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RESEARCH NOTE

Women behaving badly: Female speakers backstage[1]

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I explore women's (and girls') self-presentation in contexts where they seem most relaxed, most off-record, drawing on Goffman's concept of 'backstage'. In particular, I shall focus on those aspects of women's backstage performance of self which do not fit prevailing norms of femininity, in other words, women's performances of 'not-nice' selves, as well as reports of – and fantasies about – behaving 'badly'. The analysis will draw on a corpus of spontaneous conversation involving girl and women friends. It will be argued that the backstage talk possible only with close friends provides women with an arena where norms can be subverted and challenged and alternative selves explored. But it also needs to be acknowledged that in an important sense such talk helps to maintain the heteropatriarchal order, by providing an outlet for the frustrations of frontstage performance.

KEYWORDS: Gender, self-presentation, backstage talk, friendship, femininity, performativity

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, Jenny Joseph's poem *Warning* was voted Britain's favourite post-war poem in a BBC poll. This is how it begins:

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit . . .

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The poem's popularity suggests that its message – a woman threatening that in her old age she will overthrow the constraints of conventional femininity – has struck a chord with many women. It is undeniable that one of the burdens of being born female is the imperative to be nice. The ideal of femininity, established in the nineteenth century, is the 'perfect wife and mother', the epitome of niceness (Purvis 1987: 255). Brown and Gilligan (1992) have explored in moving detail the struggles that girls have with the social pressure to be nice. They show how a girl feels that 'people will not be nice to her if she is not nice to them' (Brown and Gilligan 1992: 60). But the girls interviewed by Brown and Gilligan are aware that being nice to others often involves them in hiding what they really feel. This dilemma continues into adulthood. Adult women feel under pressure to be nice, but also need to express the whole range of feelings, nice and less nice.

In this paper, I want to explore the subject of women being *not* nice, that is, of women behaving 'badly'. The scare-quotes are used with 'badly' for the obvious reason that notions of good and bad are both culturally constructed and culture-specific. In the extract from the poem given above, for example, the woman's threat that she will learn to spit violates a norm about adult *female* behaviour in Britain today, not adult male behaviour: no one is shocked by the sight of a man spitting in the street or on the football pitch.

Moreover, it seems that in late 20th century Britain, while women are obliged to avoid the appearance of being 'bad', male speakers will overtly stake a claim on badness. Example (1) comes from a conversation in a pub involving three men in their 20s[2] (transcription conventions are given in the Appendix):

1.
1 Rob: no/ [. . .]
Gary: you not been demolishing houses recently? .
2 Rob: don't think I've done anything really that bad
3 Rob: lately/ (2.0) oh yeah I have actually/ [. . .]
Gary: ⟨LAUGHTER⟩
4 Rob: we were talking at this meal/ and he [Nick] goes
5 Rob: ''oh I got this porno film''/ I said ''oh you'll have
6 Rob: to let me borrow that film . Nick''/ and this is a bloke
7 Rob: . that's- stays up . till . bloody twelve o'clock
8 Rob: to watch the free ten minutes of soft porn ⌈ on Sky/
Gary: ⌊ ⟨LAUGHTER⟩
Dan: ⟨LAUGHTER⟩
9 Rob: so you can . imagine how sad this bloke is/ his
10 Rob: pride and joy this tape/ he absolutely loves it to bits/
[. . .] [*Rob borrows the tape and makes a copy at home*]
11 Rob: got back/ thought ''oh I'll just have a look/ see what
12 Rob: it's like''/ (1.5) rewound it/ pressed play/ this is MTV/
13 Rob: (1.5) strange/ got the other tape/ oh fuck I've recorded
14 Rob: MTV over it/ ⟨LAUGHS⟩ so I had to pluck up courage
15 Rob: to tell him . that . I taped over his . bloody pride and
16 Rob: joy video tape with three hours of MTV/ ⟨LAUGHS⟩

Being 'bad' here clearly accords with the young men's sense of what it is to be masculine. When Gary asks the question *you not been demolishing houses recently?*, he explicitly invites Rob to tell a story about being 'bad', and we see how Rob works hard to respond to his invitation. Rob's story functions simultaneously to present him as someone who is not 'sad' (unlike Nick Staples), as someone who is an agent in his own life, but also as someone who makes mistakes, mistakes which he presents to his friends as something to laugh about, as proof of his laddishness. It should also be noted that he says he has to *pluck up courage* to admit his mistake to the injured party. This intriguing mixture of openness and bravado seems to be typical of contemporary (young) masculinity. Like women in conversation with friends, young men tell disaster stories, but unlike women they do not present themselves as victims and the stories do not function as confessions. On the other hand, they do not present themselves as heroes, but rather as well-meaning happy-go-lucky persons whose actions sometimes lead to unintended outcomes. Their attitude to these outcomes is one of amusement rather than horror. The television programme *Men Behaving Badly* plugs into this sense of laddish masculinity. The programme's title emphasizes a particular aspect of contemporary masculinity – in fact the series could (with tongue-in-cheek affection) be called *Men Behaving Normally*.

