

ON BEING UPPITY: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN KNOWING ONE'S PLACE

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UPPITY DEFINED

Deference involves those behaviours which are intended as expressions of high regard for some who is acknowledged to be of higher prestige than oneself (Goffman, 1956; Shils, 1970). The most convenient medium for analysis of the dynamics of deferential interaction is a stable dyad of persons who are acknowledged to be unequal in terms of prestige, such as an adult with a child, or a man with a woman. In unequal dyads, if both parties agree on the direction and the magnitude of status discrepancies, the interaction is civil and tends to maintain the *status quo*. If however, the parties disagree on the legitimacy of prestige disparities, or on their importance, predictable confrontations occur which tend to alter the prestige balance. Failure to comply with deference norms can result in four devalued social roles. Individuals in the superordinate role can demand excessive deference and be considered *arrogant*, or accept insufficient deference and be considered *meek*. Persons in the subordinate role can give excessive deference and be considered *servile* or decline to express the amount of deference expected of them and be considered *uppity*.

We are concerned with the phenomenon of uppitness, and with male-female differences in its expression. To simplify discussion, and to focus attention upon sex differences, only two kinds of unequal dyads will be considered: a dominant man with a male subordinate and a dominant man with a female subordinate.

POWER AND PROWESS: SOME BIOLOGICAL INEVITABILITIES

In being deferential, lower status persons must minimize whatever threat they might potentially be to higher status one. From the point of view of dominant men, ensconced in superordinate positions, uppity underlings may present a variety of threats to the legitimacy of their position, and to their physical and psychological ability to retain their power advantage. The most salient gestures of respect from low status persons to their superiors are those which directly neutralize, or at least minimize, incipient threats to superordinate status. Although deference gestures may all

be drawn from the same lexicon of actions, they differ in saliency from one situation to the next. Goffman (1967a:73) repeatedly contends that: "Ritually speaking, females are equivalent to subordinate males, and both are equivalent to children." While this is often the case, the meaning of deference behaviors also varies with circumstances. The nature of uppity behaviors is somewhat different in man-to-man encounters than it is in woman-to-man encounters.

Whatever other bases there may be for the existence, and perhaps for the persistence, of gender roles, it is impossible to disregard completely the basic facts of sexual dimorphism. Males are taller, heavier, and more muscular than are females, and so potentially constitute a greater physical threat. From the point of view of the superordinate male, who seeks to assert his high rank and to minimize threats to it, it is important to neutralize the threat of physical force from other adult males, who may approximate or indeed exceed him in strength, and who in any case are capable of doing him considerable damage. It is our contention that, as a consequence of this possibility, the demonstration of dominance of men over other men tends to be primarily focused on gestures and symbols relating to physical confrontations. However, in scenarios involving interaction of men with women, the issue of subduing physical threats from subordinates is largely irrelevant, in that women's physical prowess is usually assumed to be minimal in any case. Relatively powerless people, however, are often highly motivated to exploit to full advantage whatever bases of influence do remain open to them. In attempting to equalize the inequitable arrangement between the sexes, women have at least two alternative strategies available to them: either to discredit male claims to superior status, or to switch the basis for hierarchical ordering to one more favourable to themselves. In the first instance, a prime weapon in the woman's arsenal is her verbal skills, which may in fact be superior to the male's. In the second instance, a significant advantage may accrue if the basis for prestige is deflected from physical prowess to physical attractiveness. We contend that when

woman are considered uppity, their deviance tends to involve their taking "unfair" advantage of one of the alternative sources of power which are open to them: verbal discrediting or sexual enticement. Insubordinate women are threatening because of their potential ascendancy in verbal or sexual encounters, as opposed to physical ones: the behaviors demonstrating dominance and deference therefore tend to involve psychological rather than physical rituals or subordination.

MAN-TO-MAN AGONISTICS

Among adults, women have only about two-thirds of adult male strength (Veevers and Adams, 1981). This biological advantage is exacerbated by differential socialization stressing maximum development of male strength and coordination. Consequently, in male-female interaction, the women's ability to inflict substantial physical harm on men is minimal. Noteable exceptions to this generalization do occur and, using weapons and/or stealth, some women do commit assaults and murders. Most violent crimes, however, are committed by men (Simon, 1975), and it is men, especially able-bodied young men, who potentially pose the most serious and most ubiquitous physical threats. The dominance rituals of man-to-man agonistics therefore tend to involve a pantomime of physical confrontations.

