

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Emily E. West

September, 2009

Doing Gender Difference through Greeting Cards: The Construction of a Communication Gap in Marketing and Everyday Practice.

Emily West, *University of Massachusetts Amherst*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/emily_west/3/

Doing gender difference through greeting cards:

The construction of a communication gap in marketing and everyday practice

Author: Emily West

Published in *Feminist Media Studies* 9.3 (2009): 285-299.

Regularly as clockwork Cathy, a cartoon “everywoman” who appears in many comics pages of US newspapers, comments on the obligations and pleasures of correspondence, especially greeting cards, as the holidays come and go. She observes, for example, that as much as Valentine’s Day sentiments might change, one thing remains constant --- “...and still, no men in the store” (Guisewite 2001). As this cartoon strip reminds us, greeting cards are a highly gendered form of popular culture, and due to their routine use, one that serves as a constant reminder of gender difference.

Greeting cards are not a common form of media to study, but they offer a fruitful site to explore a variety of issues. They are both consumer goods and a form of mediated communication; they are used in interpersonal communication but they are mass-produced; they are popular and ubiquitous but their respectability as a form of communication is uncertain. While the questions they raise are manifold and have begun to be explored by scholars (Jane Hobson 2000; Alexandra Jaffe 1999; Stephen Papson 1986; Barry Shank 2004), here I focus on one of their most obvious but perhaps taken-for-granted attributes: their association with women. While scholars have examined representations of gender stereotypes on cards themselves (Judith S. Bridges 1993; Melissa Schrift 1994; Lynda Willer 2001), here I focus on greeting card communication as a gendered practice.

With women still being primarily responsible for domestic concerns in heterosexual households, the feminization of consumption in our collective imagination remains relevant in the twenty-first century (Suzanne M. Bianchi, Melissa A. Milkie, Liana C. Sayer, and John P. Robinson 2000; Scott Coltrane 2000; Arlie Russell

Hochschild 1989). The labor of shopping and provisioning and then, significantly, transforming commercial goods into the sacred offerings suitable for home and hearth, falls largely on women's shoulders (Daniel Miller 1998). They bear the responsibility for keeping households running, maintaining the lines of communication to family and friends, and keeping holidays and traditions alive, but in a way that disguises the labor and effort involved. The linked spheres of social reproduction, consumption, and femininity are largely interpreted as denigrating to women. These categories' denigration reflect the historical situation of women being both the primary consumers and those responsible for the creation and maintenance of the home. Rita Felski (2000) writes, "Women become the primary problem of an inauthentic everyday life marked by the empty homogeneous time of mass consumption" (p.83).

The cultural practices surrounding greeting cards are a potent site of "doing gender" (Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman 1987). In this view, gender is a "routine, methodical, and ongoing accomplishment" and "an emergent property of social situations" (Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker 1995, p.9). Gender is an "interactional accomplishment" that is reproduced over time on both the micro-level of interaction and the macro-level of institutional structures and norms (West & Fenstermaker 1995, p.20). In this paper I note not only that greeting cards are a gendered sphere of cultural practice, but elaborate on how and why. Beliefs about natural gender difference structure this communicative activity both in interactional contexts, from my interviews with greeting card consumers, and in the institutional setting of the greeting card industry. The consistency between these settings illustrates how beliefs about gender difference are represented, enacted, and reproduced in ways that are often mutually

reinforcing across interactional and institutional domains (West & Zimmerman 1987; West & Fenstermaker 1995).

I begin by demonstrating the extent to which greeting cards are part of “women’s work.” Because the gender system is relational, it is the contrast between men’s and women’s relationship to cards that highlights their gendered nature, so I describe the trope that “men are bad at cards” and how it reinforces the naturalness of gender difference when it comes to emotional expression. I turn to the marketing of cards to show how the greeting card industry uses the premise of gendered differences in communication as an important selling proposition. I conclude by suggesting that the greeting card illustrates how models of communication are themselves gendered in the collective imagination and located in hierarchies of legitimacy. Compared to greeting cards, other modes of interpersonal communication such as using the telephone come to seem the masculine alternative, illustrating the elasticity of attributions of gender-appropriateness, given that the phone has been analyzed as a feminized communication technology in other contexts (Lana Rakow 1992). This elasticity points to the compulsion to view objects and practices in ways that support an ideology of gender difference (Robin Leidner 1993).

This paper draws on fifty-one face-to-face interviews I conducted with greeting card consumers; interviews and field work I undertook with greeting card producers, including at Hallmark Headquarters; and analysis of greeting card industry advertising and press releases. I also attended Hallmark Writers and Artists on Tour events in Kansas City, MO; Philadelphia, PA; and Raleigh-Durham, NC. At these events, begun by Hallmark in 2003, writers and artists discuss their creative process to an audience of

interested Hallmark fans, and then solicit stories from these consumers about the role that cards play in their lives.

