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**Mothers' role in the everyday reconstruction
of "Father knows best"¹**

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INTRODUCTION

No institution is more important to the instantiation, creation, and socialization of gender identity than the family. During a child's first two years of life, more learning takes place in general than in any subsequent comparable period of time, including the learning of fundamental cultural notions of female and male identities (Cole & Cole 1989; Freud [1921] 1949; Kohlberg 1966). Children develop understandings of what it means to be female or male in part from observing the actions of adults and in part from others' expectations concerning how female and male children themselves are to act (Dunn 1984; Goodwin 1990; Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Schieffelin 1990).

For several years, we have been observing and analyzing language socialization in American families, focusing especially on dinnertime communication patterns. Our attention has been captured by the pervasiveness and importance of collaborative narrative activity (i.e., co-narration) as a locus of socialization (Ochs, Smith, & Taylor 1989; Ochs & Taylor 1992a, 1992b; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith 1992). We see narrative activity as a linguistic medium for constituting the family as well as different identities within a family. In the present study, we examine how family narrative practices instantiate the gender-relevant family identities of mother and father, husband and wife. We argue that narrative practices of all family members, especially those of women as mothers and wives, play an important role in instantiating what we might call a "Father-knows-best" dynamic in the family. Within this dynamic, the father is typically set up—through his own and others' recurrent narrative practices—as primary audience, judge, and critic of family members' actions, thoughts, feelings, and conditions either as a narrative protagonist (acting in the past) or as a co-narrator (acting in the present). We tend to associate the "Father-knows-best" ideology with a pre-feminist, presumably passé 1950s conceptualization of idyllic domestic order that was popularized and concretized by the television program of the same name. Our appropriation of this title is intended to suggest that the ideology persists in the everyday narrative practices of post-feminist American families in the 1990s.

DATABASE

This study analyzes the dinnertime narratives of seven two-parent families who reside in Southern California. All seven families are English-speaking, European American, and earned over \$40,000 a year during the 1987-89 period in which the study was conducted. Each family had a five-year-old child who had at least one older sibling. Two fieldworkers video- and audiotaped each family twice; fieldworkers left the camera on a tripod and absented themselves during dinner activity. The data base comprises a total of 100 narratives (reports and stories) told during 13 dinners where both parents were present.

NARRATIVE INSTANTIATION OF GENDER ROLES IN THE FAMILY

To understand the family narrative practices that (re)create the "Father-knows-best" dynamic, we need to look at how specific narrative roles are differentially assumed by specific family members. Because the dinner interactions that we are examining involve at least four family participants, each participant potentially instantiates more than one family role, i.e., women as mothers and wives, men as fathers and husbands, girls as daughters and sisters, boys as sons and brothers. For simplicity in presenting our findings in the tables below, we will refer throughout to women as *mothers*, men as *fathers*, and boys and girls as *children*, recognizing that at any one moment each may be constructing more than one family identity.

We have identified the following narrative roles as relevant to the construction of gender identities within families: protagonist, introducer (elicitor or initial teller), primary recipient, problematizer, and problematizee. Below we define each of these roles and show the extent to which each narrative role is assumed by particular family members.

Protagonist

A *protagonist* is here defined as a leading or principal character in a narrative. Protagonist is an important role with respect to the "Father-knows-best" dynamic in that it presents an individual as a topic for comment by family members. While being a protagonist puts one's narrative actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings on the table as a focus of attention, this attention is not always an advantage given that protagonists' actions, etc. are not only open to praise but also exposed to familial scrutiny and possible sanction. Our concern is with those narratives such as (1) where the protagonist is a co-present family member, in this case five-year-old Jodie:²