With the possible exception of delinquent gangs, a very few disputes among men result in fisticuffs, and fewer still are so resolved. Atavistically, however, the dominant man among men still tends to assume a posture which signals a readiness for physical combat. The head is held high, which maximizes the apparent height. The gaze is direct and intense, so that the opponent's movements are immediately apparent. The feet are slightly apart, which facilitates balance, and the body weight is disproportionately on the toes, so that the body is ready to pivot in any direction. The arms are held slightly away from the body, partly to give the impression that they are pushed akimbo by overdeveloped lateral muscles, but also to facilitate quick sparring movements in any direction. If the hands are not empty so that they can quickly be formed into fists, the objects carried are either weapons (such as policeman's nightstick) or potential

weapons such as a cane. Because the spine is erect and the arms and legs are held open and away from the body, the person in the dominant stance looks as large as possible, and occupies the maximum amount of space. The muscles are slightly flexed, both to prepare them for action and to exhibit their tone and strength. Importantly, the prepared person is literally posed for action, a stance involving apparent relaxation of one's body without loss of awareness of it.

In contrast to the superordinate power stance, the man who has been cowed, and who is showing submission, does so by minimizing his physical presence. The subordinate stance is one which is handicapped by either too much or too little physical tension, and the body is held so as to appear as small as possible, and to occupy a minimum of space.

Attention! Excessive muscle tension was perhaps initially associated with submission as a symptom of timidity, as in being rigid with fear. Whatever its origin, excessive tension is debilitating, and is an inefficient preparation for exertion, leaving the muscles cramped, cold, and relatively inflexible. An extreme example of such agonistics is the requirement that military personnel stand "at attention" in the presence of superiors. Being "at attention" is the antithesis of combat readiness. The body is slightly off-balance, with a flat-footed stance exaggerated by the need to keep the feet together. The arms are held rigidly at one's side. The "eyes front" command focuses attention on the middle-distance and interferes with normal perception of potential threats. The body is as compact as possible and by implication, seems smaller and hence less threatening than otherwise.

Shuffles. Reduced body tension is also associated with powerlessness. The epitome of deference is the stereotype of the shuffling Uncle Tom, who exhibits extreme physical submissiveness by standing flat-footed, and then by trying to walk that way. The resulting shuffle is clumsy, with a shambling gait that typically involves the arms swinging loosely from the shoulders, as opposed to being flexed for action. The back is somewhat bent forward, and the head is bowed downward, with the eyes averted, so that the shuffling man is not fully aware of threats coming towards him. For

efficient physical combat, the unencumbered use of the hands is essential. The shuffling man is even more off-stride if he is also required to signal his unreadiness by lugging bundles or bulky objects which would have to be disposed of before he could assume a fighting stance. Even when he is aware of threatening features in his environment, he is not physically prepared to deal with them efficiently. Idiomatic descriptions of dominance and submission reflect directly the metaphor of force. The person who is "on his toes" is ready for anything, in contrast with the person who is "caught flat-footed" which signals being caught unprepared (Brewer, 1977:419).

VOCAL ASSERTIVENESS: POWER OF THE PEJORATIVE

In our culture, in interacting with women, males in general have the upper hand, and tend to display more of the nonverbal behaviours associated with dominance (Frieze & Ramsey, 1976). When insubordinate women wish to challenge dominant men, they can draw considerable power from their potential ability to discredit verbally the legitimacy of the male claim to superordinate status. Within this framework feminists might offer generalized challenges to the doctrine of male supremacy. A more effective strategy in individual cases, however, is to acknowledge that while males in general may be deserving of higher prestige than females in general, invidious comparisons of this particular male with others of his gender suggest that he is an exception. When an uppity woman takes advantage of her verbal facility, she is likely to meet with at least two criticisms: first, that she talks too much, and second, that she talks too loudly.

Verbosity. Insubordinate men are sometimes chastised for speaking "out of turn": insubordinate women are often chastized for presuming to speak at all. The good woman, like the good child, is seen and not heard. A perennial male complaint about female companions is that they talk too much, a stereotype attribution which is the focal point of endless jokes. In fact there is evidence that, in cross-sex dyads, women talk less than do men (Frieze & Ramsey, 1976:137). In terms of the differential prestige of men and women, however, the point is not that women talk less than do men, but that the disparity is not considered

sufficiently large. Verbosity is an important component of many forms of female insubordination, ranging from nagging to bitchiness (Bernard, 1968: 206-213). The person who has a "sharp tongue," who "scolds," or who administers a "tongue-lashing" is likely to be a woman, as is the "gossip" (Rysman, 1977). Conversely, the deferential woman is one who "holds her tongue," keeping silent (Brewer, 1977:1091). Verbal onslaughts are considered primarily a woman's strategy, resorted to in lieu of other more effective means of assertion. The man with too great verbal facility, therefore, meets with criticism for being "glib" in much the same way that a man who talks too much may be denigrated as an "old woman" (Rysman, 1977).