It could be argued that, in contemporary Britain, 'behaving badly' has positive connotations when associated with men, while the phrase has negative connotations when associated with women. This means that certain kinds of behaviour are taboo for women. Yet the evidence of the poem I started with is that there is a strong desire in women to challenge these constraints.

In this paper, I want to ask the question: Where is this challenge expressed? I shall draw on Goffman's (1971) dramaturgical metaphors of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' to explore the way women deal with aspects of the self which do not accord with conventional norms of femininity. For all of us, 'frontstage' performance is much more carefully controlled, and much more susceptible to prevailing norms of politeness and decorum. Informal personal conversations are widely acknowledged to be backstage activity. This does not mean that in interaction with friends we are not performing, but the distinction between performer and audience is blurred: there is a sense of 'all-in-together' and failures in performance cease to be a worry. 'There can be plenty of performance failures here [i.e. backstage]: in fact the sharing of such failures as they actually transpire is what makes up the ''informality'' of the talk, and the sense of ease and intimacy of selves that goes with it' (Collins 1988: 56). This means that burping or sneezing in the middle of an utterance to a friend will actually underline the friendliness of the encounter.

Given the constraints on appropriate behaviour for women in public spaces, even today, it is not surprising that women have always had a particular relish for the 'sense of ease and intimacy of selves' that goes with informal backstage

talk. Goffman himself noticed that women interacting with other women provide a particularly good example of backstage. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* he quotes a long extract from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* which ends as follows:

> With other women, a woman is behind the scenes; she is polishing her equipment, but not in battle; she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics; she is lingering in dressing gown and slippers in the wings before making her entrance on the stage; she likes this warm, easy, relaxed atmosphere . . . For some women this warm and frivolous intimacy is dearer than the serious pomp of relations with men. (De Beauvoir quoted in Goffman 1971: 115)

In this paper I will explore women's (and girls') self-presentation in contexts where they seem most relaxed, most off-record, that is, when they are backstage with each other. In particular, I shall focus on those aspects of women's backstage performance of self which do not fit prevailing norms of femininity: women's performances of 'not-nice' selves, as well as reports of – and fantasies about – behaving 'badly'. I shall draw on a corpus of both mixed and same-sex conversation gathered over the last 15 years with the aim of exploring the speaking practices of (white, middle- and working class) women and men with their friends, in pairs and in larger groups. Speakers ranged in age from twelve to fifty years old. The corpus consists of spontaneously-occurring conversations, recorded with the agreement of participants in settings chosen by participants themselves: in the case of the women this was invariably the home, apart from one group of adolescent girls who recorded themselves in a room in their local youth club. (This contrasts with male participants who chose a wide range of settings: in their homes, in pubs, in a university office after hours, in a youth club, even in a garden shed in the case of one group of (dope-smoking) adolescent boys.)[3]

WOMEN'S BACKSTAGE TALK

Backstage talk can be described as 'performers' shop talk' (Collins 1988: 56). One of the things women friends do with each other is talk over their performance frontstage, describing the feelings that accompanied the performance. During such talk, women will often say things which contradict the polite front maintained during the performance. Such contradictions are an intrinsic part of backstage talk: 'A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (Goffman 1971: 114).

The following extract from a conversation between two young women friends illustrates this nicely. One of the friends (Ann) has complained of having a bad day at work.

2. 1 Jude: why did you have a bad day?
Ann: got into work this morning
2 Jude: oh dear/ [how did you break them?
Ann: and broke two mugs/ then [er-
3 Jude: [what did they say?
Ann: dropped 'em/ ⟨LAUGHS⟩ [then er I got all the bloody
4 Ann: snotty customers/ stupid people/ . had one lady who er
5 Ann: bought twelve glasses/ and I was wrapping them all up/
6 Ann: and she'd told me after I'd wrapped six of them up/
7 Ann: ''Can you take the price off the bottom of them''/
8 Ann: stupid cow/ ''Yes certainly Madam''/ so I unwrapped
9 Ann: them all and rewrapped them/

