Resisting Vulnerability: The Social Reconstruction of Gender in Interaction

JOCELYN A. HOLLANDER, *University of Oregon*

Most research on the social construction of gender has focused on how conventional representations of gender are reproduced. In this paper, I argue that coexisting with these conventional constructions of gender are alternative constructions that resist them. Focusing on the level of discourse, I examine resistance to one dimension of gender: women's assumed vulnerability to men's violence. Using evidence from 13 focus group conversations, I describe six types of resistance to the conventional construction of women's vulnerability. I then analyze the interactional processes through which these ideas are derailed or, sometimes, succeed in conversation. This analysis points the way toward a better understanding of both gender resistance and change. At the same time, it illustrates the difficulty of successfully challenging the gender regime.

Conventional gender ideology suggests that women are weak, vulnerable, and unable to protect themselves from violence, particularly men's violence. As a result, they are expected to be fearful, take self-protective measures such as refraining from walking alone at night, and rely on men to protect them from danger. Consider, however, these excerpts from focus group discussions about violence:

LORNA: I don't feel personally in any danger really at any time, and I don't know if it has to be, being athletic, or if it has to do with being tall, or what, but I go out at night, and walk around in my neighborhood, and I feel fine. I don't live that far from the Central District, but I really don't think about it so much . . . I don't feel threatened, really, kind of, ever.

STACY: I have to agree with what Karen said. I've never been physically attacked when I was under threat. But my underlying instinct or intuition is that they'd better be damn good, cause I've got enough anger and rage from what happened as kids and that kind of thing, I'm not going to tolerate it, I'm not going to roll over and just give in. I think I probably am intellectual enough that I would definitely weigh benefits and consequences. But if somebody came up from behind, I would fight and fight hard.

These quotes belie conventional gender expectations. In the first excerpt, Lorna claims that she is not fearful in her everyday life; rather, she moves freely around the public space of her neighborhood, even at night. In the second quote, Stacy makes an even more radical claim: if someone were to attack her, she would forcefully and physically defend herself, and the assailant would have to be "damn good" to overpower her. Both comments contradict traditional beliefs about gender and, in their place, offer an alternative vision of what women might be.

After more than twenty years of research and theorizing, most scholars agree that gender is socially constructed. Gender is a social institution, not a biological distinction, something that members of a social group collaboratively create, maintain, and enforce (Lorber 1994;

Lorber and Farrell 1991; West and Zimmerman 1987). Much of the time, these social processes reinforce the gendered status quo. Most gender scholarship, therefore, focuses on these mainstream or conventional patterns. According to Barrie Thorne, this bias toward the hegemonic results in a "functionalist tilt" to gender scholarship, "emphasizing the maintenance and reproduction of normative conceptions, but neglecting countervailing processes of resistance, challenge, conflict, and change" (Collins et al. 1995:498).

But gender is not always reproductive. Sometimes, these gender processes result in a representation or enactment of gender that does not simply mirror what has gone before. At times this subversion is intentional—for example, when a woman applies for entrance to an all-male military academy. At other times, it is incidental—for example, when a father becomes a single parent and must perform stereotypically feminine nurturing behaviors for his children to survive. In either case, these new gender enactments represent *gender resistance*: acts of opposition to conventional gender expectations or beliefs. As the comments above illustrate, alternative constructions of gender exist alongside more conventional ideas in everyday conversation.

While gender resistance has received increasing attention over the past decade (e.g., Brown 1994; Carr 1998; Cocks 1989; Leblanc 1999), it remains under-explored and under-theorized. In this paper, I use data from focus group discussions to examine two questions about gender resistance in conversation. First, under what circumstances do such alternatives arise? In other words, when does gender resistance happen, and who initiates it? And second, what happens to these alternative ideas? What forces sustain or undermine this resistance? As interaction proceeds, how do others respond to these ideas, and do they influence the group's conception of gender? In other words, does gender resistance facilitate gender change, and if so, under what conditions?

Analyzing how gender resistance unfolds is vital if we are to fully understand the social construction of gender. Underlying social constructionism is the assumption that gender (like other social constructions) is not static or predetermined. Rather, it is a human creation, performed with some degree of agency in interaction with others. As a result, gender is malleable: it is neither predetermined nor fixed, and could therefore be otherwise. Of course, gender performances always occur within constraints, which may be more or less visible or forceful. But as Foucault argued, power and resistance always coexist (1981:95). To understand gender, we must examine both power and resistance: "not only how dominant groups and institutions attempt to impose particular . . . meanings, but also how subordinate groups contest dominant conceptions and construct alternative meanings" (Glenn 1999:14). Studying moments of gender resistance can help us understand how gender can change, which in turn can aid us in reconstructing gender more equitably.[1]

Of course, resistance is not always successful. One individual, performing or envisioning gender differently, is unlikely to spark gender change on a broader scale. Moreover, any challenge to the gender regime may be contested or suppressed, a point that is underdeveloped in most social constructionist treatments of gender. Many analyses proceed as though construction were unfettered by convention or authority (see Hollander and Howard 2000). Yet to ignore these constraints is to ignore social structures, institutions, and systems of hierarchy (Collins et al. 1995). Actors are not equal in their ability to construct reality or to have those constructions taken seriously. As Erving Goffman argued in *Gender Advertisements*,

> The question is that of whose opinion is voiced most frequently and most forcibly, who makes the minor on-going decisions apparently required for the coordination of any joint activity, and whose passing concerns are given the most weight. And however trivial, some of these little gains and losses may appear to be, by summing them all up across all the social situations in which they occur, one can see that their total effect is enormous. The expression of subordination and domination through this swarm of situational means is more than a mere tracing or symbol or ritualistic

1. Though the relationship between resistance and social change is under-theorized, most writers presume that such a relationship does exist. See Hollander and Einwohner (2002) for a more extensive discussion of this issue.

affirmation of the social hierarchy. These expressions considerably constitute the hierarchy; they are the shadow *and* the substance (Goffman 1976:6).

Those with more power are able to impose their definition of reality on those with less power. The success of any resistance effort, then, depends on power as well as agency.

In this paper, I examine resistance to one dimension of gender: vulnerability to violence. According to conventional gender ideology, women and men are polarized on this, as on many other dimensions of ability and behavior. News and entertainment media, safety advice to women, and everyday conversation portray women as weak, violable, and inherently vulnerable to violence from dangerous men (Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik 1999; Gordon and Riger 1989; Hollander 2001; Stanko 1996, 1997). Men, in contrast, are portrayed as physically competent—as capable of violating women or, paradoxically, protecting them from danger (Connell 1987; Stanko and Hobdell 1993). This construction of gender is racialized (Madriz 1997): white women are perceived to be more vulnerable than women of color, and men of color are considered more dangerous than white men. However, within every racial group, women are perceived to be more vulnerable than men (Hollander 2001).

Of course, concerns about women's vulnerability and men's violence are warranted given the prevalence of violence against women as substantiated by the large literature on women and victimization. Beginning in the 1970s, activists and scholars paid increasing attention to rape (e.g., Brownmiller 1975; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987), battering (Jones 1994), sexual harassment (Gardner 1995), and femicide (Radford and Russell 1992). These groundbreaking works demonstrated the pervasiveness of violence and its devastating effects on women. This literature also showed that violence affects not only those who are victimized, but also their families (Wolak and Finkelhor 1998), other women (through the fear of violence [Gordon and Riger 1989; Stanko 1992]), and society as a whole (through the loss of freedom and productivity of half its members [Sheffield 1987]). This work was enormously important in increasing attention to the gravity of violence against women and obtaining resources to aid survivors and promote violence prevention and redress.

This large literature on victimization tends to overshadow other research on women's resistance to violence. For example, women who forcefully resist attempts at sexual assault are more likely to escape the assault (Bart and O'Brien 1985; Ullman 1997), and to do so without sustaining increased injury (Ullman 1998; Ullman and Knight 1992). Indeed, women successfully resist at least 75% of all attempted rapes, although this reality is not reflected in news reports of violence (Gordon and Riger 1989; Riger and Gordon 1981) or in everyday conversation (Hollander 2001). Similarly, recent research finds that battered women are active and creative in seeking help from police, friends, relatives, and service agencies (Cook, Woolard, and Russell forthcoming; Gondolf 1988). It is clear from this research that women are not inevitably vulnerable to men's violence; indeed, they are often strong, resourceful, and resilient in defending themselves. Nonetheless, women continue to be portrayed as weak, helpless, and passive in both scholarly and popular writings (Jones 1994).