Shrieks and Screams. Shakespeare tells us, in an oft-quoted description, that a voice "ever soft, gentle, and low" is indeed "an excellent thing in women." Since part of an assertive presentation of self, and of the communication of superior attitudes, is to speak loudly (Argyle *et al.*, 1970), a second requirement of women's speech is that what words are spoken are said softly. When women speak loudly, they are generally designated as shrill, and many references are made to the displeasing quality of their voices. While there are certainly sex differences in timber and in volume, the most displeasing thing about a loud voice is its inappropriate loudness *per se*.

SEDUCTIVE ASSERTIVENESS: THE POWER OF IMMODESTY

A second main weapon women may use in combatting powerlessness is the considerable disparity between male and female enthusiasm and urgency in the pursuit of sexual experience. By and large, men are more lecherous in general, and are more easily stirred by suggestive cues, especially visual ones. Whether the etiology of this difference in lasciviousness is biological or cultural or both, there is a superabundance of evidence that sex drives are indeed perceived to be discrepant, leading to what amounts to a double standard of desirability. If both sexes were equally enthralled by sexual opportunities, sexuality *per se* would be of diminished value as a medium of exchange. In reality, however, male emphasis on the desirability of women as sex objects often greatly exceeds the reciprocal

female emphasis on the desirability of men as sex objects. The inequity of interest fosters and maintains a significant power edge for women in general, and for young attractive women in particular.

The prostitute who overtly bargains an exchange of sexual favors for other advantages is not uppity in the usual sense, in that whatever material benefits she may attain are offset by her pervasive loss of prestige. The women who do take maximum advantage of the power of immodesty are those who entice sexual response and desire while holding out the unrealistic hope that eventually sexual fulfillment might be possible if enough concessions were forthcoming, and if sufficient rewards could be arranged. The basis for relative prestige in the male-female dyad is switched from physical or social power, where the male excels, to physical or sexual attractiveness, where the female excels. The woman who knows and accepts her place behaves in an unsexy and unprovocative way, so as not to take advantage of asymmetrical sexual inclinations: the uppity woman does not necessarily do so. The social role of "tease" provokes maximum male social aggression and outrage, as it is in this circumstance where the reversal of power is most often complete.

Heterosexual males who allow their bodies to be seen or who sit in revealing poses are not necessarily considered immodest in that the sight of their bodies *per se* is not expected to constitute a sexual enticement. Women who exhibit themselves, however, are defined as flaunting their potential power, and hence as being uppity. A "nice girl," in addition to her other constraints, is one who is modest, in the sense of keeping her distracting physical assets modestly clothed (Fox, 1977). An extreme example of seductive assertiveness, complete with implicit promise, is the strip-tease dancer; however, modified forms of brazenness can be found wherever unattainable women try to manipulate men by displaying themselves on a look-don't-touch basis. Definitions of what is considered immodest in preliterate and traditional societies may be more stringent than in our own, but in almost all cultures a woman's flaunting of non-reciprocal sexuality is considered an uppity gesture, and perhaps even an aggressive one. In this vein, Flynn interprets immodesty as a direct function of women's power

advantage through sexual enticement, and provides cross-cultural evidence of the extent to which female immodesty is therefore considered to be insulting (Flynn, 1977:18-20).

REBELLIOUS PROCLIVITIES: SOLEMITY AND SULLENNESS

The verbal and nonverbal vocabularies used in the rhetoric of dominance and submission enable both parties in unequal dyads to monitor each other's behaviors. In order to forestall actual rebellion before it occurs, it behooves persons in superordinate positions to be aware of restlessness and discontent among underlings. Conversely, in order to rebel effectively, subordinates need to know the kinds of behaviors which threaten their masters, the kinds of cues which make them nervous, and the kinds of submissive gestures which appease them. Some kinds of nonverbal messages are very subtle, with the result that it is difficult for the sender to effectively alter their behaviour for the purposes of deception (Ekman & Friesen, 1969:99). The kinds of actions being discussed here, however, are relatively overt, and persons in subordinate positions can readily convey a message, true or false, which will be understood in both roles.

Among uppity males, increasing propensity towards rebellion is signaled by an increased preference for a combat-ready stance. Among women, where rebellion is likely to be more covert in nature, the prodromal signs of uppitness may be less apparent. In the absence of physical gestures, psychological clues become paramount. The interpretation of such actions is complicated by the fact that, since subordinate man and subordinate women potentially constitute different kinds of threats, the interpretation of the meaning of deferential actions may be quite different for men than for women. The most important of these actions is the presence or absence of smiling.

One apparent sex difference in nonverbal behavior is that women tend to smile more often than do men (Rosenfeld, 1966; Bugental, Love, & Gianetto, 1971; Mackey, 1976). In the western world, smiling is generally felt to reflect pleasure, and to indicate at least non-hostility, and most liking, friendliness, and a desire for intimacy (Mackey, 1976:1976). Smiling, especially long smiles with intense gazing, is an important part of ingratiation and

of approval seeking (Rosenfeld, 1966; Lefebvre, 1975). The effectiveness of such actions is shown by the finding that women who smile often are in fact seen as more interpersonally attractive than women who do not (McGinley, McGinley, & Nichols, 1978).

