

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman: Small Insults and Doing Gender

One of the most universal social things that we as humans do is gender. We use gender to organize activities, as innocent appearing as lining up in school (boys in this line, girls in this one) or as oppressive as income distribution. Ethnomethodologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) want to unsettle gender for us. As with everything that ethnomethodologists look at, gender for West and Zimmerman is not a thing that exists outside of interactions, either in society or biology. Gender is something that we achieve—we *do* gender.

One of the interesting things about gender is that we do it in such a way as to be recognized (accountable) as gender, yet it is one of the least seen things we do. This hidden, universal, and perhaps insidious aspect of gender can be understood in asking the question, “What are you doing?” The responses to that question will, of course, be as diverse as the social activities in which people are engaged. People may say “We’re having class; we’re working; we’re getting married; I’m working on the car; we’re watching football” and so on. But in every case, we are also doing something else: we are doing gender.

We are organizing our behaviors in such a way as to give a sense to others and ourselves that we are accountable as a gendered person. Seen but unnoticed in each of our examples is the achievement of gender: “I’m (a woman) in class; I’m (a woman) working; I’m (a male) getting married.” The only time it gets noticed is when we are involved in something that is unusual for our gender, like a woman basketball player or a single dad. Then we feel almost compelled to qualify the social status with gender: a *woman* doctor. Gender is thus universal—it’s everywhere and we are all the time accountable to it.

In order to begin to unsettle gender, West and Zimmerman expand our categorizations. Sociologists, and sometimes the general public, talk about sex and gender as different, sex being the biological component and gender the social. Sex is seen as natural and gender as culturally specific. But West and Zimmerman give us three categories: sex, sex category, and gender. West and Zimmerman (1987) define sex as “a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying person as females or males” (p. 127). Notice the social component: “socially agreed upon biological criteria.” That seems odd until we look at what is actually happening biologically, rather than our ideological use of biology.

Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) is a Brown University biologist who explains that there are at least five biological sexes, not the two that we normally think. There are, of course, male and female; but some babies are born “intersexed,” which means that they share some characteristics of both male and female. According to Fausto-Sterling, there are three general categories of intersexed persons: true hermaphrodites, people who have

one ovary and one testis; male pseudohermaphrodites (testes, no ovaries, but some elements of female genitalia); and female pseudohermaphrodites (ovaries, no testes, but some elements of male genitalia).

Actually, the biological case gets even more complicated when we realize that a person's primary sex characteristics (physical) may not match their sex chromosomes (genetic). We don't have good statistics on how many intersexed babies are born every year in the U.S., but Fausto-Sterling tells us that the Stanford Medical Center alone has on average 20 such births per year. These are cases where the doctors cannot determine whether the baby is male or female. This "confusion" isn't new, many societies have recognized these differences and simply created different categories, but in Western society we surgically force these babies into one of two categories.

A person's sex category is initially achieved through application of the sex criteria, at the hospital, by a doctor, or other such institutionally accredited spokespersons. However, "in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). As West and Zimmerman point out, in daily life we rarely see the biological, physical characteristics that are used to place someone in a sex category, yet we always do place people in such a category. Thus, sex and sex categories are different. Sex is a biological assignment based on socially agreed upon criteria and the sex category is the kind of sex we attribute to someone based on socially required cues. An important point here is that when we place someone in a sex category, we make certain assumptions about their sex. These assumptions aren't always true, as in the case with preoperative transsexuals; but, these assumptions are generally moralistic, as demonstrated by certain hate crimes targeted at transvestites; and these assumptions are political, as when feminist organizations or counterculture groups make distinctions based on what someone's sex "really is."

West and Zimmerman don't define gender in its usual manner. We usually think of gender as a set of traits (as in femininity and masculinity), a role (as in scripts for behavior), or a social variable (as in salary differences). The doing of gender is different than all of these, and it is different than Goffman's idea of gender displays. West and Zimmerman argue that Goffman sees gender as an optional dramatization that is played out for an audience that is well-versed in a culture's idealization of feminine and masculine natures. In thinking about gender in this way, Goffman misses the fact that gender is an ongoing achievement that is central to the organization of every interaction. For West and Zimmerman (1987), gender isn't a trait or variable, gender is an accomplishment, an interactional activity that we universally use to organize social encounters: "Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (p. 126).

Thinking of gender in this manner shifts our attention away from the inner person and to the interaction, where we can see gender as an achievement. In presenting ourselves as a gendered person, we are making ourselves accountable—we are purposefully acting in such a way as to be able to be recognized as gendered. If we think about it in bookkeeping terms, we want others to be able to put a check mark or "paid in full" stamp in our gender account—we want gender reckoned to our social record. It also means that our doing of gender gives an account of gender: it names, characterizes, and formulates what gender is—how gender exists as gender. We are also held accountable to gender, in that we must explain or excuse any behavior that does not fit our sex category and subsequent gender.