I suggest that one reason that women's resistance to violence is overlooked is that it does not fit with conventional notions of gendered vulnerability. The idea that women are unable to protect themselves from men's violence is pervasive; it is visible in behavior (as when women—but not men—restrict their activities to reduce their exposure to violence), in belief (as when women—but not men—are viewed as weak and subject to victimization) and in discourse (as when women and men are described in these ways).

I focus here on the realm of discourse.[2] A *discourse* is a collectively constructed, coherent

2. My focus on discourse is not intended to discount the role of behavior in constructing social life. Physical behavior plays a distinct and important role in constructing gender. Nonetheless, I believe that people "do things with words," as Austin (1962) argued. Talk is not only a means of communication, but also "a form of social action designed for its local interactional context" (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000:798). Discourse helps to construct and reconstruct conceptions of gender, in part by facilitating some gendered behaviors and constraining others.

way of understanding the world; it is "a 'main-line story' that conveys common values, constructs and reflects a specific world view, [and] consists of ideas and practices that constrain what we feel, think, and do" (Dienhart 1998:10; see also Potter 1996). Discourses are collective, social, and historically developed. Moreover, discourses are multiple: there are many possible ways of understanding any given social reality. *Dominant discourses* are those "that are granted the status of truth, the agreed-upon frameworks of language and meaning" (Maracek 1999:161). *Alternative or marginal discourses*, then, "are counter-hegemonic; they refuse or challenge received wisdom" (Maracek 1999:161).

Many disciplines have lately turned to discourse as an important focus of analysis. However, like Plummer (1995), I eschew the direction taken by many literary theorists, who examine texts in isolation from their social and political contexts and their real import for human lives. Instead, my goal here is "to push away from the dominant interest in stories simply as texts awaiting analysis and instead to see stories as *social actions embedded in social worlds*" (Plummer 1995:17; italics in original). Discourse is important because it shapes individual and collective understanding of our world, our possible futures, and ourselves. Just as the dominant discourse on gender reflects and recreates hegemonic masculinity and dominant femininity, alternative discourses on gender resist these conventional constructions: "Discourse creates reality, so that to create alternative discourses is to create alternative realities" (Gibson-Graham 1997).

In past research (Hollander 2001), I examined how the dominant discourse about female vulnerability and male dangerousness is collaboratively constructed in conversation. In this paper, I argue that coexisting with this dominant construction of femininity are others that contest it. Using data from 13 focus groups convened on the topic of violence, I demonstrate that although overall these conversations mirrored conventional ideas about gender, some speakers portrayed women as strong and capable of defending themselves from violence. These portrayals have the potential to be quite subversive, because they challenge beliefs about women's supposedly innate vulnerability, suggest that women may not require men's protection, and imply that men may not be as dangerous and invulnerable as often assumed. If these narratives of resistance were to become dominant, they could fundamentally change individual and collective beliefs about gender, as well as gendered behavior.

Below, I present empirical evidence of gender resistance in talk about vulnerability. I begin by describing this alternative discourse: What does it look like? In what types of conversations does it occur? Because resistance begins with individual efforts, this first section focuses on comments made by individual speakers. However, because gender is a collaborative process, understanding resistance also requires attention to social context and interaction. The second part of the paper thus examines the situations in which resistance occurs and the fate of these ideas in the ensuing discussions. Do these resistant ideas succeed—in other words, are they adopted or reinforced by others to become a viable vision of gender in the conversation? Or are they challenged or dismissed by other participants? Here, I analyze the interactional processes through which these successes or failures occur. This analysis points the way toward an understanding of gender resistance and its role in the social reconstruction of gender. At the same time, however, it illustrates the difficulty of successfully challenging the gender regime and helps to explain the persistence of the gendered status quo.

Methodology

This analysis is based on thirteen focus group discussions conducted between 1995 and 1997 in Seattle, Washington. These discussions provided an opportunity to observe how gender is constructed in conversation. The construction (and reconstruction) of gender is an inherently collaborative process. While individuals of course contribute to this process, it is the interplay and negotiation between their individual contributions, within the larger social

context, that constructs gender. Unstructured focus groups are an excellent site for this type of analysis because their similarity to everyday conversation highlights these interactional pressures and processes.[3] As the following discussion makes clear, it is the interaction between group members, and not simply their individual contributions, that is central to gender construction and resistance and therefore to this analysis.

Focus group participants were recruited from a wide variety of social locations, including workplaces, apartment complexes (including residences for elderly or low-income residents), athletic clubs, special interest organizations, churches, and university classes. Four groups were all female, four were all male, and five were mixed-sex. While each group was relatively homogeneous (in order to increase participant comfort), the sample as a whole was quite heterogeneous, and approximated the Seattle population on race, age, income, and sex. Groups varied in size from four to eight participants, and were facilitated by a leader of the same sex (and when possible, the same race and sexual identity) as the participants.

Participants volunteered to take part in a discussion of "issues in American life." All discussions began with the following question:

1. Do you feel that the issue of violence affects you personally, or affects your friends and relatives?

Some groups discussed this question for the full two hours, while in others conversation lagged after half an hour. Follow-up questions included:

2. When do other people give you warnings about dangerous situations or people? What kinds of warnings do you give others?
3. In what situations do you feel most vulnerable?
4. In what situations do you feel most safe?

Facilitators followed a strategy of "self-managed groups" (Morgan 1988) in order to center the discussion on the participants' own thoughts and ideas, rather than their responses to the facilitator's ideas. Each conversation was audio recorded with the participants' consent, and later transcribed verbatim.[4]

Analysis followed the accepted procedures of qualitative research (Miles and Huberman 1994), including code development and testing, data coding, and pattern assessment (see Hollander 1997 for a fuller discussion of analysis procedures). For this paper, I analyzed every instance of conversation in which the participants discussed ideas about violence that did not fit the dominant discourse of female vulnerability and male dangerousness. This dominant discourse includes ideas about ability, experience, and affect (Hollander 2001). According to conventional belief, men are more capable of acting aggressively than women, while women are less able to defend themselves than men. As a result, women are more frequently victimized and men are more frequently aggressors. And finally, because of these perceived realities, women are expected to be more fearful of danger than men.

Resistance to this dominant discourse similarly includes ideas about gendered ability, experience, and affect. Specifically, I included in the analysis all discussion of: (1) women's *potential* ability to defend themselves against violence or commit violence against others; (2) men's *potential* vulnerability to violence or inability to commit violence against others; (3)

3. It is important to note that this approach to focus groups departs from their traditional use as a tool for gathering individual-level data in a group setting. I have argued elsewhere that the group pressures inherent in focus groups make them a problematic method for measuring individual thoughts or beliefs (Hollander 2002; see also Kitzinger 1994). While these pressures can compromise focus groups as a tool for measuring individual belief or experience, they make them an appropriate method for research that examines the processes of social interaction. Focus groups allow us to view how interaction unfolds within small groups. Interactional pressures do not detract from this type of analysis but are an important element of it.

4. The raw transcripts, like most natural speech, contain many repetitions, sentence fragments, and other dysfluencies. In the excerpts presented here, these have been edited out in the interest of readability, except when they affect the speaker's meaning.

women's *actual* self-defense against violence (physically or verbally; in the past or in a hypo-thetical future) or commission of violence; (4) men's *actual* failure to defend themselves against violence or to commit violence[5] (5) women's lack of fear of violence; or (6) men's fear of violence. The unit of analysis here is the resistant idea, defined in terms of topic: an "instance" of resistance including the original resistant comment and all ensuing conversation on the same topic. These instances ranged from a single, brief comment that received no response to many minutes of conversation among an entire group. This unit of analysis per-mits an examination of the fate of the resistant idea in interaction, consistent with the notion that the construction of gender is an interactional process.

Forms of Resistance to the Discourse of Gendered Vulnerability

In the 13 conversations, the dominant representation of women was as a class of humans inherently vulnerable to men's violence (Hollander 2001). Women were portrayed, by them-selves and by others, as frequently victimized by men, as threatened by men, as fearful of men, and as unable to protect themselves from men's violence. Paradoxically, they were also portrayed as requiring protection from men, who were represented alternately as dangers and safe havens. While these representations of masculinity and femininity dominated in the con-versations, some discussions did include alternative representations. There were 78[6] instances of these alternative ideas in the focus groups. These occurred across 11 of the 13 groups, and included between one and 19 instances per group. These instances of resistance focused more on femininity than masculinity, perhaps reflecting the greater flexibility in femininity.

