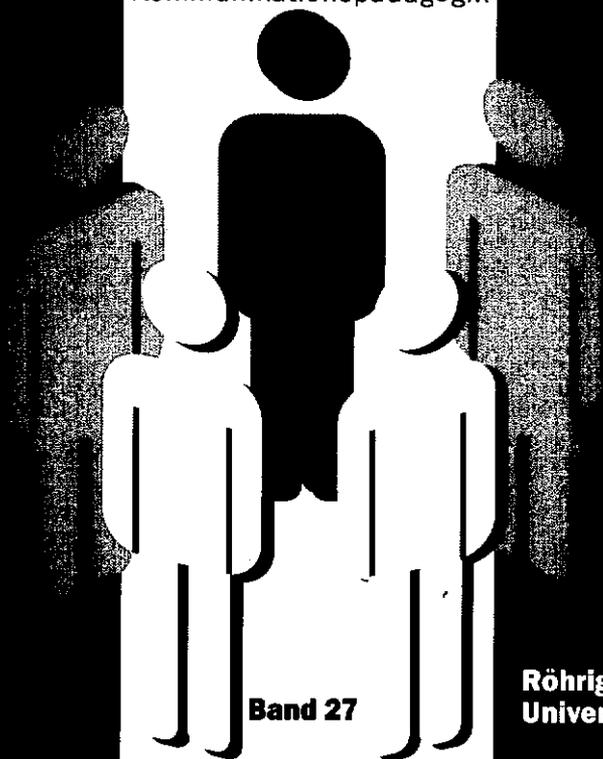


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Gender and Courtesy: Traditional Communication under Inquiry

Despite the historic ups and downs throughout the centuries, one thing has remained relatively constant: women have been responsible for the domestic sphere. Women were tied to the home even more since the development of the industrial society and the rising bourgeoisie of the 18th century; they become guarantors of customs and morals (cf. Saurer 1990, 45). To fit this role, they had to cultivate inner qualities: humility, modesty, chastity (cf. Geissner 2001). They had to be constantly available for the care of their family, for whom they joyously fulfilled their “gratuitous work of love” (Mesmer 1988, 27). They had to stay in the background; public performance was reserved for others – for men. Thus, women could not become competitors on the public floor.

At the same time, manners toward women were being refined under the rubric of courtesy, as they were passed down from an era when nobility dominated. A courteous man will act obligingly, at least towards a woman with a social status comparable to or higher than his own - as long as she acts as is befitting to her gender, i.e., conforms to her role. Towards the end of the 18th century, reservations against learned women were being formulated as follows:

I am always overcome with the shakes at a social affair, whenever I have to sit next to a woman who makes great demands regarding aesthetics or erudition If the woman would only consider how much more interest those among them arouse, who simply fulfill the purpose of nature. To what avail do they want to compete with men in subjects that they cannot handle (Knigge 1787, 94).

And a bit further on in the text: “She creates enemies for herself and her husband, everything goes wrong in her home; meals are served either cold or burned; debts accumulate; the poor man has to walk around with holes in his socks” (94-95).

Towards the end of the 19th century, it became at least possible for women to graduate with a college entry diploma and to study at an institute of higher learning, despite much resistance and intervention.

Entry to offices and positions, however, remained closed for them and therefore, they still were no competition for men. This has changed only within the last third of the 20th century. Many women have studied or have received other excellent education. Medical female doctors have their clinical practices, female attorneys their law offices, business women head companies. But if they apply for leading positions in business, administration or at universities, they will hit the glass ceiling. There are differences among the European countries, but women have few opportunities in most of them. The reasons can be sought on many levels; I would like to pursue just one thread: courtesy. Can internalized – and for the most part subconsciously observed – patterns of courtesy become a handicap when women try to occupy leading positions that require responsibility and the ability to make decisions in a non-domestic arena? Conversely, are there male patterns of courtesy that exclude women from gaining entry to these types of positions?

Courtesy has many dimensions. There are, for example, the greeting order, the seating order, the dress code, and many more that all add up to courtesy in different settings. The settings vary according to the social group and to the afforded degree of privacy or openness. In interpersonal contacts, courtesy is expressed above all in the use of verbal and paralinguistic behavior.