I used snowball sampling to access greeting card consumers for interviews. I made an effort from the outset to reach people different from myself, in terms of age, ethnicity, type of occupation, and educational background. I interviewed forty-six women and five men, my informants ranged in age from eighteen to ninety, had educations ranging from some high school to graduate degrees, and included nine people of color.

I designed a paper and pencil questionnaire to gather the nuts and bolts of people's card use---how many, how often, and to whom---along with demographic information. The interview started by looking at examples of cards that I had collected and brought as stimuli. In addition to showing them cards, I asked informants questions from a pre-prepared interview guide. I included many questions designed to elicit anecdotes and a sense of the context in which card purchasing, writing, sending, and opening takes place. Interviews lasted from thirty minutes to an hour and a half.

Greeting cards and the gendered division of domestic and emotional labor

Survey data indicate that in the United States women undertake by far more social and familial communication through phone calls, letters, and greeting cards than men (Scott Coltrane 2000, Robert Putnam 2000). The industry consensus is that at least 80 percent of cards are purchased by women (American Greetings 2000b; Greeting Card Association 2004; Hallmark N.D.a). Men purchase only about 10 percent of cards for most occasions and a somewhat higher proportion for certain holidays, such as Mother's Day or Valentine's Day, when they purchase 17 percent of cards (American Greetings

2000a; American Greetings 2001; Hallmark 2000). While men are more likely to buy for just one person at Mother's Day for example, women tend to buy for multiple recipients including "stepmothers, daughters, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, godmothers, aunts and even their friends who are moms" (American Greetings 2001a). At Hallmark Headquarters, the customer is referred to as a "she," and the majority of the company's efforts are focused on serving their core demographic of women forty-five years of age and over.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the habitus is useful for thinking about how some modes of femininity are associated with particular ways of using products of the mass market. Bourdieu describes the habitus as a "generative formula" that connects the economic and social conditions of an individual's existence to her or his preferences and lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984, p.170). He explains that it is "necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 170). Greeting card communication falls into the feminine domain, just as gift-giving, decorating the home for holidays, scrap-booking, and organizing holiday get-togethers---all activities aimed at reinforcing kinship ties---are generally considered women's work (Micaela di Leonardo 1987).

The practice of sending greeting cards is also a site par excellence for looking at Hochschild's (1983) category of emotional labor. She argues that women are expected to manage their feelings, and their display, in order to please others more than men. The term "emotional labor" highlights how activities like smiling, or sending greeting cards, aren't just part of women's natural disposition but are a social expectation or obligation. As Hochschild (1983) writes:

The emotion work of enhancing the status and well-being of others is a form of what Ivan Illich has called 'shadow labor,' an unseen effort, which, like housework, does not quite count as labor but is nevertheless crucial to getting other things done. As with doing housework well, the trick is to erase any evidence of effort, to offer only the clean house and the welcoming smile. (p.167)

The effort behind greeting card communication is relatively invisible, and therefore perceived as undeserving of inquiry or discussion.

Daniel Miller's (1998) Theory of Shopping specifically connects the everyday and routine provisioning that women do for their households with an expression of love, in essence arguing that we shouldn't make a hard distinction between domestic labor and emotional labor. Miller places shopping and routine provisioning squarely in the category of kinship work and the division of labor within it, he argues, is central to our contemporary gender ideology.

Taking the perspectives of Bourdieu, Hochschild, and Miller as a conceptual framework, this research presents greeting cards as not just feminized because women are somehow "naturally" more interested in relationships and emotions, but because they view it as part of the necessary work of keeping households, and the larger kin networks that support those households, running. As a ritualized practice, greeting cards are a form of both domestic and emotional labor through which gender difference is performed on a routine basis.

The DDB (Doyle Dane Bernbach) Consumer Lifestyles Survey from 1998, a data source independent of the greeting card industry, confirms that women over the age of forty-five are the most frequent senders of cards, with mean and median cards sent per

year steadily rising with age brackets from the age of thirty-five and up.[1] Curiously, the DDB Lifestyle Survey data indicate that, according to self-reports, women send on average only about twice as many cards as men, a much less dramatic proportion than that suggested by the greeting card industry, who report that women buy at least four times as many cards as men. The discrepancy between the industry numbers and the independent statistics may be explained by the distinction between buying and sending.

Most (but not all) of the women I interviewed who live with husbands or male partners, twenty-two of my fifty-one informants, explained that they do most of the card-sending and card management in the house, while four of the twenty-two said the division of labor was more equal. Emma (all names used are pseudonyms), a mother in her twenties who also works outside the home and who lives in Philadelphia with her husband, explained that the responsibility for card-sending falls mainly on her shoulders: “Oh, I take complete responsibility...My husband can’t remember my birthday, so I can’t expect him to remember any other birthdays,” she said laughingly. Emma explained that she buys cards to be sent “from” both of them, although she normally will sign the card for herself and her husband, unless “it’s for his Mom or something, then I have him sign it.” Emma’s description of the division of card labor was quite common among my informants of different ages and educational backgrounds.