Ann's story of her 'bad day' makes very clear distinctions between front stage and back stage. In her frontstage persona, she describes herself as answering the customer politely and doing what she is asked to do without question. The two speakers also implicitly acknowledge that breaking things at work is a failure of performance. At the same time, Ann intersperses her narrative with comments which tell Jude what she *really* felt at work. She refers to the customers she'd served as *bloody snotty customers* and *stupid people* (staves 3–4), and her comment *stupid cow* (stave 8) about one particular customer is juxtaposed with her acting out of her own super-polite persona saying to this customer: *Yes certainly Madam.*

So in this example, Ann tells the story of her day to a friend and presents herself in a way which directly contradicts the impression she had carried off at work. At work, the exigencies of her role as a (female) shop worker require her to perform herself as 'nice'. At home, talking to a close friend, she performs a very different self, one who is not nice, who is rude about the customers and who resents doing what they ask. We have to infer that 'behaving badly' like this backstage – that is, owning our less nice, our more impolite and unsociable feelings – is accepted and even welcomed between friends, precisely because backstage is the appropriate arena for dropping your front, and because reciprocal admissions of 'not-niceness' reinforce solidarity.

I want to look now at the backstage talk of some very young speakers, three four-year-old girls. This example provides a very striking case of female speakers performing 'not-nice' selves, in the context of fantasy play. The three speakers here are playing with dolls in their British nursery kindergarten class. The girls decide in their personae as Mothers that they need to bath the babies. They move through a sequence of utterances: 'G3 suggests the water is hot; G2 says ''Let's boil the babies''; G1: ''Yes let's boil them and boil them''; G2: ''We'll boil them till their skins fall off'' ' (Cook-Gumperz in press).

This example comes from data collected by Jenny Cook-Gumperz in research exploring the role of play – specifically the role of talk in play – in the formation of gender identity. Girls' pretend play often involves games where girls enact domestic scenarios (see also Goodwin 1988, 1990). In modern western societies, learning to be a woman involves learning how to be a 'good

mother', to the extent that 'an idealised figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow' over the lives of girls and women (Ruddick 1989: 31). Play has a key role in this learning. Cook-Gumperz argues that 'one important function of the game [of Mummies and Babies] is to allow the two girls, in their game talk, to explore their gender role as women' (Cook-Gumperz 1995: 416). But clearly, the game *is* a game and the girls are aware of this. They exploit the backstage nature of their play together away from adults (though in this case not away from the concealed tape-recorder) to explore the role of women as mothers by pushing at the limits, and by acting out being *bad* mothers.

The expression of such violent and blatantly un-maternal feelings by three year old girls is simultaneously amusing and shocking. The expression of similar un-maternal feelings in relation to real children by adult women is much more shocking. The next example comes from a conversation between three women in their 30s who have been friends for many years.

3. 1 Anna: some people when they have children just think- just
2 Anna: assume that everybody loves kids/ [that everybody
Sue: [
Liz: oh I know/ [they do/
3 Anna: they know [all they have to [do-
Sue: [((xxx)) [who wants to see them))
Liz: [especially theirs/
4 Anna: it's like Michael's sister was like that wasn't she? =
Sue: =mhm/
Liz:
5 Anna: ''you must love [((2 sylls))/ they're so wonderful''/
Sue: [they were HORrible/
Liz:
6 Anna: and they were GHASTly children/
Sue:
Liz: nobody ever says
7 Liz: that <u>do they</u>/ ⟨LAUGHING⟩

In this example, we see the three friends exploring the clash between the assumption that *everybody loves kids* (stave 2) and that all children are *wonderful* (stave 5) and the reality that some children are NOT wonderful – *they were horrible* (stave 5)/*they were ghastly children* (stave 6). There is explicit acknowledgement that to call children 'horrible' or 'ghastly' is taboo – Liz says *nobody ever says that do they* (staves 6–7). This is an interesting comment, since the three women are in fact saying precisely that. Liz's remark can be understood to mean 'nobody ever says that when they are frontstage'. The frontstage performance of Woman/Mother entails certain sorts of behaviour and precludes others. Saying 'children are wonderful' is expected, but saying 'children are horrible' is taboo. The fact that these women feel able to express subversive views with each other demonstrates the backstage nature of women's friendly talk. These women exemplify very clearly Goffman's (1971: 115) description of

backstage as a place where '. . . the performer can relax; he (sic) can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character'. These women are relaxed: they have dropped their front, and stepped out of character.

Having agreed that they have negative feelings about some children, the three friends go on to consider their attitude to children in general. This next extract from their conversation is initiated by Anna, the only one of the three who does not have children.