The *what* and *how* of comments are determined by *who* is speaking to *whom*, at *what time* and in *which type of setting*, about *what* subject, and *why*, that is what aims are pursued when doing so. Someone is commenting about *something* (within the subject); but at the same time, this person always reveals something about *him/herself*: how the utterance is meant to be taken, in what mood the person is at this moment, how he/she evaluates him/herself in relationship to others, who he/she wants to be. Similar elements become audible either verbally or paralinguistically, and they become visible in the nonverbal expression. The effect, the interpretation of what has been heard and seen, determine verbal and nonverbal actions or reactions of the audience (cf. Geissner 2000).

Speakers and listeners are always influenced by the external setting in which they meet. Settings determine how participants are express-

ing themselves, and how they listen and understand. More important than private settings are public settings, such as meetings and speeches, and semi-public settings such as schools, church services, seminars, and conferences. In all events, power and power levels play a role (cf. Geissner 2000, 87). In semi-public surroundings, this can be institutionally bestowed power, as would be the case with instructors or supervisors. In addition, power levels are created between the participants. There, it depends upon whose opinions and suggestions get more attention, who wins influence, or whose contributions are not pursued (these are often those of women). Intuitively, men and women in any given setting will behave according to their personal experiences and thus, according to their evaluation of this situation. They not only choose what they are saying, but also how they are saying it depending on what they want to achieve (or even hide). Depending on the situation, they will express themselves more carefully verbally, paralinguistically, and nonverbally – i.e., they choose different forms to remain either distant or to become approachable. Therefore, how courtesy is expressed really depends on the situation. It focuses on the social and affective functions of conduct in certain settings.

For example, a newcomer on the university campus will ask a woman whom he takes to be a student: “Can you tell me where the administration office is located?” But if he takes the woman whom he is addressing for a professor, he might say: “Excuse me please, can you tell me how I can get to the administrative office?” In the first case, he expresses courtesy mostly verbally and by keeping conventional physical distance from the student. In this manner, he shows that he respects her personal space. In the second case, the newcomer additionally expresses great verbal courtesy, he apologizes for addressing a stranger, and only then will he indirectly ask for information. He chooses a different courtesy register that expresses more distance. Then again, he shows by his behavior that he accredits himself with less power. Here, courtesy describes a behavior that is not generally valid but rather varies according to the situation. It can be personal and inviting, or it can be formal and distant.

Three factors seem to be involved in deciding if one should trouble oneself with courtesy:

1. One tends to show more courtesy towards persons of a higher standing or social status: towards the supervisor, the pastor, the doctor, the president.

2. One also tends to be more courteous towards people who are unfamiliar and towards whom one feels distant: towards strangers. In the first situation mentioned, courtesy is mostly one-sided. Subordinates are more polite towards superiors. In the second case, courtesy is rather symmetrical.

3. Another factor deals with the social weight of the imposed burden and thus, with the degree of threatening one's image. The higher the potential is for losing face by the act of speaking, the more courteous this act will be executed (Brown, 1991, 105).

Brown and Levinson assume that courtesy has to do with saving face or with self image, meaning that one signals that the image appeals of the other person are being considered. In this case, 'positive' courtesy means that the threat to the 'positive' image of the counterpart is defused. Positive courtesy includes, for instance, showing interest, paying compliments, emphasizing group affiliations (the ways of addressing someone, the choice of topics, dialect) emphasizing unison, avoiding disagreements, joking, and laughter.

"Negative" courtesy, for the most part, is based on preventive behavior. It is marked by self-withdrawal, formality, and self-control. Any possible image threats are excuses. These include verbal (please excuse me...), paralinguistic (the use of a rather soft, high-pitched voice by women), and nonverbal expressions of respect (assuming a better posture, smiling more than one's counterpart), the use of modal particles that help take the edge off a comment (perhaps, maybe), the use of questions instead of requests (could you . . .) [could you .. may be both, a polite request or the beginning of a question]. Although this type of courtesy could be meant as an aggression, it still leaves the counterpart room for escape. Depending on the situation, this type of behavior leads to the conclusion that the person tries to remain courteous on one hand and thus shows respect for the image of the counterpart, but on the other hand, also wants to save face himself. Direct speech – in the extreme case issuing an order ("Have this done by 11

o'clock" versus "Could you please have this done by 11 o'clock?") – requires less trouble and is clearer, but it does not show much consideration for the image preservation of the other person. According to Brown, degrees of courtesy can show differences in power levels within relationships (1991, 107) and therefore, they can be applied to the examination of male and female courtesy patterns.

