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## Community and Contest: Midwestern Men and Women Creating Their Worlds in Conversational Storytelling

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It has often been noted (Labov 1972, Polanyi 1985, Johnstone 1990b) that the anecdotes Americans tell about their lives in the course of ordinary conversations tend to have a climactic structure. The plots of spontaneous oral narratives, like those of traditional folktales and many literary stories, center around disturbances in the usual flow of events, which must be overcome or lived through. Situations become dangerous or embarrassing, failure looms, unusual people or supernatural apparitions are encountered. Protagonists manage these disturbances, in their stories about them, by calling on various sources of strength. In some stories, disturbances are resolved as a result of individual characteristics of the protagonist: will-power, cleverness, or physical prowess. In others the power to overcome or understand disturbances is communal: the help and advice of friends or neighbors, the law, or the dictates of religion. Still other stories involve supernatural sources of power. Each of these choices about how to present disturbances and their resolutions involves the creation, in the story, of a world: a world of contest in which individuals act alone to overcome challenge or threat, or a world of community in which disturbances in the status quo are managed jointly, or a world in which supernatural forces and personalities can create and resolve disturbances.

The story I call "When I Was Really in Shape" illustrates the first of these options. Its teller, a white, twenty-five-year-old student, is talking to a friend of the same age who is taping the conversation for a class project. They are in Dave's apartment. The friend, Ron, has just been talking about accidentally scaring a coworker, and Dave responds with a reminiscence

about a longtime friend and former roommate, "Mr. McCoy," and a mis-aimed karate kick.<sup>1</sup>

### When I Was Really in Shape

- Dave: When I was really in shape (I'd) throw kicks at him all the time, shit that was when I could kick to my Adam's apple.  
Used to practice at home?  
Had this light cord hanging down you know?  
Just .. practice kicking it up in the air.  
I'd .. kick at him one time I kicked him.  
He was closer than what I thought he w-,  
well he wasn't *closer*,  
yeah he was.  
Kicked his goddamn bowl of .. soup out of his hand,  
*just reaction he* [slaps hand] *turned around and HIT me man*,  
[gesture of turning around as he hits fist against palm]  
*and it backed me* [up against the goddamn] *refrigerator*,
- Ron: [laughs]
- Dave: and wow .. *what is this shit?* .. 'cause Mister McCoy MELLOW you know,
- Ron: Yeah, [laughs]
- Dave: [Oh man] he felt bad as hell about that for a long time.  
He finally told me he said,  
"Yeah I don't feel too sorry about that no more." [imitating deeper voice]  
[laughter]

The disturbance of normality around which this story revolves is Dave's accidentally kicking his roommate's soup bowl out of his hand. Dave delivers the next few lines in a voice ranging from loud to shouted, accompanied with iconic gestures of hitting and being "backed up," and punctuated with "goddamn," "wow," and "shit." These heavily evaluated lines call maximum attention to how Mr. McCoy resolves the disturbance: by hitting Dave, "just reaction," hard enough to "back [him] up against the goddamn refrigerator." Although he is referred to by his last name in the story, McCoy is an old friend of Dave's, and for a time he feels "bad as hell" about the accident. But eventually, in the only words Dave presents him as actually saying, McCoy announces that he doesn't "feel too sorry about that no more." "When I Was Really in Shape" is a story about friends; it is in fact an illustration of friendship. But friendship, in the world Dave creates in this story, expresses itself in contest of the most elemental kind: kicks and punches. Neither of the friends regrets the inadvertent fight for very long, and their relationship survives intact.

The second option, resolution of disturbance by means of community, is illustrated in "The Gift Box," another story about friends. The storyteller is Ruby, a white twenty-three-year-old housewife with some high school education. She is part of a group consisting of her husband, Fred; her brother, Rob; and her sister-in-law, Sammie, all in their early twenties,

who are sitting in her living room chatting about childhood antics. Sammie made the recording.