A number of respondents connected their husbands’ lack of interest in greeting cards to their ineptness when it comes to shopping in general, alluding to a gendered habitus when it comes to consumer behavior as well as the idea that cards are actually part of the routine provisioning for a household. Rita, a grandmother and homemaker in her sixties who lives in a rural community, also takes responsibility for her husband’s

card-sending. She pointed out a linkage between responsibility for greeting cards and buying groceries, saying:

He does have obligations...you know, he definitely will sign it, and I want him to sign his name to it, sure. But I of course go to the store. In fact I took him to a new grocery store that just had its grand opening. He said, oh you know, I'd like to go see that grocery store. And I said, well, yeah, we can stop by. He said, you know, they sell flowers there. And they have a pharmacy! [Laughter] So you see how often he goes to a grocery store.

Women like Daisy also regularly buy cards to be sent by children to family and friends. Daisy is a single parent of two sons who is also the guardian of her eldest son's two children and stepchild. Her modest home in a South Philadelphia neighborhood, her clerical job, and considerable family responsibilities suggest that money may be tight. However, expense does not get in the way of Daisy buying greeting cards. Daisy explained:

I don't care how many will go to my Mom [who assists with childcare]. I send my Mom cards from me on Mother's Day, my youngest son, my oldest son, and the two grandchildren, which they have a sister which I call my granddaughter. So I'll send one from each one of them, and then one from everybody, and then one from just the two brothers.

Daisy's approach to cards speaks less to a "natural" feminine interest in emotional communication than her role as the primary caretaker, which causes her to be attentive to the gestures that keep affection and obligation circulating in the network that supports her home and her dependents.

Displaying and saving cards is another dimension of the labor surrounding greeting cards. At a Hallmark Writers Tour event in the Philadelphia suburbs, the audience laughed knowingly when a woman recounted how, when she and her husband were moving from a house they had lived in for nineteen years, she hid all the greeting cards they had received over the years under linens and pillows in the moving boxes so her husband wouldn't see them and insist that she throw them all out. She explained that she still has all those cards that they moved with twenty-three years ago, leading to applause and “oohs” of appreciation from the mostly female audience. Many of the married women I interviewed reported that they also take on the role of displaying greeting cards and identifying which cards ought to be saved, and where and how. For example, Ginny, a working mother in her forties, displays cards around the TV “where [her] kids can see them” and then clears them away when she “gets around to cleaning.”

Many women do enjoy cards and feel drawn to their use, but this sense of interest in cards fits with the pattern of household responsibilities falling to women in heterosexual households. Greeting cards are very much part of the work of reproducing familial and friendship ties that is still regarded as women's work in American culture, work that is often accomplished through various forms of shopping or interactions with the mass market. They are part of a broader feminized habitus aimed at reproducing the home both practically and emotionally, and the resulting division of labor between men and women naturalizes gender difference.

Why are men bad at cards?

Theorists of gender argue that gender is socially constructed in a relational way (Michael S. Kimmel 2004). While certain behaviors or interests might come to seem

naturally associated with one or the other gender, it's really the emphasis and policing of gender difference, especially through repeated acts, gestures, and "stylizations of the body," that produces this sense of a natural gender order (Judith Butler 1990, p.33). So, while greeting cards may seem feminine because they are related to kinship, emotion, and shopping, the extent to which cards are counter-indicated with heterosexual masculinity reinforces the gendered nature of this communication genre. In general, men aren't expected to take as much responsibility for sending greeting cards as women, or to display competence in this mode of communication. In fact, by affirming men's incompetence in greeting card communication, their heterosexual masculinity appears to be confirmed and even celebrated. If men do show competence in a cultural practice widely interpreted as "feminine," they will likely be held "accountable" for this discrediting behavior (West & Fenstermaker 1995, p.20).

Consider what the following scenario says about the relationship between greeting cards, gender, and domestic labor. A woman comes through the front door of her home in her business suit, noticing as she puts her coat and suitcase away that the front hall of the house is a mess, with toys and clothes strewn throughout the hallway. Her two young sons welcome her home, and immediately ask her to read them a story. Having just walked through the door, she asks them to wait. Discovering that the kitchen is a mess with the remains of dinner still on the table and pots all over the counter, she encourages her sons to get their father to read them a story. They go to Dad, who is on the phone and indicates that he can't help out. Mom bathes the boys, and then setting aside the laundry she's doing, she finally agrees to read them a story, having not yet had a chance to change out of her workday clothes. As she turns the page of their favorite storybook, The

Little Engine that Could, she discovers a greeting card with “Mom” written on the front in red crayon. She reads the card aloud, which says:

Because of you our world is happy
A place we love to be
All the days are filled with laughter
The nights with sweetest dreams
And all because of you.