Courtesy Patterns of Men and Women

Generally, a basic courtesy pattern applies to conversations: conversation is comprised by alternating the roles of the speaker and the listener. Both require paying attention. How the respective role is being perceived and executed depends upon the individual's personal experiences. Girls have learned and internalized that boys receive more attention, and that they claim for themselves more time to speak, which they are granted by their instructors. Girls are expected to be friendly, disciplined, and helpful in easing tensions. All of this requires polite demureness from girls and does not permit them to proclaim space for themselves – including space for speaking (cf. Duru Bellat 1990, Moreau 1994, Zaidman 1996). Boys and girls develop different behavior patterns and thus, also different courtesy patterns.

Generally, it can be stated that men tend to distinguish themselves when it comes to public speaking and the winning or the defense of their status. Men's performance motivation will grow in competitive situations, whereas this is seldom the case with women (Kotthoff 1988, 94). This is evident also in the fact that men claim the forum for themselves in competitive situations, and that they rather fiercely defend their own positions without being ready to consider the positions of their counterparts. Kotthoff shows in her study that men can win the respect of their own gender with this behavior (110-111). "Some men . . . claim that using a combative, challenging, and argumentative style . . . is necessary for their intellectual progress. Challenge and criticism lead a proponent of a theory to further elaborations and developments" (Holmes 217). These conducts are connected with rather negative courtesy patterns. They also serve to nurture one's self-image.

As shown in other studies, this particular style of courtesy determines the conversation style: Men tend to pose closing questions containing longer introductions that request additional information or that question what they just heard. Thus, they do not open up the conversation towards a common, continuous thought process, but concentrate it on themselves and on only one other person. In conferences and seminars, this type of pattern is not unusual.

Men interrupt more often than women. A courtesy rule learned early on in European cultures states: "Do not interrupt!" But regardless, interruptions do occur. The person with more power is "permitted" to interrupt someone else; persons to whom a lower status is attributed are usually interrupted. In gender-mixed social settings, these are generally women, even if they do occupy a higher institutional status. It follows that men have internalized courtesy patterns that are focused on winning status and competition, and in the end, on the execution of power.

The rules for male interaction in public originated during an era when women were excluded from positions and offices. As mentioned, their domain was the home and the nurturing and tending of the family. This includes the nurturing of relationships, intimacy, and emphasis. Accordingly, women to this day prefer private conversation when it comes to building and nurturing relationships, smoothing out disagreement with carefully formulated statements, showing attentiveness towards others, giving positive feedback, avoiding direct confrontations. "For women, positive courtesy involves talking to one's friend" (Holmes 1995, 39). Women have a tendency to regulate their conduct in accordance with their awareness of the needs of others. This includes – as already demonstrated in Fishman's studies of 1978 – that they feel responsible for contributing to the conversation by finding topics, being responsive to the topics of others, putting their own topics on the back burner, allowing others to interrupt them, and then being responsive to the topic of the interrupting person. Fishman states: "The women worked harder than men, but were less successful in their attempts." To work harder and being less successful in their attempts to introduce topics of their interest, does this hold true also for public and semi-public situations?

Speaking in public situations, whether they be meetings or conferences, is still a hurdle for women: on one hand, the male customs are domineering and are reinforced by men to this day; on the other hand, women state again and again that these situations are frustrating and in part even intimidating. For this reason, they act restrained, either remaining silent, or if they do say something, in the best case scenario their contribution is ignored, or torn to shreds, or conceived as unimportant. Kotthoff shows that women who apply their learned conversational conduct in disputes in a gender-mixed, hierarchic environment are evaluated by the higher ranking person as neither likeable nor as competent. Their behavior is evaluated rather negatively; they are lacking the element of self-assertiveness (1988, 110-111). But in this situation, the women have merely shown understanding for the position of the hierarch, they have tried to find possible alternatives for conflict situations; and they have accepted his interruptions, all the while smiling politely. The women have applied positive courtesy patterns by showing understanding and have respected the deliberations of the hierarch; they also used negative courtesy patterns by arguing, but they left their arguments open for discussion. Both patterns were connected with relativizations such as “Wouldn’t it be possible that . . .” or, “You probably already thought about how . . .” Female courtesy in gender mixed professional situations seems to be ambivalent, and at any rate, it can be interpreted as lacking assertiveness.