(1) "Jodie's TB Shots Report" (excerpt)

m = mother (Patricia)

f = father (Dan)
o = Oren (7;5)
j = Jodie (5;0)

m: ((to Jodie)) =oh:: you know what? You wanna tell Daddy what happened to you today?=
f: ((looking up and off)) =Tell me everything that happened from the moment you went in - until:
[
j: I got a sho:t=
f: =EH ((gasp)) what? ((frowning))
j: I got a sho:t
[
f: nQ
(0.4) ((Dan begins shaking head no))
f: couldn't be
j: (yeah) ((with upward nod toward Dan))
[
o: (a) TV test? - TV test? Mommy?
m: ((nods yes)) - mhm
j: and a sho:t
f: ((to Jodie)) (what did you go to the uh::) ((to Patricia)) Did you go to the ?animal hospital?
m: .hh - no:?
f: (where/what)
j: I just went to the doctor and I got a shot
f: ((shaking head no)) I don't believe it
j: rilly::

This example is illustrative of our finding, displayed in Table 1, that children were the preferred protagonists of dinnertime narratives in our corpus:

TABLE 1. *Family-member protagonists: Who were the preferred family-member protagonists in the 100 narratives?*

5-year-old child	33	Mother	28
Older sibling	31	Father	24
Younger sibling	8		
Children	72	>	Parents 52

Here we see that of 124 family-member protagonists in the 100 narratives told, 72 (or 58%) of them are co-present children. An important question to ask in light of the vulnerability of protagonists to familial scrutiny is the extent to which each family member assumes this role through their own initiative as opposed to having this role imposed on them through the elicitations and initiations of other family members. To address this issue, we consider next how narratives about family members were introduced.

Introducer

The narrative role of *introducer* is here defined as the co-narrator who makes the first move to open a narrative, either by elicitation or by direct initiation. We define these two introducer roles as follows: the *elicitor* is a co-narrator who asks that a narrative be told. In (1) above, Jodie's mother assumes this role and in so doing introduces the narrative. The *initial teller* is a co-narrator who expresses the first declarative proposition about a narrative event. In (1), Jodie assumes this role but because her mother has elicited her involvement Jodie is not the narrative introducer. In unelicited narratives such as (2), the initial teller (here, the mother) is the narrative introducer:

- (2) "Broken Chair Story"
- m = mother (Molly)
- f = father (Patrick)
- j = Josh (7;10)
- r = Ronnie (4;11)

During dinner preparation, as Molly brings Ronnie a spoon to open a can of Nestlé's Quik, she scoots Ronnie's chair in to the table.

m: (Oh) this chair? broke - today
 [((microwave? buzzer goes off))
 f: I? know
 ((Molly heads back toward kitchen, stops by Josh's chair; Josh begins looking at Ronnie's chair and under table))
 m: No: I mean it rea:2ily broke today
 [I? know
 f: I know?
 m: Oh you knew that it was split?
 f: yeah?,
 m: The whole wood('s) split?
 f: yeah,
 m: Oh did you do it?
 (0.4)
 f: I don't know if I did? it but I saw that it wa:2s=
 [(oh)
 m: ((Josh goes under table to inspect chairs))
 r?: ()
 =
 m: yeah I sat down? in it and the whole thing split so I - ((bending over as if to indicate where on chair)) I tie:d
 [That's (a) rea:l sign? that you need to go on a
di:2et
 r?: ((going under table too)) (where)
 m: hh ((grinning as she rises from stooped position next to Josh's chair on side facing Patrick))
 r?: (where where where)=

j: =Mine? broke?
 m: I fixed it - (I tied)
 [(mine?)=
 r?:
 j?: =(I'm not gonna sit on that chair)

The role of introducer is one that we see to be pivotal in controlling narrative activity. The introducer nominates narrative topics, thus proposing who is to be the focus of attention (i.e., protagonist), what aspects of their lives are to be narrated, and when narration is to begin. Thus, in (1) Jodie's mother directs the family's attention to Jodie at a particular moment in the dinner, suggesting that there is a narrative to be told and circumscribing the boundaries of that narrative. In addition, the introducer controls who is to initiate the narrative, either self-selecting, as in (2), or nominating a co-narrator, as in (1). Finally, introducers also exert control in that they explicitly or implicitly select certain co-narrator(s) to be primary recipients of the narrative (see the section on this role below). In both examples above, mother as introducer selects father as primary recipient. Table 2 displays our findings regarding family preference patterns for who introduces narratives at dinnertime:

TABLE 2. Narrative introducers: Which family members introduced these 100 narratives (either by elicitation or by direct initiation)?