The card is signed, “Love Charlie, Jack, and Dad.” Dad has been listening outside the bedroom door, and as she finishes reading the card aloud, Mom glances up and catches his eye, smiling. They walk away from the boys’ room, arm in arm, as one brother asks the other, “What was that Dad made for dinner?” (emphasis mine).

This Hallmark commercial, designed as most of Hallmark’s ads are to tug at the heartstrings, nicely captures the gendered division of household and emotional labor commonly found in American homes, and suggests where greeting cards fit into the mix. Mom’s responsibility for caring for the physical and emotional needs of her family is taken for granted, despite the fact that she also works outside the home. The domestic work that Dad does is unexpected, and therefore noticed for being a special effort, and held to different standards. Dad has gone above and beyond the call of duty by watching his sons and making dinner and so, the commercial implies, he can’t also be expected to do a good job and tidy up. He is grateful to his wife for what she does, and she, in turn, is grateful for being noticed. Although Hallmark may appear to be modeling card-sending to men in this ad, in fact the intended audience for these ads is women, to whom they are suggesting that expectations for the male performance of emotional and domestic labor

ought not to be very high. If women don't receive cards or recognition like this from their spouses, then they receive it in virtual, fantasy form, courtesy of Hallmark.

Just as Hochschild (1983) illustrated in the world of flight attendants, performing emotional labor is a taken-for-granted expectation for women. For men, on the other hand, it is seen as outside their natural disposition, so when they take emotional labor on, be it smiling, sending greeting cards, or engaging in conspicuous caring, they are disproportionately rewarded and recognized for it, like the Dad in the Hallmark commercial, just as they are specially praised for taking on other kinds of domestic labor, like housework (Hochschild 1989). A number of stories recounted at the Hallmark Writer's tour illustrate, through the special recognition that men get when they send cards, how feminized this communication practice is in the collective imagination. For example, during the discussion period of one event, the Hallmark editor who was hosting hearkened back to a Valentine's Day when she was four years old. On this occasion, she received separate cards from each of her parents. She hardly noticed the card from her mother because receiving a card from her father alone was such a novelty. When she saw this card, with an image of a flocked white kitten holding a heart, and "Love Daddy" written inside, it was "a moment when a little girl realized how much her Daddy loved her." Unlike her mother, this engineer father-figure didn't write anything "flowery," but his daughter still "got the message." Mother's emotional labor remained somewhat invisible because of its reliability, whereas Father's efforts were by definition remarkable. Just the fact of sending it said so much that extra words from him were hardly required.

Although many men do send cards, it's common for women to complain or laugh about their male friends and relatives being inept when it comes to remembering a card. Juliet, a mother in her 40s who runs a business with her husband, relishes telling the story of when she shamed him into buying a Valentine's Day card at the last minute because he had forgotten to acknowledge the occasion. It remains a great family joke that he devoted so little attention to which card to buy that he got a card meant to be sent by a wife to her husband. Similarly, a middle-aged woman who attended Hallmark Writers and Artists on Tour in North Carolina reflected on the reluctance of her sons to send cards. She announced that this year was the first year she had received Mother's Day cards from all three of her sons, who were 31, 28, and 23. The audience laughed when she explained that when she received them all, she thought to herself "I've made it!"

There are, of course, exceptions. For example Janet, a professional and graduate student in her 40s, recounted how struck she was when she first met her husband by his interest in greeting cards. They were well-matched in this regard, and continue to communicate on almost a weekly basis with cards. Similarly Laura, a suburban stay-at-home mother, explained that her father, who had been a widower for some time, was a dedicated and conscientious sender of greeting cards right up until his death, at which point she found cards he had purchased for the rest of the year's family birthdays and holidays in his files. In these and similar cases, however, the women framed their male family members as exceptions that proved the rule of cards being a feminine domain. At the moment, then, it seems that men who embrace greeting cards may be celebrated in a way that draws attention to the expected gender gap in this communication practice, rather than incorporated in a way that might challenge it.

While many women, younger and older, don't really expect their male relatives to put a lot of time and effort into sending cards, Rebecca, a college student, unfavorably compared the cards she receives from her father to the ones she gets from her mother.

She explained:

I'm very critical. I mean especially the cards that my Dad has sent me, which is probably like two this year, compared to like, a stack of like forty from my Mom, he doesn't, I mean he doesn't take the time, and it's just kind of like, you know, whatever his secretary gives him to send.