Representations of Women's Actual Resistance

Some comments focused on *women's actual resistance* to men's violence: descriptions of past events where women did in fact resist men's violence. Given the dominant theme of women's vulnerability, there were a surprising number of stories about women's successful self-defense—or, very occasionally, their initiation of violence against others.[7] There were 26 such examples among the 78 instances of gender resistance.[8] For example,

> LOUISE: I was working at a little deli and one of the guys there was a real loudmouth and he teased really hard . . . And he used to come and he used to say things, and I didn't know whether he was going to get really rough someday. And I remember one day he came in there and before I even knew it I had my foot up to his knee because that is the best thing you do to some big guy is to take out their knees. It will drop them; they'll drop like stones . . . Well, I didn't hit him, but I had my foot up there ready to get him and I looked right at him and I said, "Hi, how are you today." In other words, "Don't bother me.". . . So it was that kind of thing. Because I couldn't figure out where he was coming from, so I thought I would err on the side of letting him know I wasn't any pushover . . . There are other ways. You don't have to go for their knees. I mean, you can go for their soft parts if they come closer . . . It's war, baby, we gotta do everything . . .

Here, Louise's behavior challenges the expectation that as a woman, she will be a "pushover," and possibly forestalls violence against her. Gender resistance was also found in participants' recounting of actual physical resistance by women or girls:

5. There were no instances of this type of gender resistance in the data.
6. Throughout the text, I present the raw numbers of comments or interactions of various types. I do so not because these numbers have any inherent meaning, but so readers can see for themselves the relative frequency of par-ticular types of resistance.
7. These stories are consistent with the fact that women successfully resist much of men's violence against them, as described above.
8. Some interactions included more than one of the six types of resistance.

> ELLEN: Has anyone here been a victim of physical violence?
>
> KAREN: I have.
>
> ELLEN: With a weapon?
>
> KAREN: Mm hmm.
>
> ELLEN: Well then, how did you respond? Do you feel comfortable talking about it?
>
> KAREN: Well, I won't go into total detail, but basically I got mad enough to take the weapon, throw the weapon, and beat the shit out of him.
>
> BOB: But when we grew up, both our parents, if we got in a fight with kids or something like that, we would not be let into the house until we won. And that's to teach us to win.
>
> LINDA: Well, were your sisters not allowed to get back in the house until they'd won?
>
> BOB: Both of my sisters were pretty tough, and you know, my mom would not let my sisters back in the house until they'd won, and they would do it.

In each of these conversations, the speakers portray women as capable and efficacious, able to protect themselves from violence rather than relying on men to defend them. In contrast to the dominant discourse about gender, which paints women as weak and ineffectual against men's violence, all of these comments show women's actual physical ability.

Of course, individual women vary in their physical ability to protect themselves from violence. Elderly women, young girls, and women with disabilities, for example, may not find the kinds of assertive responses described above to be viable options. Indeed, younger women more frequently made this kind of resistant comments (and it should be noted that because of the relatively small number of research participants, few women with disabilities participated in the focus group discussions). Nonetheless, the ability of any *specific* woman to physically resist violence is quite different than the question of whether women, *as a group*, are capable of protecting themselves. Ability and gender, while certainly interacting in individual experience and perception (a disabled woman may feel and be seen as more vulnerable than a similarly disabled man, for example), are separable issues at the collective level.

Representations of Women's Potential Resistance

A second type of resistance to gendered vulnerability involved comments about *women's potential resistance,* as in this statement:

> LOUISE: And at this point in my life, I would fight to the death. I would. I mean, if they tried to steal my purse—they always say, "Give up your purse." I ain't giving up nothing. They're going to knock me out or something. I mean it. I won't have it. . . .

In this type of comment (of which there were 38 in the focus groups), the speaker portrays women as capable of defending themselves through their attitudes, body language, or predicted responses to violence. Again, these portrayals run counter to established views of femininity, which assume that women do not have the ability to defend themselves from men's violence. Images of women's violation in entertainment media, advice to women to lock their doors and refrain from walking alone after dark, and advertisements for safety devices such as guns, mace, and personal alarms all are predicated on this assumption. By asserting that they would fight, these speakers resist dominant notions of what is possible or appropriate for women.

Representations of Women's Fearlessness

A third type of resistance involved comments about *women's lack of fear.* Fear is a central element of women's vulnerable subjectivity. Women (but not men) are expected to feel fearful in a wide range of situations: when home alone at night, when walking alone on a darkened street, when in public space without "protection" (Gallacher and Klieger 1995; Stanko 1997). As a result of this fear, women are expected to lock their doors, stay away from "dangerous" places and people, and seek men's protection. Indeed, these kinds of precautions are

perceived to be a moral obligation for women, as evidenced by the tendency to blame women for their own victimization if they have not taken such measures (Stanko 1996). Women's fearlessness, then, challenges this conceptualization of gender, asserting that women have the ability or the right to be comfortable in public or private space, at any time of day, even without men's protection. There were 17 instances of this kind of resistance in the focus group discussions, illustrated in the following comments:

> ANGELA: But just in moving through life, driving around, or being in a community, or being at work, you know, or whatever, I pretty much feel safe. I don't feel insecure or unsafe.

> TINA: I will run—because I guess maybe athletics makes me feel safe and strong and powerful, and I really don't want to compromise that. I mean, I would not run through the Arboretum at night by myself, but I go running there, as long as I can see the dirt so I'm not going to fall on my face, it more has to do with being able to see where I'm going than somebody popping out. I usually feel fairly safe.

Elizabeth Stanko argues that women's practice of "safekeeping" is one way of "doing gender": safekeeping "is performative of respectable femininities" (Stanko 1997:489). Safety talk, including talk about fear, is an integral part of this performance. By stating their lack of fear, then, these women challenge gender expectations for appropriate gendered emotion and behavior.

Representations of Men's Potential Vulnerability and Fear

Finally, some instances of resistance focused on ideas about masculinity. Because women's vulnerability is predicated upon men's potential dangerousness, comments about *men's vulnerability*—as in a statement that men are weaker than believed—represent resistance to the hegemonic construction of masculinity. For example:

> MEG: It was my brothers who taught me how to protect myself. . . . When I went off to college and when I began to date in high school and things like that, they were showing me how to knee somebody, and don't go with this one, and don't go to this place, and all that. They really did a lot of that . . . A knee in the groin . . . There are ways you can cause pain to a tall person, you know.

> MARCIA: I always had this plan in my head, if anything were to happen like [an attack], because men do have a weak spot, and if you know where it's at . . .

In these quotes, men's supposed physical superiority is challenged by the existence of a "weak spot."

Weak spots can include psychological as well as physical vulnerability, as in this conversation:

> BOB: People who start fights are weak. My momma taught me that, not even my daddy. People who start fights are weak, and like these bully types you talk about, they want to pick a fight, man, you just give it to them. You watch out, they'll back off real good.
> BARBARA: That's right. It's like, my ex-husband was a police officer. And it was so weird! He, after all this emotional violence, and terrorizing the family that he put us through, come to find out, he's really, really weak and he's really scared.

Barbara's comment also notes that her ex-husband is fearful, another dimension of gendered vulnerability. Comments about men's vulnerability were rare in the focus group discussions: in the more than 25 hours of discussion, there were only five instances that included the idea that men might not be as invulnerable as most people assume. Ideas about masculinity, therefore, seem less malleable than those about femininity.

Each of the comments above subverts the dominant belief that women are inherently vulnerable to men's violence by presenting evidence to the contrary, by presenting an alternative view of women's physical competence, or by presenting an alternative view of men's physical competence. Together, they form the basis for an alternative discourse on gender, one in which women are not necessarily vulnerable and men are not necessarily dangerous.
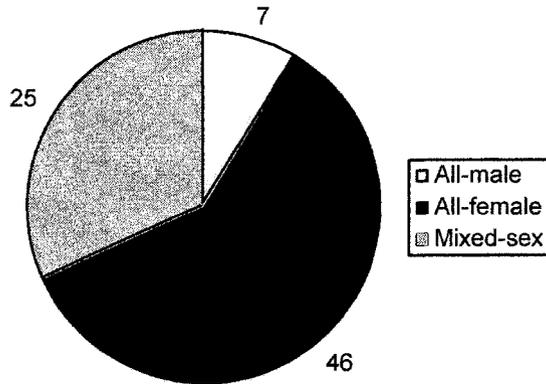
Figure 1 • *Distribution of Resistance Instances, by Type of Group*

When Does Resistance Happen?