Mother	39	Older sibling	18
Father	32	5-year-old child	9
		Younger sibling	2
Parents	71	>	Children 29

While the majority of the protagonists were children, we see here that 71% of all narratives were introduced by parents. To understand the degree to which specific family-member protagonists were "vulnerable" to introduction by others, we turn to the protagonist-introducer interaction patterns found in Table 3:

TABLE 3. Who introduces whom?: To what extent did family members introduce the narratives about themselves as opposed to having them introduced by others?

Protagonist (# of narratives)	Who introduces (elicits or initiates)		
	Self	Other	(Which other)
Children (72)	33.3%	< 66.7%	M = 34.7% F = 19.4% Sib = 12.5%
Mother (28)	53.6%	> 46.4%	F = 35.7% Ch = 10.7%
Father (24)	54.2%	> 45.8%	M = 33.3% Ch = 12.5%

Here we see that on the one hand all family members are vulnerable to having narratives about themselves introduced by others; moreover, there is relative parity between parents in this respect: mothers/wives are no more and no less vulnerable to this type of narrative control than are fathers/husbands. On the other hand, there is a striking asymmetry displayed in this table, not between mothers and fathers but between parents and children. Only one-third of all narratives about children were introduced by the child-protagonists themselves; rather, mothers were the chief introducers (34.7%) of narratives about children. We suggest that for mothers the role of introducer is appropriated as a locus of narrative control over children. Mothers are largely responsible for determining which children and which aspects of children's lives are subject to dinnertime narrative examination—and when and how such narration takes place.

Primary recipient

The narrative role of *primary recipient* is here defined as the co-narrator(s) to whom a narrative is predominantly oriented. This role is a powerful one in that it entitles the family member who assumes it to evaluate the narrative actions, thoughts, feelings, and conditions of family members as protagonists and/or as narrators. Anyone who recurrently occupies this position is instantiated as "family judge." As noted earlier, the introducer is critical to the assignment of primary recipient. In some cases, as in (1) and (2), the introducer designates another family member to be primary recipient; in other cases, as in (3), an introducer may select her- or himself:

(3) "Lucy's Swim Team Report" (excerpt)

f = father

l = Lucy (9;7)

f: (Your) mother said you were thinking of uh: - getting on the swim team?

l: ((nods yes once emphatically))

(1.0)

f: ((nods yes)) - (good) ...

Our findings as to who was preferred for the role of primary recipient are displayed in Table 4:

TABLE 4. *Primary recipients: Which family members were most often selected (by self or other co-narrator) to be the primary recipients of these 100 narratives?*

Father	55	5-year-old child	10
Mother	40	Older sibling	9
		Younger sibling	2
Parents	95	> Children	21

Not surprising but nevertheless striking is the privileging of parents as primary recipients of dinnertime narratives. Out of a total of 116 designated primary recipients for the 100 narratives in our corpus, parents assumed that role 82% of the time (95 instances). Seen together with the findings of Tables 1 through 3, the overall pattern suggests a fundamental asymmetry in family narrative activity whereby children's lives are told to parents but by and large parents do not address their lives to their children. Within this privileging of parents, fathers are favored over mothers. While fathers often position themselves as primary recipients through their own elicitation of narratives, in some families mothers regularly nominate fathers as primary recipients through their narrative introductions such as in (1): *You wanna tell Daddy what happened to you today?*

This preference for fathers as primary recipients is partly accounted for by the fact that the father is often the person at the dinner table who knows least about children's daily lives. Typically, even those women who work outside the home arrive home earlier than their husbands and have more opportunity prior to dinnertime to hear about the events in their children's days. However, there are several reasons to see that lack of knowledge is an inadequate account for fathers' prominence as primary recipients. First, in two of the thirteen dinners in our corpus, where mothers knew less about their children's experiences that day than did fathers, we did not observe fathers nominating mothers as primary recipients of narratives about children (i.e., we did not find fathers saying, "Tell Mommy about ..."). This absence suggests that it is not simply lack of knowledge that determines primary-recipient selection. Second, child initiators oriented more narratives to mothers than to fathers in spite of the mothers' generally greater prior knowledge of children's lives. This finding is seen in Table 5, which shows the preferred recipients of the narratives initiated by each family member:

TABLE 5. *Who addresses whom?: Who was the primary recipient of the narratives initiated by each family member?*

Initiator		Primary recipient	
Mother (39)	Father (33) >	Children (10) >	Self (2)
Children (36)	Mother (22) ≥	Father (19) >	Sibling (3)
Father (25)	Mother (16) >	Children (6) >	Self (3)

This table indicates that it is not children, then, who account for the relatively strong showing of fathers as primary recipients, despite mothers' classic "Tell Daddy ..." elicitation. Rather, it is mothers (as initiators, in addition to their role in eliciting children to initiate toward fathers) who are largely responsible for putting fathers in this position. Mothers initiated twice as many narratives oriented toward fathers (33) as fathers initiated toward mothers (16).

We have noted above that narrative introducers exert control by designating primary recipients, but here we emphasize that at the same time, such a designation passes control (the power to evaluate, reframe, etc.) to the co-narrator who assumes

the role of primary recipient. This role is potentially critical to the narrative reconstruction of "Father knows best," given the opportunity it affords co-narrators to take on a panopticon-like role (Bentham 1791 in Foucault 1979). *Panopticon* refers to an 'all-seeing eye' or monitoring gaze that keeps subjects under the constant purview of the panopticon (e.g., a prison guard in a watchtower). We suggest that a narrative similarly exposes a protagonist to the surveillance of other co-narrators, especially to the scrutiny of the designated primary recipient (see Ochs & Taylor 1992b).

Tables 1 through 5 present an overall picture of the way in which narrative activity serves to put mothers, fathers, and children into a politics of asymmetry. In the family context, issues of gender and power cannot be looked at as simply dyadic, e.g., men versus women as haves versus have-nots. Rather, women and men manifest asymmetries of power not only dyadically as spouses but also triadically as mothers and fathers with children. While there are interesting observations here regarding women versus men (e.g., women tend to raise narrative topics, men tend to be positioned—often by women—to evaluate them), these apparently gender-based distinctions are part of a triadic interaction wherein children are often the subjects of narrative moves. Control exerted by both women and men is not limited to control over one another, but particularly encompasses and impacts children.

Problematizer/problematizee

The narrative role of *problematizer* is here defined as the co-narrator who renders an action, condition, thought, or feeling of a protagonist or co-narrator problematic or possibly problematic. The role of *problematizee* is defined as the co-narrator whose action, condition, thought, or feeling is rendered problematic or possibly problematic.

An action, condition, thought, or feeling may be problematized on several grounds. For example, it may be treated as *untrue*, *incredible*, or *doubtful*, as when in (1) the father problematizes Jodie's narrative with mock disbelief (*no, couldn't be, and I don't believe it*). In other cases, the action, etc. is problematized because it has or had *negative ramifications* (e.g., it is deemed *thoughtless* or *perilous*), as when in (2) Molly implicitly problematizes her husband as thoughtless for not warning her about the broken chair (*Oh you knew that it was split?*). We also see in (2) how an action, etc. may be problematized on other grounds, namely as a *sign of incompetence*. When Patrick indicts his wife's weight as the cause of the chair's breaking, he is implicitly problematizing her for lack of self-control (*That's (a) real sign? that you need to go on a diet.*). In (4), Patrick again problematizes his wife, this time as a too-lenient boss and thus as incompetent in her workplace as well as in her personal life:

(4) "Molly's Job Story" (excerpt)

m = mother (Molly)
f = father (Patrick)

Near the end of a story about Molly's hiring a new assistant at work:

- f: ((*eating dessert*)) Well - I certainly think that - you're a- you know you're a fair boss - You've been working there how long?
m: Fifteen years in June ((*as she scrapes dishes at kitchen sink*))
f: Fifteen years - and you got a guy ((*turns to look directly at Molly as he continues*)) that's been workin there a few weeks? and you do (it what) the way he wants.
m: hh ((*laughs*))
(0.6) ((*Patrick smiles slightly?, then turns back to eating his dessert*))
m: It's not a matter of my doin it the way he: wants - it does help that I'm getting more work done It's just that I'm workin too hard? I don't wanta work so hard
f: ((*rolls chair around to face Molly halfway*)) Well - you're the boss It's up to you to set the standards

A further grounds for problematizing is on the basis that an action, thought, feeling, or condition is *out-of-bounds*, e.g., *unfair*, *rude*, *excessive*. In (5), Dan problematizes his wife for her wasteful consumption (*You had a dress right?, (Doesn't that sound like a - helluva/total) - waste?*) and for her lack of consideration toward his mother (*Why did you let my mom get you something (that you) ... , Oh she just got it for you?*):

(5) "Patricia's Dress Story" (Round 2 of two-round story)

m = mother (Patricia)
f = father (Dan)

Round 2 ((*begins after Patricia hangs up phone and sits at table*))

- f: So as you were saying?
m: (What was I/As I was) saying ((*turning abruptly to face Dan*)) What was I telling you
f: I ?don't? know
m: oh about the ?dress?
f: (the) dress
(1.2) ((*Patricia is drinking water; Dan looks at her, then back at his plate, then at her again*))
f: You had a dress right?
m: ((*slightly nodding yes once*)) Your mother (bought me it/wanted me to) - (My mother didn't like it)
(0.4) ((*facing Dan, Patricia tilts head slightly, as if to say, "What could I do?"*))
f: ((*shaking head no once*)) You're kidding
m: no
f: You gonna return it?
m: No you can't return it - it wasn't too expensive - it was from Lochmann's
(0.8)
m: so what I'll probably do? - is wear it to the dinner the night before - when we go to the (Marriott)?
(1.8) ((*Dan turns head away from Patricia with a grimace, as if he is debating whether he is being conned, then turns back and looks off*))
f: (Doesn't that sound) like a - (helluva/total) - waste?
m: no?
f: no

m: ((with hands out, shaking head no)) It wasn't even that expensive (1.2)
 m: ((shaking head no, facing Dan)) even if it were a complete waste (0.4) ((Dan looks down at plate, bobs head to right and to left as if weighing logic, not convinced))
 m: but it's not. ((looking away from Dan)) (0.6) ((Patricia looks outside, then back to Dan))
 m: (but the one) my mom got me is great -
 [((Dan picks food off son's plate next to him))
 m: It's (attractive-looking/a practical dress)
 f: ((gesturing with palm up, quizzical)) (Well why did) you have - Why did you let my mom get you something (that you-)
 m: Your mother bought it - I hh-
 f: Oh she just got it for you?
 m: ((nodding yes)) (yeah)
 f: You weren't there?
 m: I was there (and your mother said "No no It's great Let me buy it for you") - I didn't ask her to buy it for me?
 (5.0) ((kids outside talking; Dan is eating more food off son's plate))
 f: So they're fighting over who gets you things?
 m: ((nods yes slightly)) - ((smiling to Dan)) tch - (cuz I'm/sounds) so wonderful (9.0) ((Patricia turns to look outside; she blows her nose))

In the 100 narratives in our corpus, exactly 50 of them involved someone problematizing a family member at the dinner table. Table 6 displays which family members tended most often to take on the very powerful role of problematizer and whom they tended to target:

TABLE 6. *Problematizer versus problematizee: Which family members tended to be problematizers and which tended to be problematizees?*

Problematizer	Problematizee
Father 116 >	67
Mother 80 =	84
Children 33 <	78
229	229
F > M > Ch	M > Ch > F

Here we see that our above illustrations of problematizing (Examples 1, 2, 4, and 5)—wherein fathers were the problematizers—are representative of a significant overall finding that fathers assumed this role 50% as often as mothers and 3.5 times as often as children. Fathers are thus narratively defined much more often as problematizers than as problematizees, while mothers are as often problematizees as problematizers, and children are narratively defined predominantly as problematizees. In fathers' preeminence in this role we see a narrative instantiation of "Father knows best." Table 6 evidences one manifestation

of this ideology, namely "Father problematizes most."