Thinking of gender as an achievement, gives us eyes to see such things as how gender is organized, what meanings the organization conveys, and how gender organizes the social setting. For example, we use physical settings in such a way as to convey essential differences between men and women. West and Zimmerman call our attention to public restrooms in North America. There are men's rooms and there are women's rooms. They are physically separated and contain different kinds of toilet equipment, even though at home both men and women use the same equipment. This way of doing gender isn't required. In fact, there are many, many countries where the restrooms are unisex. The way in which we in the U.S. do this physical setting of gender conveys the idea that there are dimorphic, biologically based, differences between men and women. Another example that West and Zimmerman give is assortive mating practices among heterosexuals. Size, weight, and age are normally distributed among both males and females, and there is quite a bit of overlap between them. Yet, in matching pairs of men and women for mating, the way we do gender means that it is generally true that men are older, bigger, and stronger than the women they marry.

Another place where we do gender is in conversations. West and Zimmerman (1983) studied interruptions in conversations. Every conversation is built around a set of turn-taking rules. Conversation couldn't happen if everyone talked at once. Thus, part of the requirement for organizing a conversation is a set of rules that indicate who talks and when. These are rules that we all know and follow, yet are not explicit. They form part of what Goffman would call the "interaction order:" demands placed upon us by the requirements of interacting. There are three ruled possibilities in conversational turn-taking: 1) the person talking has the interactional priority of selecting the next speaker; 2) if she or he does not, then the next speaker self-selects; 3) or, the original person may continue talking.

Let's use the analogy of a meeting to understand these rules. We think of people talking at meetings as "having the floor." Talk is theirs to control; they have the stage and the attention of the participants. When the individual is finished with their point, they may intentionally pass the floor to another ("What do you think, Linda?"), they may indicate that they are finished and the floor is open (by pausing or allowing their voice to drop in a concluding manner), or they may take up another topic and continue talking. Conversational turn-taking works in the same way.

West and Zimmerman report on two studies of gendered conversations. In the first study they looked at both same-sex and cross-sex conversations among acquaintances in public and private spaces. They found that there were very few interruptions within same-sex conversations; but in cross-sex talk, men with women, the pattern of interruptions "was grossly asymmetrical," with men initiating 96% of the interruptions. The second study involved college students who were unacquainted and randomly paired. They analyzed only the initial twelve minutes of conversation, feeling that the students would be on their best behavior during the process of getting acquainted. Of the interruptions in those conversations, 75% of them were initiated by men.

One explanation of these differences is that women talk so much that men must interrupt to get a word in edgewise. In order to test this hypothesis, West and Zimmerman analyzed their data to see if there was an association between the amount of talk and interruptions. If men interrupt because women talk so much, then it would be expected that the interruptions would occur later in the conversations, after enough talk has gone by for the man to feel the need to interrupt. Their analysis found just the opposite: men interrupt earlier in the conversation rather than later. In fact, when women interrupted, it took them over twice as long to initiate the interruption than it did the

man. Thus, if the data show anything, they show that it is women that must interrupt to get a word in edgewise.

So, why do men interrupt? Normal conversations are true accomplishments, especially in their turn-taking organization. Conversational lulls are inappropriate (waiting too long between talking), and so are overlaps (speaking over one another). The timing of turn-taking is thus critical and people are quite skilled at it. Interruptions, then, are violations of turn-taking rules and the intuitive knowledge of the interactants. "Interruption as a violation of turn-taking procedures is thus not a non-event, but a 'happening' in the context of an ordered system for managing turn-transition" (West & Zimmerman, 1983, p. 111).

Thus, it is likely that interruptions are linked to other issues besides the organization of conversation—something else is going on. Having the floor in a conversation is a position of power. The one talking sets the topic of conversation, has the predominant voice in setting the definition of the situation (and the roles that accompany it), and can, while he or she holds the floor, direct the conversation (who will say what and when). The something else that is going on with interruptions, then, is power. Interruptions are bids to take back the floor and control the conversation. "It is, in other words, a way of 'doing' power in face-to-face interaction, and to the extent that power is implicated in what it means to be a man vis-à-vis a woman, it is a way of 'doing' gender as well" (p.111).

Summary

West and Zimmerman studied conversational turn-taking in order to document a small part of how gender is ethnomethodologically achieved. Conversations have implicit turn-taking rules that must be followed if they are to truly exist as conversations; by definition not everybody can talk at the same time during a conversation. Interruptions are violations of these turn-taking rules and threaten the organization of conversation. West and Zimmerman found that in same-sex conversations there were very few interruptions. However, in cross-sex conversations, men disproportionately initiated interruptions. In one study among acquaintances, men instigated 96% of the interruptions; and in another study among people who were not acquainted men initiated 75% of the interruptions. Conversations are controlled by the person speaking. Thus, these interruptions are bids of power; and in that they vary by gender, they are one of the ways in which gender is achieved in interaction.

References

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