The types of resistance described above occurred more in some contexts than in others. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these comments across the three types of groups: all male, all female, and mixed-sex.

Fewer than 10% of these moments of resistance occurred in all male groups (with a mean of two such interactions per group). Nearly two-thirds occurred in all female groups (with a mean of eleven interactions per group), and about one-third occurred in mixed-sex groups (with a mean of five interactions per group). Of those in mixed-sex groups, more than three quarters were initiated by women speakers. Clearly, resistance is a discourse spoken largely by women, often in all female contexts. In all male contexts, this discourse barely exists; there, women (when they are discussed at all) tended to be portrayed in conventional ways.

Interestingly, in the few (12) cases when men did talk about women as strong, they usually were discussing their mothers, sisters, or daughters. Women who were not blood relations, in contrast, were rarely depicted as strong. This was true even when the men were discussing their romantic partners, who were more often portrayed as needing their protection than as able to take care of themselves. This representation of their partners fits well with traditional notions of heterosexual romance, in which men are expected to be big, strong, and protective of their more delicate female partners. Female vulnerability, in other words, is intertwined with heterosexual desirability.

The fact that these types of comments are more frequently made among women suggests that women and men may inhabit different discursive environments. Men's views of gender may be more conventional than women's because they are exposed almost exclusively to traditional representations of female vulnerability. Women, in contrast, may have more flexible and expansive ideas about gender, encompassing women's potential strength, if not men's potential vulnerability, because their discursive environments are more varied.

Another pattern worth noting is that in nearly all cases of women's resistance, the participants were discussing particular people, not women as a group.[9] Women most frequently talked about themselves (often contrasting their own lack of fear or vulnerability with that

---

9. In the five interactions where men's potential vulnerability was discussed, the focus was evenly split between particular men and men as a group.

of most women), while men most frequently talked about particular women. This suggests that those women who resist conventional female scripts are seen as exceptional: it is women as individuals who are seen as strong or fearless, not women as a group. Thus, the behavior of individuals does not necessarily change perceptions of the groups to which they belong.

It is notable that there were no clear race- or class-based patterns in the instances of resistance in these focus groups. Consistent with the dominant discourse, race and class were recurring themes when discussing potential assailants: men of color and poor men were frequently mentioned as potentially dangerous (see Hollander 2001 for further discussion of these patterns). However, there were virtually no mentions of race or class in comments about resistance.[10] Moreover, I saw no patterns in the resistant comments made by speakers of different racial or class backgrounds or in groups of different racial or class compositions. However, the relatively small number of focus groups makes it difficult to interpret this lack of attention to race and class. One possibility is that the geographical location of the focus groups affected talk about race: because Seattle has a relatively low proportion of people of color and a high degree of racial segregation, race might not be salient to at least the white participants in the focus groups. Further investigation of these issues is clearly warranted.

Disposition of Resistance Narratives

Even if women do hear more comments about women's strength and fearlessness than men, these are not the only ideas about gender to which they are exposed. While present in most of the groups, this alternative discourse of resistance did not dominate any of them. Instead, conventional portrayals of women as vulnerable and men as invulnerable, or even dangerous, prevailed. Somehow, these moments of gender resistance do not take root in conversation. How does this happen? How is gender resistance derailed? And does it ever flourish in conversation?

Understanding how resistance talk succeeds or fails requires attention to discourse as interaction, not just text. Gender construction is not a solo performance; gender (like other aspects of social reality) is *socially*, not individually, constructed. As Solano says with respect to social psychology,

> Influenced by the individual perspective of psychology, social psychology has been studying the equivalent of monologues. Research has been concentrating on self-centered acts and speeches and ignoring the effect of other people. Ultimately, this approach is limited. A thorough understanding of monologues does not help understand the dynamics of a conversation. Conversation involves a developing sequence of behavior that is not predictable from one person alone. Two monologues are not the equivalent of a conversation. One person might have the same monologue or lecture with two separate groups of people. Yet no one is likely to have exactly the same conversation with two different people, even if it is on the same topic (Solano 1988:37).

In the focus groups, there were six different ways that these alternative ideas about gender and vulnerability were derailed in favor of more conventional views. In some cases, resistant comments were challenged, trivialized, or framed as exceptions to the rule. At other times, these comments were neutralized by an immediate return to the dominant discourse of female vulnerability, or by the reframing of experiences of resistance as victimization. Finally, some comments about resistance were simply ignored by other participants. Each of these strategies served to minimize the subversive potential of these attempts at resistance.

---

10. The two exceptions were a comment that identified women living in a particular area of Seattle (a disproportionately black and poor neighborhood) as potentially dangerous, and one mention of a poor African American man as unexpectedly *not* dangerous. Both comments were made by white female speakers.

Challenge

Perhaps the most obvious way to derail alternative ideas is to directly contest or challenge them. For example, the speakers in the following excerpt are responding to a question about how they would feel if their intimate partner were to become angry and start yelling:

> CHARLIE: My girlfriend's not very big either, so there's no way I would feel threatened at all unless she pulled a gun on me or something like that. [laughter] That's a different story, but—
> JOHN: There's no way she would ever be like that. She'd be like, [in high voice] "I love you, man!" [laughter] "Oh give me a hug!" [laughter]

Although at least partly in jest, Charlie introduces the idea that his girlfriend has the potential to be dangerous, despite her small size. John challenges this possibility, suggesting that Charlie's girlfriend is incapable of such behavior: she is loving, not threatening. Others in this group agreed with John's assessment, and the conversation moved on.

Interestingly, this type of direct contestation occurred only twice in the focus groups. Most of the time, alternative ideas about gender and vulnerability were diverted by more subtle means. Such indirect challenges may be even more effective, because they shift the conversation without leaving space for opposition.

Trivialization

For example, note the laughter that follows both Charlie's and John's statements in the excerpt above. The other participants in this all male group laugh at the idea that women could be threatening to men. This is a second way that resistance is derailed: by trivializing it or otherwise making it into a joke. There were nine such instances in the focus groups, most in all male or all female groups comprised of good friends. Another example occurred later in the same conversation, while discussing another participant's partner:

> SEAN: I would feel very safe [if she started yelling]. . . . If this happened—which it has, by the way—I'd probably be yelling just as loud as she was. I'd probably be worse, actually. And . . . I've had fights like that before, and I just remember, nothing violent ever happens, you know, not physically, so . . . I wouldn't be concerned for my safety, or anything like that.
> ANDREW: Sean, is this the missus you're talking about?
> SEAN: Yeah, this is the missus.
> ROB: Better half. [laughter].
> CHARLIE: Ball and chain.
> ROB: I'd be afraid of Sean's girlfriend [laughter]. I'd be running—I'd be like "whoa!" [laughter].
> SEAN: Shut up! [laughter].

In this case, Sean seemed almost ashamed to have his girlfriend portrayed (even in jest) as potentially dangerous. One interpretation is that having a "dangerous" girlfriend would challenge his masculinity, as it is conventional for men to be stronger and more dominant than their female partners. Thus, Rob's comment could be interpreted as a playful attack on Sean's masculinity: If Sean were more appropriately masculine, he would have a more appropriately feminine girlfriend. These kinds of comments make female resistance into a joke, thus reinforcing conventional ideas about gender: women's strength is so unlikely that it is laughable.

Trivialization can also be accomplished by language choice, as in this man's comment about violence he had witnessed in his family of origin:

> ROB: And I remember hearing stories from my grandmother, about my dad hitting my mom, and my mom throwing my dad against the wall, because she's a pretty big, she's a pretty big girl.

Here Rob is describing a woman of considerable strength and ferocity. Yet, in characterizing her as "a pretty big girl," he simultaneously trivializes her. The potential resistance to gender in this situation is undermined by his description.