Practical Experiences of Doctoral Candidates and Female Assistants

So far, we have examined the general characteristics of courtesy patterns among males and females. Here, we will examine whether these characteristics hold true in contemporary situations. Gender Mainstreaming programs aim to help men and women learn to understand themselves and others in areas where they find themselves at a disadvantage due to their upbringing. Basically, it should be maintained that the purpose of Gender Mainstreaming is not to help women simply because they are women, but to help the part of society that does not have adequate opportunities in its development (Bachmann

2005, 46). Both genders did not and do not have adequate opportunities during their personal development – not women regarding performance in public and semi-public situations, and not men regarding respect for the female thought process, sharing household tasks, and childcare. It would also be necessary to guide men, for instance, in areas where they evade household duties and childcare, or where they consider their communication style in public situations as the only style possible for both genders. However, most programs are related to women; they aim to give women better starting opportunities in academic and non-academic careers.

Within the framework of this program, I hold seminars in the field of conversational rhetoric; they mainly concern themselves with providing transparency to conversational structures women cannot recognize, but also with guidance for dealing with controversial situations. The participants are assistants and doctoral candidates at various universities in French Switzerland. They belong to the academic staff, and most of them are in charge of lecturing, tutorials, and lab courses.

At the start, participants collect situations that are easy or difficult for them in their professional daily encounters. Situations that they name as especially causing problems are: institutional meetings, speeches, and participation in scientific conferences.

As teachers, they apparently have no problems. At most, they might mention that discussions are often debilitating; that female students show little active participation; and that homework materials are not read.

Whenever courtesy has to do with power, the participants are in control of teaching situations. Therefore, according to the pattern, the powerless - the students - must be more courteous (cf. also Sefa 2004). But instructors find for themselves that they not only want to involve everyone in a discussion; they also want to support the female students. A relatively typical statement is that female students “have nothing to contribute.” They assert that female students speak less than male students. But what is assessed as “they have nothing to contribute” - does this not conform to typically female courtesy patterns? When female students comment, they are rather supportive, avoid confrontations; they cooperate, for instance, by documenting with ex-

amples what they have just heard, or by asking for clarification. These are altogether positive courtesy patterns that - though often unintentionally - help the teacher save face. What is not clear is whether female students consciously avoid confrontation, or if they unconsciously apply internalized courtesy patterns.

Male students rather tend to question more or less politely what they have heard. They might ask for instance: "There was something that I didn't understand. Professor XY told us this or that in his seminar. Doesn't this differ from your statements?" In this case, the teacher has to determine if she wants to circumvent Prof. XY, or if she should try emphasizing common ground. She can interpret the question as a question about her expertise, or she can take it as an attack on her image.

The courtesy patterns of male students are far more often negative or a mix of positive and negative. To this, the female teacher apparently reacts with: "They have something to contribute." Thus, they respond more to male than to female courtesy patterns. What remains is this open question: Don't female teachers transfer their own experiences from situations that rendered them powerless to their students? Finally, to what extent do they contribute to reinforcing courteous behavior in female students and thus help to transfer it to the next generation?

As Speaker in Conferences

Assistants and doctoral candidates give their first speeches at conferences. This is an opportunity to introduce research results, to become well-known, and to prepare one's career. The last mentioned sub goal of speeches, in particular, contributes to the fact that women prepare themselves very thoroughly, all the while doubting whether their statements are relevant and will pass with their audience. If it "will pass" smacks of exam situations. Do women still see themselves in exam situations? Their own doubtfulness is often transferred manifold to their speaking situation, when they speak with a soft voice or dry throat. Here, women find themselves in a situation of public speaking, a situation with few parallels to their socialization. Knigge argued,

“To what avail do they want to compete with men in subjects that they cannot handle.” Though not wanting to appoint Knigge as a referee for 21st century settings, it still appears that the standards of the 18th and 19th century have not been completely overcome yet. “Woman must be silent in the community” is already postulated in the bible. To give a speech also always means not only to present *something*, but to present oneself as well, to proclaim space, to be a presence in the assembly. “It is little doubt, that talk in public context is potentially status enhancing, it is ‘display talk,’ an opportunity to display what you know. Effective contributions clearly have the potential to considerably increase a person’s status or prestige” (Holmes 1995, 67). To claim prestige in public situations does not fit the patterns learned during the course of female education. Therefore, it should not be surprising if the patterns for self-depiction in speeches are neither learned nor accepted.

