes outside)) Ouch, my elbow! (45) ((door bangs, he returns)) (7) Emm (2)
 9 MARY: So I followed her all the way up through the store (1) and she was ((word))
 10 BUD: ;well, you have to remember my mom, my mom has tunnel vision, too, I mean she don see nothin but straight ahead.
 * * *
 11 MARY: I've got this all figured out. (3) I talked to Doyle today? (4) And, (4) you know explained to him the fact that you know, come April I'll probably have to (1) ahm (.)
 12 BUD: ;Excuse me, open the back door, I'm gonna give this to ((the dogs)). (8) ((He returns.))
 13 MARY: I'll probably have to terminate my appointment.

During our interview Bud said he did not feel like talking at the time of the conversation and that he had 'heard it all before'. His lack of attentiveness was apparent: he went outside twice during her stories (lines 8, 12); he seemed to diffuse her punch-line for the first story (line 10); he seldom provided any apparent participative listening cues (lines 2, 6), and he seemed to exhibit no-response violations (e.g. lines 11, 12, 13). In the total 12.5-minute conversation, he had 18 turn-taking violations, she had 9. She raised 7 topics, 5 of which were successful; he raised 4, all successfully. Together these suggest she was working harder at the conversation, but with less success than Bud.

All the women expressed concern about getting their husband's attention and mentioned the extra efforts they made to try to do so. One woman, Sandy, said: 'He doesn't talk to me! If it were up to him, we wouldn't talk.' She described various attention-getting strategies: she quizzed him if she suspected he had not been listening, she used guilt and jealousy strategies, and she purposefully raised topics he enjoyed.

In contrast to the women's efforts to encourage talk, they noted in the taped interactions a variety of what they termed 'patronizing', 'put-down' and 'teachy' behaviors by their husbands. Patronistic statements are said to limit another's behavior through what are presented as well-meant intentions (Davis, 1988: 23). In the taped interactions the men's patronizing comments seemed to detour the women's efforts to develop conversation. In a more blatant case, when Sharon asked Jerry's opinion about responding to a newspaper advertisement he warned, 'Be careful you don't get into somethin you can't get out of. Like don't give em your credit card number', to which she replied, 'I know. I'm not stupid.' In another case, Sue labeled her husband's behavior as 'teachy', because of the way he explained tennis or technical processes related to their joint careers in television production. On the tapes, her husband Robert slowed his speech and used more careful articulation, similar to the way adults sometimes try to teach children. Less blatant cases of condescending behaviors which silenced the women may be the several instances of husbands who cautioned their wives to quit worrying about a topic the wives had tried to discuss. 'Why worry about something until it happens?', Curt said.

A final type of patronizing behavior is what two women called 'faked listening', pretending to listen by offering only token acknowledgments. Sharon said when Jerry got bored with her topic he would change it by 'getting mushy', meaning he would make a romantic or sexual comment. She knew the next thing he said would have nothing to do with the topic she had raised. The effect of these various patronizing behaviors seemed to be to trivialize the women's concerns and make further discussion of a topic irrelevant.

There was also other evidence that talk was more important to the women than the men. I received eighteen responses to my solicitations for participants; women initiated the contact in all but one case. Of these, six chose not to participate (five were ineligible), because they said their husbands were not comfortable with the project. Of those who completed the project, four men (Curt, Hal, Ted and Warren) said they agreed to do so because their wives had been feeling lonely and they thought getting to talk with another woman (rather than increasing an awareness of their own communication inadequacies) might make their wives feel better.

I am not trying to suggest that the men in this study failed to value talk at all, or that the stereotypical 'silent male' is a universal phenomenon. However, the men consistently preferred 'not talking' and/or 'light conversation' in their continual vigilance for conflict avoidance. According to previous research, conflict-avoidance strategies are techniques people use to deal with unwelcome requests from others (Belk et al., 1988: 165). Both the women and men voiced desires to avoid conflict, but the strategies they preferred for doing so were different. The women chose to voice objections, seek compromises and talk out a problem. These are behaviors consistent with what previous researchers have labeled 'collaborative' conflict-avoidance strategies (Belk et al., 1988). The men chose what previous researchers have labeled 'unilateral conflict avoidance' (Belk et al., 1988), as exemplified by their desires to withdraw, for their wives to be less emotional, to have more efficient conflict resolutions, and to generally avoid sensitive topics of discussion.

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The men's stated preference for conflict avoidance seemed consistent with their greater use of no-response violations because the conflict avoider is generally thought to be apathetic and disinterested (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Folger and Poole, 1984). It is plausible that a person who unilaterally avoids conflict may do so, as these men did, by avoiding sensitive topics; using more no-response violations as opposed to interruptions; talking less; and using patronizing behaviors to control conversation. The women's preferences for collaborative conflict avoidance seemed consistent with the greater amount of work they did to generate communication with their husbands.

The problem, then, is that these different preferences for how to avoid conflict may themselves come into conflict. And, while no one piece of evidence reported here would be highly meaningful alone, together the information demonstrates that when these needs did compete, the men seemed to be able to put forth less effort and still obtain their wishes more often than the women. As a result, the men seemed to have more control in defining the day-to-day reality of these couples' communication styles, and the women did more of the adapting.

Thus, through the variety of research methods employed, we can see connections between speaker preferences, components of conversation, and the consequences for relational and social control. Although this was a preliminary effort to understand how gender inequalities may be created and maintained on a daily basis, the methods do offer directions for future work. Analyses of isolated conversational components are not enough if we want to understand how relational and social realities are developed through interaction. Anita Pomerantz (1989) suggested that researchers need to bridge the gap between the more technical analyses of conversation and that which is socially relevant for the speakers. While such translational links are susceptible to misrepresentations (Jefferson, 1989), failure to make such attempts seems elitist and does little to inform people's lives. This concern is particularly important for feminists, since the violations of one's communication expectations and preferences in intimate relations may actually be covert dominance strategies. Research methods which fail to make such political links serve to further camouflage women's realities and maintain the silence.

NOTES

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- 1 The term communication preferences as used here refers to individuals' likes and dislikes in communication with their spouse, not the structure-based preferences Schegloff (1988) discussed.
- 2 In the transcripts, the symbol | is used at the beginning of an utterance to show overlap, that is, to show where a speaker began her/his turn within two or less syllables of the other speaker's ending. The symbol } is used to show where a speaker interrupted the other's turn by beginning to speak when it was not a transition-relevance place (a point beyond the two syllable rule of thumb).

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