Table 7 displays which family members were targeted by problematizers:

TABLE 7. *Who problematizes whom?: Who was the preferred target of each family member in their role as problematizer?*

Problematizer	Problematizee
Father (116)	Mother (67) = 57.8%
	Child (39) = 33.6%
	Self (10) = 8.6%
Mother (80)	Father (42) = 52.5%
	Child (28) = 35.0%
	Self (10) = 12.5%
Children (33)	Father (15) = 45.5%
	Sibling (9) = 27.3%
	Mother (7) = 21.2%
	Self (2) = 6.1%

This table shows that the bulk of narrative problematizing occurred between spouses. Of the 84 problematizings of mothers (seen in Table 6), Table 7 shows that 67 (or 80%) of them came from their husbands. In fact, we see here that the targeting of women by husbands represents the largest category of problematizings in our corpus of narratives. While women also problematized spouses, men did so 60% as often, and in addition to this overall quantitative difference were differences in the nature of women's versus men's problematizations. Table 8 reveals a distinction in spouses' use of two domains of problematizing: problematizing of someone's actions, thoughts, feelings, or conditions (in the past) as a protagonist, and problematizing of someone's comments (in the present) as a co-narrator. The latter category includes counter-problematizing in self-defense as a response to an "attack" from a prior problematizer (here, the spouse):

TABLE 8. *Cross-spouse problematizing: To what extent did wives and husbands problematize their spouse's behavior as protagonists versus problematizing their spouse's dinnertime comments on narrative events?*

Problematizer of spouse	Focus of spouse-problematizing	
	As protagonist	As co-narrator
Husband (67)	53.7% (36)	46.3% (31)
Wife (42)	33.3% (14)	66.7% (28)

Table 8 indicates that husbands criticized the actions, thoughts, feelings, and conditions of wives as protagonists far more often than wives problematized husbands (36 times versus 14 times). Figuring largely in husbands' problematizing of wives as protagonists is the targeting of the wife on grounds of incompetence, as

exemplified in (4), "Molly's Job Story." In our corpus, wives did not problematize husbands on the basis of incompetence as protagonists; in fact, wives relatively infrequently problematized their spouses as protagonists at all but rather problematized the latter's remarks in the course of dinnertime narrative activity. Much of wives' problematizing of their husbands was of the counter-problematizing type, either in self-defense or in defense of their children. In other words, fathers would target what mothers had done in reported events and then mothers, as co-narrators, would refute the fathers' comments. Men's problematizing was of the type "You shouldn't have done X," while women's problematizing was more a form of resistance, a way to say, "No, that's not the way it happened," "Your interpretation is wrong," "You don't see the context," etc. One implication of this pattern is that women, because they are mostly targeted for their past actions, etc. as protagonists, may get the impression that they cannot *do* anything right (and may wind up defending past actions, as seen in the "Molly's Job" and "Patricia's Dress" stories), whereas men, because they are targeted more for their comments, may get the impression that they can't *say* anything right.

Fathers' preeminence as problematizers is further seen in the fact that they problematized their spouses over a much wider range of narrative topics than did mothers. Mothers' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings were open to fathers' criticism in narratives about not just childcare, recreation, and meal preparation, but even their professional lives. Narratives about the men's work days, however, were exceedingly rare and virtually never problematized. This asymmetry, wherein fathers have or are given "problematizing rights" over a wider domain of their spouses' experiences than are mothers, further exemplifies how narrative activity at dinner may instantiate and socialize a "Father-knows-best" world view.