### The Gift Box

Ruby: Now when we were younger,  
me and Ann my sister,  
and Ellen and Marlene the neighbor kids,  
used to go out,  
and like we at first we started out with just purses.  
We'd hide in these shrubs that were along the road,  
and we'd set a purse out there with a piece of fish string tied to it.  
[laughing]  
Well we'd always get a dollar and stick out of it,  
and this was you know,  
right around sunset where it was getting kind of dark,  
and we'd .. hide in those bushes, [laughs]  
and then cars would go by you know,  
and they'd see that purse laying in the middle of the road,  
sprung open here was a dollar hanging out of it you know,  
and they'd ... stop and they'd back up,  
and while they were backing up,  
we'd pull the purse back in, [laughs]  
and here they'd be out a-looking you know in the road,  
knowing they'd seen that you know.  
And we'd do this and do this,  
and then finally,  
One . you know that got kind of boring after while,  
so we found this box, [laughs]  
and Ann said ... "Let's set this out in the middle of the road,"  
well (1.0) she said "Let's fill it with all the trash we can find."  
Well she'd just went in the bathroom and used the bathroom,  
and she goes "Oh I didn't even flush the toilet." [laughs lightly]  
Well she took this spoon and started  
scooping=  
Sammie: =Oh gross=  
Ruby: =this stuff out, [laughing]  
and putting it [ in this ] box?  
Fred: [ Only Ann. ]  
Ruby: And then we went outside to Ellen and Marlene's dog Happy,  
and gathered up his turds, [laughs]  
Sammie: Oh God,  
Ruby: and put them in there. [laughs]  
And we put old chicken bones,  
Fred: ( )  
Ruby: grease ... old food,  
everything we could think of that was nasty and awful into this  
box,  
and then we took it and gift-wrapped it and put this big bow on  
it, [laughs]  
and a little card.

Well we set it out in the road,  
and waited and waited you know and nobody ever came by.  
(1.5)  
And at this time also,  
there was these Mexicans that lived down the road from Ellen.  
And she kind of looked Mexican herself and his name was Javier,  
[laughs lightly]  
and he was you know really such a lover, [laughs lightly]  
and he'd go . go by "Mu mu mu" [kissing noise] to that Ellen you  
know, [laughing]  
"Eh baby eh baby" [imitating Javier; laughing] always to her.  
Well who would pull up in that van *but Javier*. [laughs]  
We about lost it you know. [laughs]  
We about gave ourselves away from laughing so hard. [laughs]  
And here he comes you know,  
"Aeee aeee," [imitating Javier]  
talking in this Spanish as fast as he could seeing that box there.  
[laughs lightly]  
Him and this other ... *Sancho* ... [ was with him. ]  
[laughs] [ laugh ]

Fred,  
Sammie:

Ruby: You know and here they come,  
and stuff and they get out buddy and grab that box,  
you know excited as can be, [laughs]  
you know thinking they've really found something here. [laughs]  
Well ... [laughing] they get that thing in the van and the van  
stops,  
and we're laughing so hard we can't hardly control it,  
and all of a sudden man we hear them start this loudest Spanish  
talking ever,  
growing louder and louder and all of a sudden, [laughing]  
this box comes a-flying out of that van all,  
they're a-cussing in Spanish, [laughs]  
and that stuff is scattered all over the road. [laughs]  
We were er you know here we were scared to death they were  
gonna hear us a-laughing in these bushes and come and get us.  
[laughs]

Fred, Sammie: [ [draws in breath] ]  
[ laugh ]

Ruby: But it was just wild. [laughs]

The disturbance in "The Gift Box" occurs when Javier, the irritating but also somewhat alluring Hispanic, happens to stop with his friend Sancho to take the girls' gift box bait. What was meant as a harmless, if disgusting, joke to be played on strangers suddenly looks like a personal insult to a "lover" and his friend, who could "come and get" the girls. Though Ruby has presented Javier's sexual baiting of Ellen in light parody ("He'd go 'Mu mu mu' . . . 'Eh baby eh baby'"), the girls know they need to keep themselves hidden: they "were scared to death [the men] were gonna hear [them] a-laughing in these bushes." The disturbance is resolved (the girls don't get caught) through their mutual attempts to con-

trol their laughter. Throughout the story, the girls are a team; the story's protagonist is almost always the communal *we*, never an individual *I*, and an individual *she* (Ann) only in the three lines of the bathroom episode. Ruby uses her friends' names repeatedly in the story, as well as the name of the neighbor's dog and those of the men, and key parts of the story, such as the girls' decision to fill the gift box, Javier's history of sexual harassment, and the men's reaction to the gift, are represented as actual speech.