Unlike most of the other stories I heard, Rebecca did not go out of her way to celebrate the cards that she did receive from her Dad because, as a man, he couldn't be expected to do cards well. The culture at large might be willing to concede greeting card communication as woman's work---something that men are expected to try to do but are not necessarily expected to develop competency in---but some do question this division of labor, and hold men to different standards. As the greeting card industry faces the aging, and eventual dying out, of their core customers, they are looking to bring younger customers into the card habit. The possibility that men will take on greater responsibility for card-sending should domestic arrangements meaningfully shift is suggested by the correlation found in the DDB Lifestyles Survey data between grocery shopping and card-sending, where men who say they take responsibility for most of the grocery shopping in their household report buying almost twice as many cards as men who do not. Greeting cards may become a less discrediting practice for men if the division of domestic labor becomes less gendered over time.

Marketing gender difference

Press releases, commercials, and other communications from the greeting card industry frequently support the idea that “Men tend to communicate differently than women,” more often than not using this perceived communication difference as a marketing pitch for their products which they claim can bridge the gender gap (American Greetings 2002). American Greetings publicized market research which found that men are more reticent to express sentiment than women, reporting that their focus groups found that men feel uncomfortable with cards that are too sentimental, and prefer ones with shorter, snappier pre-printed sentiments, such as “I love you. It’s as simple as that” (American Greetings 2002). The report also found that, “women’s expectations may be influencing men’s habits. In the study, many men admitted they buy their wives two cards---a funny one just for laughs and a mandatory romantic one they think is expected,” a conclusion that resonates with the stereotypical view of gendered communication styles while simultaneously encouraging men to compensate for their perceived shortcomings with multiple cards (American Greetings 2002).

In their advertising and marketing, greeting card companies often offer their products as the solution that will address and ameliorate the difficulties of communication that “everyone knows” occur across the gaps of gender and, often, generation. For example, in one of Hallmark’s press releases for Father’s Day cards, therapist Dr. Carle counsels daughters on what kinds of cards will bring about the connection they would like with their fathers:

‘Tell your dad that you want to get closer to him because you realize he might not always be around. Chances are, Dad will be glad,’ Dr. Carle says. ‘He just doesn’t know what you want---unless you tell him.’ (Hallmark N.D.b)

Rather than attempt to downplay the gendered division of labor in greeting card communication or de-feminize this communication practice, Hallmark and American Greetings, who between them control about eighty-five percent of the greeting card industry (Lisa Biank Fasig 2003), tend to exploit the idea that men and women communicate differently and as a result, orient towards cards differently. The industry exploits beliefs in gender difference in their representations of card exchange in advertising images that are largely aimed at their primary demographic of women, but these beliefs also play out in how they market to men differently than women. The industry has found that the proportion of cards being purchased by men remains fairly flat despite their best marketing efforts (which may help explain the lack of generational difference reported across my informants about their husbands and boyfriends’ card habits), and so they concentrate their efforts on making sure that men continue to buy cards for occasions they are already aware of. Hallmark and American Greetings create larger cards at higher price points for men to buy at Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, anniversaries, and other “obligatory occasions” when they are expected to pick out their own cards without the help of their spouse, in the belief that because men purchase cards less frequently, and because they feel anxious about what kind of card is expected, they will gravitate towards more expensive-looking cards (American Greetings 2000a). This strategy is illustrated in a recent Hallmark card. The cover of the larger-than-usual card reads: “From Your Adoring Husband. On your birthday it takes more than a card...” The

inside reads “to say EVERYTHING I want to say to you” and a flap flips up at the top saying “(Pull here).” When pulled, the card folds out into almost a poster-size sheet that says, “It takes a REALLY BIG card!” along with comments like “You’re the BEST! Love you! Happy Birthday! You’re a WONDERFUL Wife!”

Although Hallmark and American Greetings want to encourage men to purchase and send cards, their public relations and marketing materials focus on how women and men relate to cards differently, turning this perceived gender gap into its own set of selling propositions. The case of greeting card communication highlights how cultural ideas about gender difference, when it comes to emotional and relational expression, cycle between consumers and cultural institutions like the greeting card industry, such that the institutional domain reinforces the seeming naturalness of gender difference encountered in the interactional domain. As West and Fenstermaker (1995) write,

...while individuals are the ones who do gender, the process of rendering something accountable is both interactional and institutional in character: it is a feature of social relationships, and its idiom derives from the institutional arena in which those relationships come to life. (p.20)

In the realm of greeting cards, the pressure to be “accountable” for one’s gender performance in this domain of communicative practice is all the stronger because, despite being nominally an interpersonal form of communication, cards are designed for semi-public display. Originating as public texts in the marketplace, cards invite display with their designs as well as through the ability to stand up on mantels or desks. Some cards incorporate the gendered communication gap into their sentiments, such as a humorous Hallmark sentiment that reads on the cover: “For My Wife – You know ME, Honey...I’d

NEVER get you one of those BIRTHDAY CARDS with a LOT of Mushy Stuff on the COVER,” and when you open it up: “I save that stuff for the inside!! Happy Birthday with Love!” On a more serious note, another Hallmark sentiment reads on the cover: “For my Wife – I never have been good about telling you “I love you” enough or complimenting you as much as I should...” and on the inside: “...but I hope somehow you know how glad I am to be your husband and that I love you more than anything else in the world. Happy Birthday.”