Exceptionalism

A different way to neutralize potential gender resistance is to paint women's resistance to violence as exceptional or simply lucky, as something available only to extraordinary women or in extraordinary circumstances. Seven instances were of this type. For example, in response to a woman's story of successfully fighting off a strange man who appeared naked in her bedroom, other group members commented, "You were blessed," and "You were really fortunate, weren't you?". These comments emphasize the role of luck in surviving this attack, rather than the woman's own skill, ingenuity, or power. In a different conversation, a woman vividly described how she would forcefully resist an assailant, but then, moments later, contrasted her own strength with that of other women:

> KAREN: If I have someone who's going to have the nerve to come at me that way, I'm going to use everything I have, they're going to have to kill me to get whatever they want. I'm going to use everything I have, and grab anything I can. I mean, they're going to be marred somehow, if they get what they want. . . . But, I had a girlfriend who was a very thin woman and she was fairly strong, and when we would wrestle around, she like had no strength. With one hand, I could pin her. And it dawned on me that if she were to be in any situation with someone stronger than her, and a lot of women who are that size, they have nothing. They're totally defenseless.
>
> SUSANNAH: And I suspect that you have a lot more upper body strength than most women, and a lot of men.

Both speakers suggest that Karen's abilities are unusual and not available to the average woman. Rather than framing her experience as an example of what is possible for women, both Karen and Susannah use it to reinforce the perceived impossibility of women's self-defense and self-determination. Ironically, although these stories depict women's strength and actual success in resisting men's violence, they are used to reinforce women's perceived weakness.

Return to the Dominant Discourse

A common way that resistance was neutralized was by returning the conversation to the dominant discourse. In many cases, this meant that speakers reframed a story about resistance to fit the dominant narrative of women's vulnerability and men's strength. There were 21 instances of such reframing in the focus groups. For example, comments about women's potential self-defense were often followed by a return to the refrain that women cannot defend themselves against men, as in this conversation among several young women:

> SARAH: Well, there's things we can do to defend ourselves, but naturally we're not as strong [as men].
>
> FACILITATOR: Do you all feel the same way?
>
> BELINDA: Yes. [others respond with nods].
>
> FACILITATOR: Does anybody feel differently about that?
>
> ANNA: No, I don't think it's that we're not as strong, it's that we're . . .
>
> MARCIA: We're perceived as the weaker sex.
>
> ANNA: Yeah . . .
>
> KATRINA: Yeah, it's just kind of the position that society puts us in, because it's what we grew up with, you know, girls are like this, girls are weaker and can't defend themselves, or don't go there by yourself if you're a girl, and it's just what we grew up with.
>
> SARAH: But I also think physically, I mean, we're structured a lot differently. I mean, I know there's a lot of strong girls and we're probably stronger than a lot of them, but I mean just, I've arm wrestled a few guys who I thought were wimps, and it just—
>
> TIA: Yeah. It's true that biologically we are weaker.
>
> SARAH: But biologically, it's just, we are.

Here the provocative idea that women can protect themselves—and indeed, the very nuanced suggestion that women's vulnerability is "the position that society puts us in," rather than an inevitable reality—is overwritten by the dominant discourse that women are biologically

weaker than men. For a moment, there is a clash between these two contradictory beliefs, but in the end, biological essentialism dominates, and without much of a struggle.

Similarly, women's comments about fearlessness were often immediately contradicted by their own admission of precautionary behavior, as in this conversation in a mixed-sex group. The first participant responds to a previous speaker who says that although a certain area of town is often considered dangerous, he doesn't feel afraid walking there:

> LORI: Yeah, I feel the same way. I've never, I enjoy walking up and down Broadway. And I live in Queen Anne and it's not nearly as—I guess, in the media and what everyone thinks about it, it's not as dangerous a place, but it's in the downtown area, so people are still more afraid than if they were in Bellevue, say. But I go, I walk at night, I don't go far from my house, I stay, like you know, convenience store right across the street, but I don't even think twice about going out at night by myself just there, and I think a lot of people would.
>
> JAN: I live on Capitol Hill, too, and I feel perfectly safe up there. . . . I think the numbers of crimes aren't high compared to the number of people who live there, but I still don't walk around anywhere at night.

Both of these speakers make a brief foray into resistance, portraying themselves as fearless in a situation others might think is dangerous. But almost immediately the feminine refrain of self-limitation reappears. Conventional ideas and discourses have tremendous power; under most circumstances, they are reasserted and accepted almost unthinkingly. As well as being readily available ways of interpreting experience, such familiar refrains also can serve interactional functions: they help to move a conversation to a new topic, shift the conversation from the specific to the general, and affirm an individual speaker's affiliation with the larger group (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000). Resistance and accommodation, then, often coexist. As Leblanc notes, "Resisters, after all, remain within the social system that they contest" (1999:17).

Reframing as Victimization

A related way of diverting a resistance narrative was to reframe resistance as victimization, even when this framing does not really fit the facts. For example, participants told a number of self-defense success stories during the focus groups. In these narratives, the women involved successfully resisted an attack: fighting off an attacker single-handedly, threatening violence to scare an attacker away, or strategically defusing a potentially violent situation. But rather than framing these experiences as resistance and celebrating their triumph over would-be assailants, the speakers frequently described these experiences as victimization, not significantly different from a completed attack. There were seven instances of this type in the focus group discussions. For example, this woman recounts the experience of one of her neighbors:

> LIZ: A woman in our building actually got mugged right out in our alley, and a black man was coming towards her, and she was coming this way on the block. And so she crossed over because of him, and then she heard footsteps behind her, and he had crossed over, and I guess he grabbed her purse, but he also knocked her to the ground, and she held onto it. But that was right in our building, and I knew the woman, and the police came, and I actually heard her screams from my fourth floor apartment. I mean I'm in the front of the building and she was screaming in the back and my windows were closed and I heard her screaming. I mean she really screamed—everybody scream, because it's a good idea. And then I saw the guy run. But I didn't know what was happening, so, but it turned out to be someone in my building. That's the closest I've ever been to violence, and it just made me think you have to keep being alert, and don't be pacified by not having anything happen to you.

This story is reminiscent of news stories about unsuccessful attacks on women. In the vast majority of such stories, the woman is described as "the victim," even if she caused harm to the would-be assailant in fending him off. For example, a 1998 *Seattle Times* article carried the

headline "Man Attacks 13th Victim Since August: Neighborhood in Tacoma Site of Latest Assault." Only after reading the body of the article does it become clear that this most recent "victim," in fact, "screamed and fought back until the man ran away" and indeed, nine of the other twelve "victims" also escaped without harm. It is true that the experience of being attacked may be traumatic even if the attack is thwarted. However, this article barely distinguishes between a completed rape and successful self-defense, which are likely to have very different consequences for the women involved. Framing all these incidents as "assaults" on "victims" makes women's resistance invisible.

This pattern can also be seen in public interpretation of media images. For example, a controversial Nike television advertisement aired during the 2000 Summer Olympics (Nike 2000). The ad parodied the genre of horror movies; it featured track star Suzy Favor Hamilton attacked by a masked, chainsaw-wielding man as she prepares to take a shower. Hamilton screams and runs, pursued through shadowy woods by the man. But she pulls away and leaves the would-be attacker winded, wheezing, and limping away. "Why sport?" the copy asks. "You'll live longer." Although this ad turned the horror genre on its head by showing Hamilton's successful resistance to threatened violence, it met with tremendous criticism for portraying violence against women, and Nike pulled the ad as a result. Here too, the successful resistance of this strong, capable athlete was reframed as victimization.

All these stories would perhaps be more accurately framed as resistance narratives: in each case, the woman involved successfully avoided the intended assault. However, the pervasiveness of conventional representations of feminine vulnerability means that we lack alternative models for understanding these kinds of experiences. There is no shared discourse about women's successful resistance to men's violence. So instead, the only way to speak about these events—and indeed, perhaps the only way to experience them—is as victimization.

Ignoring

The final way that resistance narratives are derailed is by simply ignoring them. This happened frequently: in 27 instances, potentially subversive ideas did not take root. In some cases these comments were not picked up because they were embedded in longer, multi-topic statements, but in other cases the participants simply seemed to overlook these ideas, continuing on with the conversation as though the subversive idea had never been introduced. This occurred in each conversation below:

MONA: So, do you think you could escape a violent act?
SUSANNAH: Probably not. I mean, that's the thing, I'd rather be out of range.
LORNA: . . . I have no idea what I would do.
MONA: If there was a weapon involved?
LORNA: But I don't know.
MONA: I'd do most anything, I think.
ELLEN: Has anyone here been a victim of physical violence?

FACILITATOR: So, do you take that as a warning when someone tells you a story like that?
LIZ: I haven't thought of it that way. I guess I'm not afraid—in general.
LEE: For me though, in a situation like that maybe people don't say it as a warning, but whether we realize it or not, it gets filed in the back of our minds, probably—probably on more a subconscious level.