Given this strong evidence of fathers' presumption to quantitative and qualitative dominance as problematizers par excellence, an important issue to raise is the extent to which fathers' prominence as problematizers is related to—or can be accounted for by—fathers' role as primary recipients. We look in Table 9 to see to what extent being primary recipient might account for being problematizer as well:

TABLE 9. *Recipients as problematizers: To what extent was the role of problematizer a function of being primary recipient?*

Primary recipient	Problematizer			Total
	Father	Mother	Children	
Father (55)	86 (1.6)*	54	15	155 (2.8)*
Mother (40)	24	22 (.55)*	17	63 (1.6)*
Children (21)	6	4	1 (.05)*	11 (0.5)*
	116	80	33	229

* Asterisked figures in parentheses represent an average number of problematizings per narrative; e.g., fathers problematized 86 times across 55 narratives in which they were primary recipient, or 1.6 times per narrative.

Clearly there is a strong link between fathers' being chief problematizers and preferred primary recipients: 86 of their 116 problematizings occurred when they were primary recipients of the narrative. However, several other findings in Table 9 suggest that primary recipientship is an incomplete account of assumption of the role of problematizer. First, fathers are exploiting the primary recipient role to problematize to a far greater extent than any other family member. While fathers as primary recipients problematized a family member 1.6 times per narrative, mothers as primary recipients did so only 0.55 times per narrative, and children only 0.05 times per narrative. Thus, recipient status alone is not sufficient to account for the practice of problematizing. An important element is the response of each family member as primary recipient: fathers display, or perhaps are allowed to display, a predilection for panopticon-like problematizing which is not characteristic of other family members. This pattern suggests a conceptualization of recipientship which differentiates mothers, fathers, and children, perhaps involving differential entitlements to problematize, with fathers in privileged positions.

Table 9 also provides other bases for questioning the notion that being primary recipient might account for being a problematizer. For one thing, fathers problematized more often than mothers even when mothers were the primary recipients (24 versus 22 times). Furthermore, looking across the top line of Table 9, we see that the total amount of problematizing went up when the father was primary recipient. Of the 229 problematizings in the corpus, 155 occurred when the father was primary recipient, averaging 2.8 problematizings per narrative, considerably more than when either the mother or the children were primary recipients (1.6 per narrative and 0.5 per narrative, respectively). As already suggested in the discussion of Table 8, this heightened level of overall problematization occurred largely because the father's problematizing of the mother prompted a rise in her own problematizing of him, with the result that mothers problematized much more often when fathers were primary recipients (54 times) than when mothers themselves were primary recipients (only 22 times). These findings suggest that the explanation that the primary recipient becomes problematizer is too simplistic an account; rather, our findings suggest that something in the nature and practice of the family role of father (the ideology that "Father knows best") is turning up in the narrative role of problematizer, something which goes beyond, though it is augmented by, recipientship status.

Because an important issue we are pursuing here is mothers' role in establishing a "Father-knows-best" (e.g., "Father-problematizes-most") dynamic at the family dinner table and because we have seen that mothers' most notable narrative role is that of introducer, we examine the introducer-problematizer relationship in Table 10 to discover in particular the extent to which fathers' problematizings occurred in narratives introduced by mothers:

TABLE 10. *Introducer/problemater interaction: How was being a problemater related to who introduced the narrative?*

Introducer	# of narratives problematerized	Problemater			
		Father	Mother	Children	Total
Mother (39)	24	72 (1.8)*	55 (1.4)*	6	133 (3.4)*
Father (32)	14	38 (1.2)*	15 (0.5)*	12	65 (2.0)*
Children (29)	12	6	10	15 (0.5)*	31 (1.1)*
	50	116	80	33	229

* Asterisked figures in parentheses represent an average number of problematerizations per narrative.