A third option for a storyteller is to create a world in which disturbances can be resolved in supernatural ways. White, middle-class Americans seem rarely to create such a world in personal-experience stories: "ghost stories" are about often apocryphal others, and stories involving the teller's being spooked usually end with a rational explanation of the incident.<sup>2</sup> "The Presence of a Presence," told by a businessman about a distant relative of his, is thus somewhat unusual.

### The Presence of a Presence

In 1976 my aunt's mother-in-law died,  
she lived in Rockville Indiana,  
and my aunt and her two daughter-in-laws went to this woman's house to clean  
out her possessions.

After a hard day's work she bedded down in the downstairs bedroom with her  
young grandson Robert,  
the two daughter-in-laws were sleeping upstairs.

As she was drifting off to sleep,  
she was aware of the presence- of a presence at the foot of her bed.

(4.0)

It was a tall man dressed in black with a beard.  
She wasn't frightened at all,  
because he had a sweet beneficent smile on his face.

(4.0)

And she waved him off,  
and told him to go away,  
that she was tired.

And then ... uh went uh ... to sleep.  
In the morning she chuckled to herself,  
thinking that this was all a dream,  
and how silly it was,

then at breakfast,

(4.0)

her grandson Robert asked her "Grandma who was that man in black in our room  
last night?"

and she dropped her fork.

They went through the family album that day,  
and found ... that the man ... was the father of the dead woman,  
and he had died in that room.

(5.0)

And they found his picture,  
it matched perfectly with the vision seen the night before.

"The Presence of a Presence" is a well-rehearsed, writerly presentation of a story, quite dissimilar from the two personal-experience narratives. The

disturbance in this story, the apparition of the man in black, is resolved the next day when the family figures out whose ghost it was. The world created in this story is one in which the supernatural has a part, even if people are skeptical at first.

To recapitulate, then, personal-experience stories can create worlds of various kinds. Some of these "talerealm" (Young 1987) center around contest; others around community; others, less commonly created in white, middle-class Americans' stories, around the supernatural. "When I Was Really in Shape" exemplifies the first of these possibilities—a world of contest. This story was created by a man. "The Gift Box" exemplifies the second—a world of community. This is a woman's story. In the remainder of this essay, I explore this correlation between gender and story type.<sup>3</sup>

To do this, I examine a corpus of spontaneous personal experience stories which includes "When I Was Really in Shape," "The Gift Box," and "The Presence of a Presence," stories told by white, middle-class midwestern men and women. I explore whether there are any systematic differences between these men and women with regard to the worlds they create in their stories and with regard to the linguistic resources they use in doing so. Specifically, I examine the plots to which the men and women adapt their experience; the men's and women's use of details to create social and physical worlds in their stories; and the men's and women's representation of their own and others' speech.

I have two aims in doing this. My first aim is to contribute to the empirical, descriptive study of the discursive practices of a group of female Americans who are rarely studied: white, middle-class, urban midwesterners. These are women who would identify themselves, as they are identified by others, as members of the "mainstream"; they are women of the "silent majority" of the "heartland" of America, with whom women of various minority groups are often implicitly—but much more rarely explicitly—compared.<sup>4</sup> I show that women's personal experience stories, in the Indiana city I have been studying, do in fact tend to revolve around joint action by communities of people, whereas men's stories tend to be about acting alone, and that women's stories include more details about people than do men's, more reported talk, and different ways of talking about talk. I also examine a story created about and by the community in which these women and men live: a story that belongs to the city of Fort Wayne. I show that community stories like this are in some ways more like women's stories than like men's.

My second aim is a theoretical one, which bears on the study of women and language in a more general way. I am interested in the relationship between the social world created *in* a story by means of a teller's linguistic choices and the social world that *gives rise* to the story. I suggest that women and men make the choices they do in storytelling not simply because they have different psychologies or participate in different subcultures, if they do, and not simply because their stories reflect their differential access to power in the real social world, but also because they are actively creating different worlds in and through their stories, worlds

which are at the same time reflective and constitutive of men's and women's psychological, social, and cultural worlds outside their stories.