FACILITATOR: Any stories about family or friends that stick in your minds?
ANDREW: Mmm, I guess my stepbrother. He married some psychotic lady. And she was always—I guess she would wake up in the middle of the night accusing him of sleeping with someone else, when he was right there, and . . . I guess she was just mental. And so, one night she woke up and started pounding him, and he woke up, and she was just beating the shit out of him. Sorry. And so, he called the police and they arrested her, and . . . they got a divorce, and that was all I heard about it.
ROB: Want to tell the paintball story, or not?

In the first example, the group ignores Mona's quiet comment that she would do "most anything" to escape a violent act, moving on to a new topic. In the second excerpt, Liz's unusual statement that she is not afraid is superceded by Lee's response to the facilitator's initial question. And in the final example, Andrew's quite startling account of his stepbrother's wife "beating the shit out of him" receives no comment as this group of young men turns to another story about their joint escapades.

In none of these instances was the idea of women's strength, fearlessness, or resistance picked up or even acknowledged. This may be deliberate, or it may simply be a human cognitive tendency: psychologists have found that we often fail to notice or remember information that does not fit with our pre-existing schemas. We construct "the facts" to fit our preconceptions, rather than the reverse (Howard 1984; Snyder and Uranowitz 1978). Regardless of the cause, ignoring these moments of resistance effectively neutralizes them, preventing them from taking root in the discussion.

Successful Resistance

More than two-thirds of the time, resistance attempts made in the focus groups met with one (or more) of these six types of derailments. Comments about female strength or male vulnerability were ignored, trivialized, challenged, marked as exceptional, reframed as female victimization, or co-opted into the dominant discourse. But in just under a third of cases, a resistance comment met with at least some success: other participants agreed with the speaker, told a similar story or incident, or otherwise supported the comment.[11] Twenty-two of the 25 cases occurred in all female groups; the remaining three interactions were from mixed-sex groups. No successful resistance occurred in all male groups, perhaps because there was so little gender resistance in these groups to begin with.

In all of these cases, ideas about female resistance dominated the discussion, at least for a time. Sometimes, other group members uniformly supported a resistant comment. In this excerpt, Rhonda refers to a story told earlier in the conversation, when Louise recounted turning around and walking straight at a man who had been following her, causing him to cross the street:

> RHONDA: One of the things that you did was when you talked about the guy following you and you turned around and—
> LOUISE: That was another instinct. That was like pure instinct, too.
> MEG: That does work, too.
> LOUISE: I didn't know what I was going to do. He couldn't stand the idea of me seeing his face. He wanted to do something in the dark. He knew I saw his face . . .
> MEG: Well, he's not the aggressor anymore.
> LEEANNE: You changed the script.
> MEG: I've done that. You've become the aggressor, and it does work.

In this example, Rhonda's initial comment about Louise's successful resistance is picked up and elaborated by other group members, without any significant challenge. A similar exchange occurred in another group:

> MARCIA: But you never know, because then if you get in that situation, your adrenaline is going—
> SARAH: Adrenaline, that's true.
> MARCIA: You're not fully aware of what you probably could do. I always had this plan in my head,

---

11. My definition of success here is modest: to qualify as a success, the resistant comment had to be supported and sustained by others in the group. If challenges occurred, these had to be supplanted by support to count as successful resistance. This does not mean, however, that these moments of resistance will necessarily lead to gender change. They are a necessary ingredient of such change, but certainly are not sufficient to produce it.

if anything were to happen like that, because men do have a weak spot, and if you know where it's at . . . [laughter]. Really, I mean—

SARAH: That's true, oh, I'm not saying—

MARCIA: If your adrenaline is going, who knows the strength of your kick or your punch or your claw? Seriously, I mean, if I was—

BELINDA: I don't know if you actually think that clearly in that situation, but—

SARAH: Desperation move, right. Give it all I had.

This conversation fundamentally challenges the dominant discourse that prescribes female self-limitation.

At other times, reinforcement from others in the group is less uniform. For example, the following conversation clearly shows a struggle between images of female resistance and vulnerability. Meg begins by answering the facilitator's question about how she would respond if someone close to her began yelling at her:

MEG: Anger. . . . If they go too far with it, I think you have to stop it right there, you have to decide what you will put up with and what you won't, and stop it right then . . . I would be angry, I would make it very clear that this was going to stop right now or I am out of here. And if it's an ongoing relationship, then it's going to have to be patched up and work is going to have to be done, because that's it, that would be it. . . . You can't allow that kind of thing. It gets worse. And it passes down.

LOUISE: And they're bigger than you or whatever.

RHONDA: So what?

LEEANNE: So what?

LOUISE: See, that's an issue. Well, no, that's all I'm saying, is that for me that is a factor. I mean, if I know they can beat me up, you know, I can't beat them up.

LEEANNE: I know that, too, but you know what, I know I can do something worse.

Meg begins by claiming that she would stop this kind of verbal assault, set boundaries about appropriate behavior, and leave the relationship if those boundaries were not respected. But Louise suggests that resistance may not be effective by discussing biological differences: men are bigger than women. Rhonda and Leeanne both contest this biological claim by asking, "so what?" Louise elaborates: because of men's bigger size, they can beat her up, but she can't beat them up. This is a good example of the dominant discourse on gender and vulnerability: women, because of their biological characteristics, are vulnerable in the face of men's violence. However, Leeanne contests this conclusion, saying that while this may be true, she can do "something worse." The conversation changes course at this point and moves on to another topic. For the moment, the discourse of resistance, although contested, has the last word.

In all of these cases, successful gender resistance is collaboratively constructed in conversation. Successive speakers support, echo, challenge, and build upon each other's statements to create an alternative conceptualization of gender. Even when challenges occur, this alternative conceptualization is reasserted and not trivialized, ignored, or reframed. The construction of new images of gender is a cooperative enterprise, not something that is accomplished by an individual speaker.

Discussion

Gender Conformity and Resistance

Much of social interaction serves to reinforce ideas and realities that already exist. As I discuss above, a great deal of the talk about violence and danger in the focus groups reconfirmed stereotypical notions about gender: the idea that women are vulnerable to violence but men are not, and the idea that men may be dangerous (or alternately, protectors of

the vulnerable) but women are not. Repeating old cognitive patterns is always easier than creating new ones; the metaphors, stereotypes, and schemas are already in place and available for easy use. Indeed, we are more likely to notice and remember those ideas and events that fit with our preconceived stereotypes.

In addition to these cognitive reasons, however, there are very real social rewards for "doing gender" conservatively, and very real social punishments for flouting gender expectations. As West and Zimmerman note, "If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)" (1987:146). Thus, challenging gender involves substantial effort and risk.

Existing power arrangements are a crucial force behind the interactional processes maintaining the status quo. In the case of gender and violence,

> The stereotype of gender differences in aggression has been advantageous to men in maintaining a position of power over women. . . . All men benefit from this myth, even those individual men who reject misogynist views of women, do not desire power over women, and conduct their personal lives in ways supportive of women. [For example,] perceived gender differences in aggression maintain women's subordination to, dependence on, and fear of men. If women are weak and non-aggressive, they must depend on men for protection and fear harm from men against whom they cannot defend themselves (White and Kowalski 1994:492).

Women's fear of violence acts as a form of social control, keeping women from political and economic equality as well as freedom of movement (Connell 1995; Stanko 1997). These three factors—cognitive patterns, interactional rewards and punishments, and macro-level power arrangements—help to answer the question of *why* the status quo persists: why conservative narratives remain dominant even against a backdrop of human agency and innovation. The interactional processes I describe in this paper help to answer the question of *how* this is accomplished in face-to-face interaction.

However, the resilience of the status quo does not mean that it is impossible to construct new ideas and associations. The same experience can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the interests of the speaker and the cultural resources available (Sasson 1995). The social meanings that are constructed in conversation can be altered; the same tools that work so efficiently to construct familiar meanings of gender can also be used to change those meanings. As demonstrated above, alternative gender discourses are present in everyday conversation, despite our tendency to focus on the conventional.

