



“I DON’T KNOW, WHAT DO YOU THINK?”: PERFORMING GENDER AT THE FORMICA TABLE

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In 1999, social psychologists Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Anthony Mulac, and Kathryn Dindia conducted a study on gendered communication patterns as seen within two-party conversations. Entitled “Gender-Preferential Language in Spouse and Stranger Interaction,” the study identified twenty conversational traits coded either as masculine or feminine. Question-asking was coded as feminine and appeared far more often in the speech patterns of female participants.

It only took a couple months of working at the Writing Center for me to realize the inflamed and frequently load-bearing intersection between my identities of woman and tutor. I often hear tutoring described as the art of holding space for another’s process: this is a beautiful definition with an uncanny resemblance to cultural expectations of women. In contrast to my male peers, whose precursor to employment was ten weeks of training, I had a lifetime of female socialization to equip me. Being patient, selfless, and helpful had always been obligations within my interpersonal relationships. When I fulfilled them well, I was socially rewarded; when I strayed from this attentively gendered performance, I was either humiliated or ignored. Occupying the role of “listener” was not something I did for money, but as a requisite for respect.

It’s easy to slip into a caricatured archetype of woman while tutoring, as I know this predictable performance has the potential to generate interpersonal comfort. Especially when I’m worn out or tutoring assertive men, I find myself attempting to minimize possible friction within a session by becoming the paragon of “feminine listener.” I adopt demure communication patterns; my vocal register shifts into higher tones; my questions leave less and less space for me to speak. This is a time when I allow my gender, and not the labor of my craft, to define me as listener. Within this context, it feels like I’m socially and economically profiting from my femininity.

Inversely, because so many of my relationships with men come at the expense of having to weather masculinity’s micro-aggressions, I was initially wary about trusting men’s ability to adopt a listening role. This was not a dismissal against individual male tutors, but an anxiety originating in my own

trauma and distrust of confiding in men. If they had seldom listened to me, how could they listen to strangers? Could I trust a ten-week training course to override a lifetime of social programming? Men, too, must continuously perform their gender or risk losing their own social collateral.

Outside of the Center, my speech patterns lie well within the tender and emotionally laborious legacy of traditional femininity: after all, I learned how to speak from my mother and sisters, the nurturers of the Kallem family. I exhaust myself fine-tuning my many questions in an attempt to render them as “answerable” as possible. In turn, I measure the success of my conversations by my partner’s engagement. If I don’t understand a sentence, a word, an idea, I disclose this vulnerability and ask for clarification. I demonstrate my attentiveness through soft, epiglottal offerings, sighing out, “mhm” and “uh-huh” when appropriate. Passed down through generations, these patterns are cultural inheritances: the only drastic divergence I’ve made from this linguistic genealogy has been a heightened sense of self-awareness about it. History and privilege have intertwined to provide me politicized insight into the mechanics of gendered language. I know that the topography of my speech is pocked with question marks, and that these patterns came into being because of my conditioning.

It’s critical to note that although I recognize my complicity in this performance of gender, I haven’t dropped inquisitive intonations from my register. I haven’t stopped muttering “mhm” or bobbing my head. Although I have allowed my voice to swell with greater confidence, I have no intention of becoming a worse listener or sacrificing the sincere pleasure I derive from asking questions. Only retroactively do I recognize that my decision to become a writing tutor was a means of honing the craft of listening, allowing my question marks to become powerful didactic tools in addition to their everyday discursive function.

Hugely sculpted by our writing center’s rhetoric, my personal tutoring practice aims to enfranchise listening as an active and productive undertaking, not merely passive and consumptive. Obviously I consider question-asking and listening valuable enough to refine them into a domain of “expertise,” thus institutionalizing the craft as an epistemologically valuable activity. By doing so, I pay my dues to the emotional laborers who have made this world livable. I seek to hold a space where educational healing may take place, allowing the writer who sits across the table to finally feel listened to. Although listening is a skill set systematically conditioned into women, we aren’t the only ones whose voices are taken away. Regardless of gender, the education system disciplines students into silence: “the student body” serves as synonym for “audience.” Student voices are rarely viewed as epistemologically valid. In a system where few actually feel heard, my coworkers and I are the first to provide the service of listening. This is a position I am honored to hold.

Yes, I expect dominant culture to impact the operation of a college resource center—exemption from historical context is never an option. No matter how visionary our pedagogical theory is, our practice will always be tempered by insidious oppression dynamics. Yet, like many have argued, tutoring has the potential to be a radical and transformative act.¹

1. Victoria Larkin, “Tutoring as a Radical Act: Changing the World One by One,” *Inkwell* 1, 2006, 6-8.

Although I'm not in the business of congratulating people for committing acts of decency, I do think there is something remarkably subversive about self-aware male tutorship. By altering their communication habits, men are reworking routes of privilege and expectations of gender performance. They are learning how to listen, even if it means working against their privilege as a speaker. Although I still find myself reticent to be tutored by a man, my trust of them is on the upswell. I am ensconced in a rare place, surrounded by men working toward unlearning socially-conditioned behavior. I am also lucky to find myself employed in a writing center that carries an ethos and praxis of anti-oppression, where I trust my coworkers to be wary of institutionalizing their privilege within their positions as employees.

To recode listening as a human attribute and not a feminine one is to work against our—and our writing center's—historical context. I only make one demand, and that is to see this hard work be continued outside the Writing Center's walls, both institutionally and independently. Specifically, I would like to see the men in my life make a concerted effort toward becoming better listeners and acquainting themselves with question marks—besides being the signs of a good tutor, these are also signs of an ally. Sometimes, the reciprocity needed is just a question in return.

ON THIS ESSAY

The study referenced in this essay did not consider the ways that gender-variant identities impact the formation and performance of conversation patterns, rendering it not just incomplete but problematic. My article does not include a discussion of gender-variant identities and tutoring dynamics, primarily because I am speaking from my own experiences as a cisgender woman. My intention is not one of exclusion, but that may be an unintended effect. It is pressingly important for more work to be done around issues of gender and peer tutoring in order to change this pattern of erasure.

Interpersonal dynamics are established according to inestimable variables, and gender performance is only one of these influences. Interactions are mediated by the inextricable tangles of race, class, physical and mental abilities, and age, to name a few. These social markers impact the way we communicate, just like femininity and masculinity. My experiences are in no way capable of being universalized, as they're rooted in my composite identity and the identities of those around me.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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