Although smiling is generally felt to indicate joy or happiness, clinical evidence documents the counter-intuitive contention that it is not necessarily associated with happy emotions (Marcos, 1974:35). Apart from its other meanings, a smile may be interpreted as a submissive gesture of appeasement. A superior attitude involves an unsmiling countenance, whereas an inferior one involves a nervous, deferential smile (Argyle *et al.*, 1970). Goffman (1976b:117) notes that smiles are offered from inferiors to superiors as part of the ritualization of subordination. It seems likely that women's propensity to smile is symptomatic of her less aggressive social role, and of her relatively inferior social status (Mackey, 1976:129). Firestone (1970:90) simply asserts that: "the smile is the child/woman equivalent of the shuffle." The suggestion that female smiling can often be equated with submissiveness is supported by the finding that female smiling is more likely than male to be disassociated from the emotional tone of accompanying verbal messages (Bugental, Love, and Gianetto, 1971). Another study found that the meaning of smiling was different for men and women, in that: "in women, smiling tended to correlate with feelings of social anxiety, discomfort, deference, and abasement, while for men smiling correlated with measures of affiliation and sociability" (Beekman, cited by Weitz, 1976:177).

Men are generally less submissive than are women, one indicator of which is their low frequency of smiling. As a result, an unsmiling man is not unusual, and the connotations associated with this behaviour are those of being serious and solemn. Unsmiling women, however, like unsmiling children and unsmiling Blacks, signal trouble. When someone is "sullen," he or she is "showing ill humour by gloomy silence or reserve" (Stein and Urdang, 1971:1423). Such glum behavior is a means of expressing social disapproval by social withdrawal. It is noteworthy that although we refer to sullen women, sullen children, and sullen scullery maids, we seldom refer to sullen men. Presumably, if dominant males are displeased,

they have access to more direct and more effective expressions of discontent. It is to be expected that women and children might sulk if they do not get their own way, but we do not expect grown men to do so. If they do indulge in such behaviour, they are likely to be considered bitchy, and perhaps childish.

The interpretation of smiling is further complicated by its sexual overtones. Smiling can indicate receptivity and warmth, especially when combined with eye contact. When a man smiles, he signals nonaggression, submission, and perhaps sexual availability. The woman who smiles too much may be readily designated a "flirt," which is a special sub-category combining traits of both the "bitch" and the "tease." In women-to-man interaction, smiling intended to indicate psychological submission may also indicate potential sexual submission.

The western folk-hero, *The Virginian*, often cautioned his out-spoken companions: "When you call me that, *smile!*" In so doing, he recognized a valid point. A comment made with a smile does not really count. It is discredited by the speaker who sends out incongruent messages: I am criticizing you but I don't really mean it. When something is said with a smile, a reasonable person is not supposed to take serious offence. Unfortunately, if an insult or a criticism is not supposed to be taken seriously, neither are other messages which might be conveyed. An authoritative message, presented with a smile, need not be taken seriously in terms of either its content *per se*, or of its potential emotional threat. Women trying to speak with authority may also speak, as they have been trained, with a smile, thereby discrediting themselves. Compared with male speakers, women may be less credible in part because they smile too much, and too consistently. The male speaker tends to interperse his smiles, like his jokes, in between serious comments; the female speaker tends to smile all the time, and like a speaker who jokes all the time, tends to make a joke of her message.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Although the basic sociological conceptualization of unequal dyads involving a superordinate and a subordinate role implies many traits common to a variety of role pairs, in some instances the rhetoric of dominance-submission may vary from one kind of dyad to the next.

The purpose here is to suggest patterned differences in the insubordination of uppity women compared with uppity men. This hypothesis provokes a number of leading questions relevant to the re-examination of existing data or the collection of new materials. To what extent are uppity blacks or uppity children like uppity women? When the patterns of sex role dominance are reversed, do males who are more subordinate to women act the same way as when they are subordinate to men? When women act uppity, are they considered more deviant when they express rebellion in masculine, physical ways than when they use feminine, psychological ways like verbal and sexual threats? How are these patterns different in traditional societies with more rigid sex role divisions? Importantly, how can they be expected to change as our own society moves toward androgyny? A knowledge of the verbal and nonverbal micropolitics of power manipulation increases consciousness concerning it, and facilitates the ability to resist it (Henley, 1977). Awareness of the dynamics of being uppity may be relevant to attempts to sustain successful rebellions, and to achieve increasing approximations of gender role quality.

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