These alternative discourses are more common in some contexts than in others—notably, in women's talk amongst themselves, and to a lesser extent, among women when men are present. In other words, resistance is more common in contexts where those who are disadvantaged by existing hierarchical structures can interact freely. This fits with McCorkel's (1998) argument that resistance requires "critical space"—physical, cognitive, or discursive spaces where alternative conceptual frameworks can be shared. However, the same circumstances that permit resistance to develop also may limit its spread and, therefore, its potential for social change. Here, the concentration of resistance in female-dominated contexts may inhibit its power to change mainstream conceptions of gender. Because men dominate public discourse (e.g., media, politics, and religion), resistance is likely more frequent in everyday conversation than in public discourse. And even in conversation, these alternative ideas are frequently derailed in a variety of ways, both intentional and unintentional. These kinds of derailments deflect the transformative potential of these moments of gender resistance.

Nonetheless, these alternative ideas do sometimes survive, especially if others reinforce them in the conversation. In the focus group discussions, successful gender resistance was almost always collaborative; it required multiple voices to challenge the status quo. What does this mean for the possibilities of change? A lone voice is likely to be derailed; unless many

voices start speaking resistance, change will not occur. "If we are to have social change, we need more than individual resistance. This may occasionally start things rolling, but it cannot change the relations of power by itself" (Weisstein 1997:148). While moments of resistance like those described above are necessary to spark gender change, alone they are not sufficient to cause such change. Gender change requires not only new ideas, but also reinforcement and support for these ideas in everyday life.

In particular, gender change is facilitated by reinforcement from powerful others. Those with more power and authority in local and distal systems of hierarchy are more likely to have their ideas heard and adopted; "hierarchies help determine whose version of reality will prevail" (Thorne 1993:81; see also Nelson 1995; Ridgeway 1993). In small group discussions, if powerful group members support (or even decline to challenge) resistant ideas, those ideas may be more likely to take hold; this is a hypothesis that could be explored in future research.

Thus, although I focus on micro-level interaction in this paper, macro-level structures and processes continually shape and constrain this interaction. Indeed, both micro and macro analysis are needed for an understanding of how gender and other systems of hierarchy are created, sustained, and challenged. As Schwalbe and his colleagues recently argued, "Inequality cannot be understood apart from the processes that produce it. . . . The reproduction of inequality, even when it appears thoroughly institutionalized, ultimately depends on face-to-face interaction, which therefore must be studied as part of understanding the reproduction of inequality" (2000:420).

Theoretical Contributions

The discussion above contributes to a more complete theory of gender construction; one that theorizes both gender stability and gender change. Issues of gender resistance and change were largely overlooked by early theoretical statements of this perspective (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987), and while addressed in later work (Connell 1995; Lorber 1994; Thorne 1993) they remain underdeveloped. Gender is not monolithic or stable in its construction; innovation and resistance exist alongside more conventional expressions that reproduce the gender status quo. In terms of discourse, alternative discourses coexist with conventional discourses, as evidenced above. The fact that these alternative ideas are frequently derailed does not reduce their importance for understanding gender construction.

This diversity of gender expression helps to erode the related idea that gender is dichotomous and polarized; i.e., that male and female, and masculinity and femininity, are mutually exclusive, oppositional categories (Bem 1993; Thorne 1993). As the data presented above make clear, this formulation distorts reality, even when focusing only on a single dimension of gender. Women are not always vulnerable or even fearful; at times they may be brave, fierce, and bold. Similarly, men are not always omnipotent, either to harm women or to protect them from other men's violence. Dichotomous views of gender "gloss the fact that interaction varies by activity and context" (Thorne 1993:102); because gender is linked to interaction, not essential characteristics, it varies cross-situationally as well.

This emphasis on context returns us to a central issue: gender construction, and therefore, gender reconstruction, are interactional processes. "Doing gender" is not a solo performance; one does gender for and with particular people in particular social contexts. To understand resistance to gender expectations, we must therefore focus on social relations and interaction. How does resistance emerge in a particular context, and what ensues once it does? Emphasizing context also helps tie resistance to both interaction and social structure. As Pamela Fishman argues, "Power and hierarchical relations are not abstract forces operating on people. Power must be a human accomplishment, situated in everyday interaction. Both structural forces and interactional activities are vital to the maintenance and construction of social reality" (Fishman 1978:397). Attending to resistance reminds us that both structure and agency are involved in the interactional construction of gender.

Directions for Future Research

Focusing on resistance in face-to-face conversation opens up new directions for future research. In particular, I suggest five such directions may be especially fruitful for understanding resistance to gendered expectations of vulnerability and dangerousness, to gender more generally, and in other areas of social life.

First, the focus group methodology used here could be employed to further understand resistance to gendered vulnerability. For example, the moments of resistance described above included little discussion of race or social class, a surprising silence since discourse about violence is intensely marked by race and class. As discussed above, however, the characteristics of the city where the research was conducted may have muted these themes. Conducting similar groups in a variety of locations, some with more diverse populations and/or more overt racial tension, could help resolve the question of whether resistance to this dimension of gender also has implications for race and class. Similarly, focus group composition could be systematically varied to provide more information about the role of age, sexual identity, and disability—all factors potentially related to vulnerability—in gender resistance.

A second approach would be to use other methods to extend the results described here. Survey and interview methods, for example, could help to assess the relationship between what research participants say in focus groups and what they disclose in more private settings—although it should be noted that neither method is free from interactional pressures (Hollander 2002). Another possibility would be to use ethnography and participant observation to investigate the frequency of resistant speech in everyday life, outside the somewhat artificial setting of the focus group. Similar methods could also be used to investigate the frequency of gendered resistance in individual and group behavior: how do women and men enact resistance to gendered ideas about vulnerability, and what is the role of discourse and interaction in such resistance? Together, these varied approaches would illuminate the relationship of discourse to resistance in the realms of belief and behavior.

If there is resistance to conceptions of gendered vulnerability, as I have shown in this paper, it is likely that there is also resistance to other dimensions of gender. A third direction for future research, accordingly, would be to explore whether similar patterns of interaction surround these moments of resistance. One might examine, for example, patterns of resistance to conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood, where gender expectations are very strong. Where do moments of gender resistance occur, and how are they managed in interaction? Again, it is important to see resistance as a collective process, rather than an individual action; just as the construction of gender occurs in interaction, so does its reconstruction.

Fourth, future research could extend these projects to domains beyond gender. Resistance has lately become a fashionable topic across sub-disciplines of sociology (e.g., criminology, social movements, sport, technology, and political sociology), as well as in other disciplines such as geography, anthropology, and cultural studies. Much of this research, however, uses the term *resistance* vaguely, without specifying what it might look like in actual, face-to-face interaction (Hollander and Einwohner 2002). Other research identifies resistant behaviors or speech, but not the social processes of which they are a part. The approaches I describe here could be used to further examine resistance in a wide range of social contexts.

Finally, it is vitally important that future research address the question of the relationship between resistance in face-to-face interaction and social change more broadly. This is a question, of course, of the link between micro interaction and macro structure, and has been the subject of much attention in recent years (e.g., Alexander et al. 1987). The question of micro-macro linkages is complex, and requires attention to multiple actors and the contexts within which they act. While the data I present here offer some clues to how micro and macro levels are related (such as the role of powerful others in sustaining resistance), they cannot speak directly to the issue of micro-macro linkages. For example, how do moments of resistance

such as those described here cumulate and transform to become an alternative conceptual framework for understanding gender? Certainly, this relationship is not unidirectional; these moments of resistance both draw from existing alternative discourses and help to solidify and modify them. Yet these processes deserve more focused attention. Longitudinal and ethnographic research would be a useful starting point to address this issue, as would integration with research on social movements and social change.