### *Discourse, Gender, and World*

Evidence of a variety of kinds suggests that men and women do not—or do not always—use and interpret language the same way. As discourse analysis and sociolinguistics have become increasingly sophisticated, early descriptions of “women’s language” (Lakoff 1975) based on intuition and informal observation have inspired empirical studies of how men and women interpret others’ speech (Tannen 1982) and how women use language, in conversation with men (Zimmerman & West 1975, Fishman 1978, Maltz & Borker 1982, West & Zimmerman 1983) and among themselves (Harding 1975, Kalčík 1975, Jones 1980, Rakow 1986), in joking (Mitchell 1985), in public image making (Adams & Edelsky 1988), and in the writing (Warshay 1972, Flynn 1988) and telling of personal stories (McLaughlin et al. 1981, Baldwin 1985, Mills 1985, Jahner 1985, Silberstein 1988). As has much other work in discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, work on language and gender in the United States has tended to be about well-educated middle- to upper-middle-class women, who are white and either Jewish or Christian. Universal claims about what women and men do based on research about a subset of women and men must be examined critically; however, since I am explicitly interested in the white middle class, much previous research is potentially relevant to mine.

Explanations for gender differences in language use have been of several kinds. Some scholars see the differences between men’s talk and women’s as reflections of psychological differences (Gilligan 1982, Boe 1987). Others claim that the differences are social in origin, based in differential status and prestige (O’Barr & Atkins 1980, Kramarae, Schulz, & O’Barr 1984). Others attribute language-use differences to cultural differences, noting that girls and boys are socialized, in same-sex peer groups, into different forms and functions of talk (Maltz & Borker 1982, Tannen 1990). These approaches are by no means mutually exclusive, of course. All could be subsumed under the general claim that men and women live in different worlds, be these affective and/or cognitive psychological worlds; social worlds involving relationships of prestige, power, and status; or worlds of belief and knowledge created by culture; and that the world in which a person lives helps to shape the person’s talk.

But talk and world are connected in a variety of ways. Talk is certainly often about the world and reflects what the world is like. At the same time, though, worlds are created in talk. This is in fact most obviously true of narrative talk, since stories, by means of introductory abstracts, summary codas, and other linguistic framing devices, explicitly take teller and audience out of the “storyworld” in which their conversation takes place into a “talerealm” in which the narrative takes place (Young 1987:19–68).

Many students of personality suggest that stories are central to people’s identities. As Ursula K. LeGuin (1989) puts it:

Narrative is a central function of language. Not, in origin, an artifact of culture, an art, but a fundamental operation of the normal mind functioning in society. To learn to speak is to learn to tell a story. . . . [Narrative is] an immensely flexible technology, or life strategy, which if used with skill and resourcefulness presents each of us with that most fascinating of all serials, *The Story of My Life*. (39, 42)

Telling one’s story is at the heart of the psychoanalytic process, which, according to Roy Schafer (1981), is about “the self as telling.” Jerome Bruner (1986) argues that while natural reality can be understood by means of logical rationality, human reality is essentially narrative: people make sense of human actions by telling stories about them.

The sociocultural world is also at least partly constituted through talk. Victor Turner (1981) points out that “social dramas” and tellings about them both reflect the same underlying process: stories take the form of social life and social life takes the form of stories. People use stories not simply to perpetuate social reality but also to create it and manipulate it (Johnstone 1987). Stories are not merely—if they are at all—icons of a preexisting extratextual world of cultural norms and social relations. The worlds created in stories do provide evidence of how psychological and social reality constrains people’s tellings about it, but in addition, and more interestingly, the social worlds created in stories provide evidence about the nature of the creative power wielded by people who talk.

### *Men’s and Women’s Narrative Worlds*

I now turn to fifty-eight personal experience narratives, all of which arose in the course of spontaneous conversation among familiars. All were told by white middle-class Americans from in and around an Indiana city of about 300,000 inhabitants. Thirty-three stories were told by women and twenty-five by men; the tellers’ ages range from fourteen to around seventy. I will move from general observations about what these men’s and women’s personal experience stories tend to be about to increasingly specific claims about what sorts of social worlds the women and men create in their stories and how they make differential use of the resources of English to do this.