Given the market dominance of the greeting card giants, the result is what appears to be a publicly sanctioned set of instructions on how to do gender. Although this kind of gendered imagery and ideology is quite common across US media culture, the linkage between commercial representations and everyday communicative practices makes this particular source of gendered communication ideology particularly potent. This interpellation takes place not only through marketing and advertising but through the cards themselves, in sentiments that literally provide scripts for overcoming the gendered communication gap.

The gendering of greeting cards as a communication medium

The extent to which greeting card communication remains subject to a highly gendered division of labor, with little evidence of generational change, is a reminder of the persistence of gender inequality in American culture. In general, those women who do the bulk of card purchases and card management for their husbands or families in my sample of informants didn't seem to resent the gendered division of labor, but accepted it as a natural consequence of the different communication styles of men and women. For example Lesley, a college student, didn't complain or express regret that she sent dozens

of romantic or “missing you” cards to her ex-boyfriend, but only received a few for special occasions in return during the course of their relationship. When I asked Maude, a suburban grandmother who is in her 70s, to explain why her husband doesn’t really send cards or why her sons leave the card-sending to their wives, she offered the following reasons:

Well I think, in general, that women are much more communicative than men. Men are not very verbal, as a general rule. It depends on the person. But I can tell by my own sons. They don’t verbalize very much. There’s one son of mine that talks more on the telephone than the other two. And one son that I have, ‘How ya doing,’ ‘Oh, I’m alright. Everything’s okay.’ Very, very short, clipped, um, sometimes I have to drag things out of him. You really have to ask questions to find out what’s going on. So I think in general the women are more interested, which is probably well-known anyway.

Maude went on to say:

And uh, I think it’s a good thing. I mean that’s how families stay in touch. And I don’t know if anything happened to me whether my husband would send cards or not. I mean, I know that he would probably occasionally keep in touch, but I don’t think that he cares that much to send cards. Now on the telephone he might, you know, call.

Maude sees the gendered difference in the desire to communicate and stay in touch as natural, as just part of being a man or woman, recalling the greeting card industry discourse about the natural gender differences in communication styles.

Maude's observations resonate with Deborah Tannen's (1990) observation that, on average, women are more comfortable with "rapport talk," or talk that focuses on, "establishing connections and negotiating relationships," while men gravitate towards "report talk," where the focus is on providing information over interaction and engagement with others (pp.76--77). These different kinds of talk are reminiscent of the typology of communication modes that James Carey (1989) offers: ritual and transmission. While ritual communication is geared towards creating and maintaining relations across time, transmission communication is more focused on the efficient exchange of information across space. Relative to other options in our communication environment, greeting cards are more suited to maintaining relations across time than transmitting information across space. Greeting cards do not usually convey much substantive information or news as we normally think of it, and relative to telephones, email, and fax, they do not travel across space efficiently at all. They are primarily statements of relationship (Alexandra Jaffe 1999), and in fact, their relative inefficiency transmitting information across space make them seem more suited to the task of communicating emotional connection. Virtues in a transmission model of communication, like efficiency and speed, weaken the power of ritual communication. As Marcel Mauss's work on The Gift (1966) suggests, materiality and asynchronicity are crucial characteristics of a communicative form meant to bind people in social obligations across time.

Interestingly, while cards are thought of as firmly in the feminine domain, talking on the phone is something that the men in Maude's family are more likely to do. Similarly Elizabeth, a former clerical worker in her seventies and a grandmother who

lives in Boston, noted the differences in communication styles among her sons and daughters, saying:

My son lives down south, and I remember him and his children, and now it's the great-grandchildren. And not once did they send a card to me, they called me up instead, to wish me Happy Birthday, whatever, you know. But now my daughter, she'll have her children write a little note in the card. Happy Birthday, or Christmas. And my other daughter-in-law will do the same thing.

These observations of the gendered use of the telephone in the home should be considered in light of Rakow's (1992) work on that subject. Rakow found that in a small mid-western community in the US women were more likely to use the phone than men, especially for social talking and listening. Similar to Tannen's (1990) conclusions, men approached the telephone with a more instrumental or "report talk" view---as a means of making plans or transferring information---while women used the phone as a medium for "care-giving" (Rakow 1992, p.57). Although male family members are generally less involved in familial and ritualized forms of communication suitable for catching up, when they do participate my respondents suggested they would be more likely to phone than send a card. While Rakow interpreted the telephone as a feminized communication technology in her study, in comparison to the greeting card it lends itself to the masculinized "report talk" or instrumental approach to communication.