Table 10 provides evidence that mothers' introductions may indeed trigger fathers' problematerizations. First, note that when mothers introduce narratives, problematerizing in general is more prevalent than when fathers or children are introducers. Out of 39 narratives introduced by mothers, 24 (or 62%) included at least one instance of problematerizing by a family member; in contrast, only 14 of the narratives (44%) introduced by fathers and 12 (41%) by children evidenced problematerizing of a family member. In addition, in narratives introduced by mothers, family members were problematerized 3.4 times per narrative, considerably more than for narratives introduced by fathers (2.0) or children (1.1). Second, Table 10 indicates that the majority of fathers' problematerizations (72 out of 116) occurred in narratives introduced by mothers. Fathers problematerized other family members 1.8 times per narrative in narratives introduced by mothers, i.e., even more times per narrative than when fathers were primary recipients (1.6, as seen in Table 9). Furthermore, fathers problematerized more often in narratives introduced by mothers than in narratives they introduced themselves (1.2 times per narrative). This high number of problematerizations in narratives introduced by one's spouse is not matched by mothers: mothers problematerized only 0.5 times per narrative in narratives introduced by fathers. Thus, we see an asymmetrical pattern wherein mothers' raising a topic seems to promote fathers' problematerizing but not the reverse. Finally, in Table 11, we consider the impact of mothers' introductions on family members as *targets* of problematerization, particularly the extent to which a mother is problematerized by family members in the course of a narrative she herself has introduced:

TABLE 11. *Introducer/problemater interaction: How was being a target of problematerizing related to who introduced the narrative?*

Introducer	Problematerizee			Total
	Mother	Children	Father	
Mother (39)	63 (1.6)*	32 (0.8)*	38 (1.0)*	133
Father (32)	15 (0.5)*	28 (0.9)*	22 (0.7)*	65
Children (29)	6 (0.2)*	18 (0.6)*	7 (0.2)*	31
	84	78	67	229

* Asterisked figures in parentheses represent average problematerizations per narrative.

Here is striking evidence that mothers may be setting themselves up for problematerization. Mothers were problematerized most often in the very narratives they introduced: of the 84 instances where the mother was targeted, 63 (or 75%) occurred in narrative activity she herself instigated. On average, mothers were targeted 1.6 times per narrative in the narratives they introduced. These figures contrast markedly with those for fathers: out of 67 targetings of fathers, only 22 (or 33%) occurred in narratives they themselves had introduced; in these narratives, they were targeted an average of only 0.7 times per narrative. These findings suggest that mothers are especially vulnerable to exposing themselves to criticism, particularly from fathers, and thus may be "shooting themselves in the foot" by bringing up narratives in the first place, as illustrated in (2), the "Broken Chair Story," where Molly's designation (i.e., control) of narrative topic and primary recipient boomerangs in an explicit attack on her weight. In (1), "Jodie's TB Shots Report," we also see how mothers' introductions can expose their children to problematerization from fathers.

CONCLUSION

Synthesizing these findings, we can construe a commonplace scenario of narrative activity at family dinners in which (a) mothers introduce narratives (about themselves and their children) that set up fathers as primary recipients (and implicitly sanction them as evaluators of others' actions, thoughts, conditions, and feelings); (b) fathers turn such opportunity spaces into forums for problematerizing, with mothers themselves as their chief targets, very often on grounds of incompetence; and (c) mothers respond in defense of themselves and their children via counter-problematerizing of fathers' evaluative comments. In (a), we see mothers' narrative locus of power; in (b), however, we see that such exercise of power is ephemeral and may even be self-destructive by giving fathers a platform for monitoring and judging wives and children. In (c), we see mothers' attempts to reclaim control over the narratives they originally put on the table. In conclusion, we suggest that "Father knows best"—a sociohistorically and politically rooted gender ideology that has been explicitly and implicitly contested in recent years—is alive and well and in considerable evidence at the family dinner table, jointly constituted and recreated each interactional moment through the narrative practices of both mothers and fathers. In this paper, we hope to have raised awareness of the degree to which women as wives and mothers contribute to a "Father-knows-best" ideology through their own recurrent narrative practices.

NOTES

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 2. All family-member names used in the transcript excerpts and throughout this paper are pseudonyms. Transcription conventions are those of conversation analysis (cf. Schenkein 1978) with some modifications, notably the use of double question marks as in example 1, *Did you go to the ?animal hospital?.*, to show rising plus stressed intonation on the word(s) bounded by the question marks.

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