Although the instances of gender resistance I describe in this paper are small, they are not insignificant. Traditional discourse on gender and violence—which casts women as pervasively vulnerable and men as alternately overwhelmingly dangerous and necessary for women's safety—facilitates a vision of the world in which women's choices are constrained because of their helplessness. This discourse may itself perpetuate women's victimization, by convincing both women and men that women cannot resist men's violence (Gavey 1999; Heberle 1996). Those moments in which alternative conceptions of gender are offered allow listeners to envision an alternative reality, one in which women have the right and the ability to be free from assault; in a small way, these moments challenge dominant conceptions of gender. While many of these alternative conceptions are ultimately derailed through the processes I describe above, these moments of innovation nonetheless hold the potential for social change. Social construction is based on human agency: on the ability of individuals to create something new from old materials. While these abilities are not always exercised—in general, we tend to reproduce what already exists—the same processes that function to maintain the status quo also contain the possibility of change.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernhard Giesen, Richard Munch, and Neil J. Smelser
    1987   *The Micro-Macro Link.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Austin, J. L.
    1962   *How To Do Things With Words.* London: Oxford University Press.
Bart, Pauline B., and Patricia H. O'Brien
    1985   *Stopping Rape: Successful Survival Strategies.* Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.
Bem, Sandra Lipsitz
    1993   *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality.* New Haven, CT: Yale
            University Press.
Brown, Mary Ellen
    1994   *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Brownmiller, Susan
    1975   *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape.* New York: Simon and Schuster.
Carr, C. Lynn
    1998   "Tomboy resistance and conformity: Agency in social psychological gender theory." *Gender
            & Society* 12:528–553.
Cavender, Gray, Lisa Bond-Maupin, and Nancy C. Jurik
    1999   "The construction of gender in reality crime TV." *Gender & Society* 13:643–663.
Cocks, Joan
    1989   *The Oppositional Imagination: Feminism, Critique, and Political Theory.* London: Routledge.
Collins, Patricia Hill, Lionel A. Maldonado, Dana Y. Takagi, Barrie Thorne, Lynn Weber, and Howard Winant
    1995   "Symposium: On West and Fenstermaker's 'Doing difference.'" *Gender & Society* 9:491–513.
Connell, R. W.
    1987   *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University
            Press.
    1995   *Masculinities.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cook, Sarah L., Jennifer L. Woolard, and Harriet M. Russell
    Forthcoming "The strengths, competence, and resilience of women facing domestic violence: How
            can research and policy support them?" In *Strengths-Based Research and Policy: Investing in
            Children, Families, and Communities*, K. Maton, C. Schellenbach, B. Leadbeater, and A. Solarz,
            eds. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
Dienhart, Anna
    1998   *Reshaping Fatherhood: The Social Construction of Shared Parenting.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Fishman, Pamela A.
    1978   "Interaction: The work women do." *Social Problems* 25:397–406.
Foucault, Michel
    1981   *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (S. Rendall, Trans.), vol. 1.* Harmondsworth, UK:
            Penguin/Pelican.
Gallacher, Fiona, and Douglas M. Klieger
    1995   "Sex role orientation and fear." *Journal of Psychology* 129:41–49.
Gardner, Carol Brooks
    1995   *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Gavey, Nicola
    1999   "'I wasn't raped, but . . .' Revisiting definitional problems in sexual victimization." In *New
            Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept,* Sharon Lamb, ed., 57–81. New York:
            New York University Press.
Gibson-Graham, J. K.
    1997   "The end of capitalism (as we knew it)." Colloquium, Center for the Study of Women in
            Society. University of Oregon, 20 November.
Glenn, Evelyn Nakano
    1999   "The social construction and institutionalization of gender and race: An integrative
            framework." In *Revisioning Gender*, Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess, eds.,
            3–43. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Goffman, Erving
    1976   *Gender Advertisements.* New York: Harper & Row.
Gondolf, Edward W.
    1988   *Battered Women as Survivors: An Alternative to Treating Learned Helplessness.* Lexington, MA:
            Lexington Books.
Gordon, Margaret T., and Stephanie Riger
    1989   *The Female Fear: The Social Cost of Rape.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Heberle, Renee
    1996   "Deconstructive strategies and the movement against sexual violence." *Hypatia* 11:63.
Hollander, Jocelyn A.
    1997   "Discourses of danger: The construction of gender through talk about violence." Ph.D.
            dissertation, University of Washington.
    2001   "Vulnerability and dangerousness: The construction of gender through conversation about
            violence." *Gender & Society* 15:84–110.
    2002   "The social contexts of focus groups." Unpublished manuscript.
Hollander, Jocelyn A., and Rachel E. Einwohner
    2002   "Conceptualizing resistance." Unpublished manuscript.
Hollander, Jocelyn A., and Judith A. Howard
    2000   "Social psychological theories on social inequalities." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63:338–351.
Howard, Judith A.
    1984   "The 'normal' victim: The effects of gender stereotypes on reactions to victims." *Social
            Psychology Quarterly* 47:270–281.
Jones, Ann
    1994   *Next Time, She'll Be Dead: Battering and How to Stop It.* Boston: Beacon.
Kitzinger, Jenny
    1994   "The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research
            participants." *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16:103–121.
Koss, Mary P., Christine A. Gidycz, and Nadine Wisniewski
    1987   "The scope of rape: Incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a
            national sample of higher education students." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*
            55:162–170.

Leblanc, Lauraine
    1999   *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Resistance in a Boys' Subculture.* New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers.
Lorber, Judith
    1994   *Paradoxes of Gender.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Lorber, Judith, and Susan A. Farrell, eds.
    1991   *The Social Construction of Gender.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Madriz, Esther I.
    1997   *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women's Lives.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Maracek, Jeanne
    1999   "Trauma talk in feminist clinical practice." In *New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept,* Sharon Lamb, ed., 158–182. New York: New York University Press.
McCorkel, Jill A.
    1998   "Going to the crackhouse: Critical space as a form of resistance in total institutions and everyday life." *Symbolic Interaction* 21:227–252.
Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman
    1994   *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook. 2nd ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Morgan, David L.
    1988   *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Nelson, Hilde Lindemann
    1995   "Resistance and insubordination." *Hypatia* 10:23–40.
Nike
    2000   "Chainsaw." http://www.adcritic.com/content/nike-why-sport-chainsaw-olympics-nbc.html (accessed 3 September 2001).
Plummer, Ken
    1995   *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds.* London: Routledge.
Potter, Jonathan
    1996   *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Social Construction.* London: Sage.
Radford, Jill, and Diana E. H. Russell
    1992   *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing.* New York: Maxwell MacMillan.
Ridgeway, Cecilia L.
    1993   "Gender, status, and the social psychology of expectations." In *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory,* Paula England, ed., 175–197. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
Riger, Stephanie, and Margaret T. Gordon
    1981   "The fear of rape: A study in social control." *Journal of Social Issues* 37:71–92.
Sasson, Theodore
    1995   *Crime Talk: How Citizens Construct a Social Problem.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
Schwalbe, Michael, Sandra Godwin, Daphne Holden, Douglas Schrock, Shealy Thompson, and Michele Wolkomir
    2000   "Generic processes in the reproduction of inequality: An interactionist analysis." *Social Forces* 79:419–452.
Seattle Times Staff and News Services
    1998   "Man attacks 13th victim since August: Neighborhood in Tacoma site of latest assault." *Seattle Times,* 24 October.
Sheffield, Carole J.
    1987   "Sexual terrorism: The social control of women." In *Analyzing Gender,* Beth B. Hess and Myra Marx Ferree, eds., 171–189. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Snyder, Mark, and Seymour W. Uranowitz
    1978   "Reconstructing the past: Some cognitive consequences of person perception." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 36:941–950.
Solano, Cecilia H.
    1998   "The interactive perspectives: Getting the social back into social psychology." In *The State of Social Psychology: Issues, Themes, and Controversies,* Mark R. Leavy, ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Stanko, Elizabeth A.
    1992   "The case of fearful women: Gender, personal safety, and fear of crime." *Women and Criminal Justice* 4:117–135.

1996   "Warnings to women: Police advice and women's safety in Britain." *Violence Against Women* 2:5–24.

1997   "Safety talk: Conceptualizing women's risk assessment as a 'technology of the soul.'" *Theoretical Criminology* 1:479–499.

Stanko, Elizabeth A., and Kathy Hobdell

1993   "Assault on men: Masculinity and male victimization." *British journal of Criminology* 33:400–415.

Thorne, Barrie

1993   *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ullman, Sarah E.

1997   "Review and critique of empirical studies of rape avoidance." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 24:177–204.

1998   "Does offender violence escalate when women fight back?" *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 13:179–192.

Ullman, Sarah E., and Raymond A. Knight

1992   "Fighting back: Women's resistance to rape." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 7:31–43.

Weisstein, Naomi

1997   "Power, resistance and science." *New Politics* 6:146–151.

West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman

1987   "Doing gender." *Gender & Society* 1:125–151.

White, Jacquelyn W., and Robin M. Kowalski

1994   "Deconstructing the myth of the nonaggressive woman." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18:487–508.

Wilkinson, Sue, and Celia Kitzinger

2000   "Thinking differently about thinking positive: A discursive approach to cancer patients' talk." *Social Science & Medicine* 50:797–811.

Wolak, Janis, and David Finkelhor

1998   "Children exposed to partner violence." In *Partner Violence: A Comprehensive Review of 20 Years of Research*, Jana L. Jasinski and Linda M. Williams, eds., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.