Speeches are followed by requests, comments, and arguments. To deal with these, the female speakers have to be ready to respond politely towards positive and negative courtesy patterns. They often feel overwhelmed by lengthy comments that do not make a clear point or that culminate in an inquiry questioning their research. They have trouble distinguishing between self-depiction of the questioner and criticism or genuine inquiries. This should not be surprising – who can listen when questioners backtrack a long way in their comments? Particularly then, when a contribution starts out with a positive courtesy “I found it very interesting, what you have told XY . . .” and then continues with a negative courtesy “but perhaps you could explain to me why you didn’t . . .” Maybe men have developed mechanisms for this situation enabling them to scan a comment from the audience for clues to what they will answer and how they can counter the question. Perhaps they even don’t perceive the negative politeness, but only concentrate on the possibility to escape.

Women often perceive their colleagues’ comments as attacks – even when they were meant to be positive; they have little experience defining the courtesy patterns men would apply to these situations. Therefore, women find themselves in a conflict during public discussions. The situation is defined by ‘masculine’ reactions, which can

also be attacks voiced by using negative courtesy patterns. These are unfamiliar to women. “Unfamiliar” is probably debatable. Many women have observed their colleagues in public situations, and sometimes they make fun of them; or they are unnerved by a conduct they define as cocky, as saying little with so many words. They do not wish to be or to become like this. This means that they do not detect that these behaviors follow male courtesy patterns. Making fun at the same time means distancing oneself – without being able to counter with patterns that seem more appropriate. On the part of male colleagues, female behavior in these situations is mostly ignored, meaning that they are not ready to take serious these courtesy patterns– and in particular, the underlying thought processes of women. This exactly would be an aim for Gender Mainstreaming where men have deficits.

Meetings in University Contexts

Assistants participate in institutional meetings concerning questions of organization, discussions of exam results, task distributions, and taking the minutes. The last task is quickly distributed: it goes to a male or female assistant. During the course of the meeting, much of what has been said so far will be repeated. After the chairperson – usually, a male professor – introduces a point of the agenda, men will be the ones who mostly rise to speak, often within the hierarchic order: first the academic incumbents, then the assistants. Their contributions might be tangential to the topic or even be on target, but according to the order of the day, their point is often not clear. Some remain silent; others attempt to fall in line with someone else’s contribution. “In public and competitive situations, women have to fall in line in order to even be able to get a word in” (Troemel-Ploetz 1988, 289). To fall in line means for them to pick up a point in the previous speaker’s contribution. This is the strategy they pursue – without becoming aware of it themselves – in order to be able to speak. Some women are under the impression that they can speak, but that their deliberations make no difference in the further development of the conversation. The chairman, at least, does use a courtesy pattern: “Thank you, Isabelle, now it is Max’s turn.” Falling in line can also mean to

emphasize agreement with the deliberations of the chairman and to further develop his thoughts. Therein, they often limit their contributions (perhaps, a little), use conjunctives (could, would be), end with a questioning inflection (Slembek 2001). These are strategies to avoid getting too personal, to stay away from direct confrontations, and at the same time to appear cooperative – these are signs of female courtesy, but they generally do not contribute to receiving the same amount of listening attention as their male colleagues. Moreover, women seldom have contributions that will not be disturbed by attempted or actual interruptions; “This limits their opportunities to introduce and pursue their own topics” (Troemel-Ploetz 1988, 292).

At this point, I am returning to the comments that were the order of the day during the seminars I gave to doctoral students and assistants. Whenever they are in control of the situation as the instructors, they reckon that female students “contribute nothing,” and they no longer try to involve them. Obviously, male colleagues are using the same pattern in meetings: women “have nothing to contribute.” Therefore, their comments do not play a role. For this reason, they can be passed over, meaning that “success is constructed for men and not for women” (Troemel-Ploetz, 292). The conduct of men and women and the success of their actions follow different courtesy patterns. Male courtesy patterns cause men to negotiate with each other “the goals and means of future actions” in public and semi-public settings. Female courtesy patterns, which are oriented towards cooperation and agreement, cause women to be relegated to non-public settings. This neither justifies male courtesy patterns, nor does it exculpate the men. What does remain – hopefully only for the time being – is the *Holy Order of Men* (Schwarz 2007).

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