As Carey (1989) observes, ritual models of communication are viewed as secondary to transmission models in our culture, with ritual modes imaginatively linked with the maintenance of relationships and groups and transmission modes evoking reason, control, and getting things done. Communicative modes that focus on the

transmission of information, such as the telephone which seems direct because it is synchronous and allows for dialogue by connecting voices in real-time, may be read as more masculine relative to modes that are more indirect, mediated, and asynchronous, such as greeting cards. The routine, cyclical nature of greeting card communication may, as Rita Felski (2000) argues, link itself with the feminine because of our deep associations in Western culture between the repetitive concerns of the everyday and women, given that women have historically been tasked with social reproduction. In relations of difference there is an inescapable tendency to place categories in a hierarchy, and these judgments of legitimacy tend to be gendered. The cultural denigration of greeting card sentiment suggests that the transmission model continues to be privileged and linked with masculinity, even in relational communication that might be expected to operate according to a different, emotional logic.

The compulsion to see the world through the lens of gender is apparent when it comes to communication media and genres. The feminization of greeting cards seems overdetermined: by their association with women's kinship work, with the supposedly feminine sphere of emotion, and with a ritualized and therefore feminized mode of communication. And yet the observation that attributions of gender appropriateness tend to be elastic and relative remind us that they are not set in stone (Leidner 1993).

Conclusion

This paper's focus is the gendered nature of greeting card communication in the US, both in terms of actual practices of greeting card exchange but also normative discourse about those practices found in representations of card use. I demonstrate that

greeting cards represent a remarkably gendered division of domestic and emotional labor, where the accomplishment of emotional communication in kinship and other affiliative networks is actually part of the work of running a household, as well as a way of showing affection. The role that cards play in confirming an ideology of gender difference is apparent not just in how women claim cards as their responsibility, but in how women and men enact and reproduce the narrative that men are “bad at cards.” As Kimmel (2004) argues, patterns of gender difference are often the result of gender inequality, but in turn the gender differences that infuse our social world come to seem like an excuse or rationale for gender inequality. The tight association between sending greeting cards – a repeated, habitual practice - and femininity plays a role in the ongoing validation of emotional and domestic labor as a natural part of women’s work.

For a commercial product like the greeting card it is instructive to see the connection between the interactional domain of greeting card practices and the institutional domain of card promotion. My field work with consumers suggests a strong connection between card culture as lived, at least by those who like cards and use them frequently, and as promoted by major industry players like Hallmark. This is hardly surprising considering the careful research that the industry undertakes in crafting its products and promotions. There is a cycle of mutual limitation and reinforcement between these domains. Card producers find themselves limited in how to craft messages about gender and card exchange by what resonates with their consumers’ experiences, as perceived through research and testing. In turn, the cards produced and the way they are marketed create public discourse and imagery that reinforce and reproduce existing

gendered divisions of emotional labor. As one gentleman I spoke with proclaimed, when he enters a Hallmark Gold Crown Store he just knows that “I don’t belong here!”

However, the relationship between these domains is hardly a closed loop. Not everyone is in lockstep with the supposedly common sense view of how women and men should use cards, as exemplified by the “exceptions” discussed by my informants. Further, as the rate of card purchases softens, as it has done since the early 2000s (Unity Marketing 2005), the industry is trying to broaden its core demographic to include younger women who, we can hope, may find themselves in household partnerships where the material and organizational arrangements disrupt such a gendered domestic habitus.

I raise these hypotheses about openings for change, but at the same time it seems important to acknowledge the extent to which struggle for communication between men and women remains a fruitful marketing premise for many products, not just greeting cards. As long as this story can be told and presented as a problem, products can be promoted as the solution. The greeting card industry, by emphasizing the role of its brands and products in facilitating relational communication across the gendered “communication gap,” appeals to common sense as it is constructed in our current media environment.

Notes

¹ The DDB Life Style data was made available through DDB Worldwide of Chicago, Illinois for fair use for academic research, and was downloaded from Robert Putnam's website (<http://www.bowlingalone.com/data.php3>). Only the 1998 data was used because it was the most recent. The sample was large (N=3290). Putnam argues that the DDB Needham Lifestyle Survey, despite its drawbacks because of being a mail panel, is reliable based on extensive comparisons made on questions that are common with the General Social Survey (Putnam 2000).