On the most general level the women’s stories tend to be about community, while the men’s tend to be about contest. The men tell about human contests—physical contests such as fights as well as social contests in which they use verbal and/or intellectual skill to defend their honor. They tell about contests with nature: hunting and fishing. Stories about contests with people or animals can take the form of tall tales, which are themselves a kind of contest between a teller and an audience. When a male storyteller is not the protagonist in his story, the protagonist is a man; men rarely tell stories involving women.<sup>5</sup>

The women’s stories, on the other hand, revolve around the norms of the community and joint action by groups of people. The women tell about incidents in which they violate social norms and are scared or em-

barrassed as a result; about people helping other people out of scrapes; about sightings of apparent ghosts which are then explained by others; about meeting their mates and acquiring their cats. The women tell about peculiar people, dramatizing their abnormal behavior and setting it implicitly in contrast with social norms. They tell stories about themselves, about other women, and about men.

Looking in more detail at the plots of stories in which the teller is the protagonist—in other words, people's stories about themselves—one finds striking differences in how often male and female protagonists act alone and how often they act in concert with others, and what the outcome is in each case. Table 3.1 summarizes the figures to be mentioned.

Of a total of twenty-one men's stories about themselves, thirteen are about men acting alone, in such situations as these:

A young man is hassled by another man in a bar but says the right threatening thing to put an end to the situation; he is with others, but no one else is involved in this interchange.

The players on a semiprofessional softball team pour ice water on the club's public relations director, as a sort of initiation ritual; the victim responds in just the right clever way, by breaking into the song "Stormy Weather."

By calling on his own willpower, a high school boy enables himself to beat forty or fifty other contestants in a cattle-judging competition.

When men act alone, the outcome is usually positive, as in these examples.

Of the twenty-six women's stories, protagonists act alone in only ten. In seven out of these ten, the outcome is bad: embarrassment, fright, pain, or failure. In one case, not consulting others is explicitly the reason for the bad outcome:

A woman pays respects to the wrong corpse at a funeral home, and, worse, signs the visitors' book, a gaffe she could have avoided by asking someone for directions.

Table 3.1 Individual vs. Joint Action by Protagonists

	Men's Stories (N = 21)	Women's stories (N = 26)
Protagonist acts alone		
with bad outcome	3	7
with good outcome	$\frac{10}{13}$	$\frac{3}{10}$
TOTAL	13	10
Protagonist acts with others		
others are just there	4	5
others help and advise	$\frac{4}{8}$	$\frac{11}{16}$
TOTAL	8	16

In the other three stories in which female protagonist/tellers act alone, they are successful.

Eight men's stories are about acting in concert with others. Of the eight, however, four have men doing things together, but not advising or helping each other: deer hunting, training to be pilots, hunting for fishing worms, and fishing. Only four out of a total of twenty-one men's stories about themselves involve their actively helping or being helped or advised. In one (a tall tale), the protagonist asks for advice after he inadvertently shuts a cat in a freezer. In another, a mechanic sends his assistant to help with a car that won't start (though the mechanic himself is the one who eventually solves the problem). In another, a soldier and his buddies survive being stranded with a broken-down vehicle in a remote part of Germany, all working together. In the other, a driver prevails on a sheriff who has providentially arrived on the scene to do something about an erratic tailgater.

Sixteen women's stories have the woman acting in concert with others. In five of these, people are simply doing things together: trashing a laundromat, throwing crabapples at cars, joyriding in a friend's brother's car, vacationing in Europe, visiting socially. In the other eleven, though, the outcome depends crucially on cooperation with others. Examples are these:

What could have been an embarrassing mistake (saying "Good God" instead of "Good morning" in Spanish) is shrugged off when the Spanish speaker being addressed laughs about it, because he's such a nice fellow.

A woman trying to rescue her drowning nephew almost drowns too, but her sister borrows a life raft and saves both.

A woman deals with the aftermath of a frightening skid in the snow with the help of neighbors, who give helpful advice, and the local police officer, who accompanies her back to the scene of the accident to retrieve her license plate and check for damage.

To summarize, the men's stories tend to be about contests in which the protagonist acts alone and is successful. When groups of men act in concert, they tend not to stand in relationships of advice or support, but rather simply to act as copresent buddies. The women, on the other hand, tell stories which stress the importance of community. When women's protagonists act alone, they tend not to be successful, and when groups of women act together, they do so in mutually supportive ways.<sup>6</sup>

### Language and Storyworld

In addition to the thematic choices I have just described—choices about which events to narrate, about who does what in a story, and about how it comes out in the end—the men and women use a variety of strategies for how to talk—discourse choices—as they create their worlds of contest and