References

American Greetings (2002) 'New Valentines address men's preferences.' Online press release downloaded July 23 2002 from:

<http://corporate.americangreetings.com/topstories/val02.html>

American Greetings (2001) 'The business of Mother's Day.' Online press release downloaded July 23, 2002 from: [http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/04-18-2001/0001471341&EDATE=Apr+18,+2001)

[bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/04-18-2001/0001471341&EDATE=Apr+18,+2001](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/04-18-2001/0001471341&EDATE=Apr+18,+2001)

American Greetings (2000a) 'The business of Valentine's Day.' Online press release downloaded July 26, 2002 from: [http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/01-20-2000/0001119243&EDATE=Jan+20,+2000)

[bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/01-20-2000/0001119243&EDATE=Jan+20,+2000](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/01-20-2000/0001119243&EDATE=Jan+20,+2000)

American Greetings (2000b) 'The business of Christmas; American Greeting reveals holiday shopping trends.' Online press release downloaded July 23 2002 from: [http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/11-30-2000/0001376277&EDATE=Nov+30,+2000)

[bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/11-30-2000/0001376277&EDATE=Nov+30,+2000](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=044150&TICK=AM&STORY=/www/story/11-30-2000/0001376277&EDATE=Nov+30,+2000)

Bianchi, Suzanne, M., Milkie, Melissa A., Sayer, Liana C., & Robinson, John P. (2000) 'Is anyone doing the housework? Trends in the gender division of household labor.' Social Forces, vol.79, no.1, pp. 191--228.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. (Translated by Nice, Richard) Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Bridges, Judith S. (1993) 'Pink or blue: Gender stereotypic perceptions of infants as conveyed by birth congratulations cards.' Psychology of Women Quarterly, vol.17, no.2, pp.193--205.

Butler, Judith (1990) Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge, London.

Carey, James (1989) Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society. Unwin Hyman, Boston.

Coltrane, Scott (2000) 'Household labor and the routine production of gender,' in The Gendered Society Reader, ed Michael S. Kimmel, Oxford University Press New York, pp.167-186.

di Leonardo, Micaela (1987) 'The female world of cards and holidays: Women, families, and the work of kinship.' Signs, vol.12, no.3, pp. 440--453.

Fasig, Lisa Biank (2003, April) 'Tenacity is Paramount,' Press release from Premier Greetings, a division of Paramount Cards. Downloaded from the World Wide Web 6 August 2004:

http://paramountcards.com.cnchost.com/pg/press/PR_details11.html

Felski, Rita (2000) Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture, New York University Press, New York.

Greeting Card Association (GCA) (2004) 'Who is sending and receiving greeting cards.' Downloaded June 4 2004 from:

http://www.greetingcard.org/gcindustry_whoissending.html

Guisewite, Cathy (2001, February 8) Cathy. Universal Press Syndicate.

Downloaded January 25, 2007 from: www.amureprints.com.

Hallmark (2000) 'Research reveals what women (and men) want this Valentine's Day.' Online press release downloaded July 14, 2002 from the Hallmark Press Room: www.hallmark.com.

Hallmark N.D.a 'Survey says meaning matters most to Mom.' Online press release in Hallmark Press Room. Online press release downloaded July 14, 2002 from the Hallmark Press Room: www.hallmark.com.

Hallmark N.D.b 'What do women want!' Online press release downloaded July 11, 2002 from the Hallmark Press Room: www.hallmark.com.

Hobson, Jane (2000) 'Non-Occasion Greeting Cards and the Commodification of Personal Relationships,' in All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture, eds Maggie Andrews and Mary M. Talbot, Cassell, New York, pp.239-252.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell with Anne Machung (1989) The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home. Viking, New York.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell (1983) The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Jaffe, Alexandra (1999) 'Packaged Sentiments: The social meaning of greeting cards.' Journal of Material Culture, vol.4, no.2, pp. 115--141.

Kimmel, Michael S. (2004) The Gendered Society, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, New York.

Leidner, Robin (1993) Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

- Mauss, Marcel (1966) The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies. Cohen and West, London.
- Miller, Daniel (1998) A Theory of Shopping. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Schrift, Melissa (1994) 'Icons of femininity in studio cards: Women, communication, and identity.' Journal of Popular Culture, vol.28, pp.111--122.
- Papson, Stephen (1986) 'From symbolic exchange to bureaucratic discourse: the Hallmark greeting card.' Theory, Culture, and Society, vol.3, no.2, pp.99-111.
- Putnam, Robert (2000) Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Rakow, Lana (1992) Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL.
- Shank, Barry (2004) A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Tannen, Deborah (1990) You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. William Morrow and Company, New York.
- Unity Marketing (2005) Greeting Card, Stationery, Party and Gift Wrap Accessories and Paper Crafting Market, 2005. Downloaded August 1 2006 from: <http://www.unitymarketingonline.com/reports2/cards/>
- West, Candace & Fenstermaker, Sarah (1995) 'Doing difference.' Gender and Society, vol.9, no.1, pp.8--37.
- West, Candace & Zimmerman, Don H. (1987) 'Doing gender.' Gender and Society, vol.1, no.2, pp. 125--151.

Willer, Lynda R. (2001) 'Warning: Welcome to your world baby, gender message enclosed. An analysis of gender messages in birth congratulation cards.' Women and Language, vol.24, no.1, pp.16--23.