4. 1 Anna: can I just ask you two as mothers/ did you used
2 Anna: to feel particularly fond of children before you
3 Anna: had them?=
Sue: =no/= how can I say that? I used to
Liz: =no/
4 Anna: [you did didn't you/
Sue: work with them/⟨LAUGHS⟩ [but no/
Liz:
5 Anna:
Sue: no/
Liz: I didn't/ I wasn't very maternal at all/ – no/
6 Anna: cos Janet and I without [children .
Sue: [
Liz: [you just get used to them/
7 Anna: you know you feel- you do feel a bit mean sometimes/
8 Anna: but I just can't understand that assumption that people
9 Anna: have that everybody loves-
Sue: you can't go round-
Liz:
10 Anna: [((xx)) certain children . I
Sue: I wouldn't expect [anybody to((xxx)) my child/
Liz: [no I wouldn't/
11 Anna: really like/ but parents [like that ((just))-
Sue: [
Liz: [I think it's- I think
12 Anna:
Sue:
Liz: it's a- . a fallacy as well that you like every
13 Anna: no/ . that's right/
Sue: [mhm/ I still
Liz: child/ [cos you don't/
14 Anna: ⟨LAUGHS⟩
Sue: quite often don't like children/ ⟨LAUGHS⟩
Liz: actually
15 Liz: I think you particularly dislike your own/

Here we see a subtle shift from the proposition 'some children are horrible' to the proposition 'I don't like every child' (*I think it's a fallacy as well that you like every child*, Liz, staves 11–13), and from here to the even more taboo proposition 'I don't like children' (Sue and Liz both say *no* in stave 2 in response to Anna's

question *did you used to feel particularly fond of children before you had them?*, and Sue says *I still quite often don't like children* in stave 14). This shift is marked syntactically by a change in grammatical subject. The earlier propositions involved sentences where the subject of the sentence is children, for example, *they were horrible* or *they were ghastly children* (note that the women's involvement is not marked syntactically in these sentences). By contrast, the later propositions position the women as the (pronominal) subjects, through the use of 'I' or the impersonal pronoun 'you'. Liz's final utterance (*actually I think you particularly dislike your own*, stave 15) marks a further step in bringing the propositions close to home: here Liz not only has women as the pronominal subject (*you*) but transforms the children from some generalised group to specific children – 'your own' – in other words, precisely that sub-set of children who, in your front-stage performance, you are not allowed to be un-maternal towards.

The backstage talk we see here is highly subversive. Dominant discourses of femininity (and of motherhood) do not allow for the expression of negative feelings about children. Anna, Sue and Liz support each other in sustaining a radically different discourse, one which challenges the idea of women as loving, caring, nurturing beings for whom having children is the ultimate experience of their lives.

The next two examples come from conversation between a different group of women friends, women who are about 10 years older than Anna, Sue and Liz, and who live in the north of England rather than the south. One of the women tells a story which hinges on her open expression of negative feelings towards an old friend, Stan, and her unconcealed pleasure at Stan's son's failure to get a brilliant degree, despite his early promise.[4]

5. [Stan's] one of those few- one of the few people in the world that I feel deeply spiteful towards, and it's all to do with his son and my son.
3 My son's a little bit older than his son,
but when they were both young lads about fourteen or something,
he said to me, ''Well you know Jacob isn't of the same calibre as Max,
6 and Max is a genius ⟨SLOW AND PRECISE⟩ and er you know thi-
not many people are blessed with having a genius as a child''.
[. . .]
but it was true that Max's incredibly creative child,
9 he could do absolutely everything,
he w- he made fantastic meccano models,
and he was the brightest boy they'd ever had in his- in the previous school,
12 and he went to Birkenhead School ((on a)) scholarship.
[. . .]
Anyway Max got a 2.2!

This story is followed by one from Bea, which takes up the theme of delighting in the failure of a friend's – or ex-friend's – child. Serial story-telling, where speakers in turn tell anecdotes on a common theme, is a common feature of friendly talk (see Galloway Young 1987; Shepherd 1997). In women's talk,

serial story-telling often takes the form of reciprocal self-disclosure (Coates 1996a, 1996b).

6. I feel like that about a friend of mine who lives in New York
who's- well she refers to her son as her little star,
and that doesn't help.
and when I arrived at the – at the – at her apartment to stay,
and she and her husband were both out at their exciting jobs in publishing,
and this lad of s- of seven or eight let me in,
and asked if he could make me some coffee.
(Sally: *oh he is a little star then*)
You know he IS a little star,
and he's so perfect that you just want to jump up and down 'im
and see if he'd squish you know,
[. . .]
and I'm so hoping that something marvellous will happen
and he'll run away from home
and – or you know something will squelch this . . .

These two stories are again classic backstage talk: the women friends feel able to let down their fronts, to drop their normal 'nice' scripts. Both stories tell of ex-friends who offended or irritated the narrators in one way or another, and both stories declare the narrator's pleasure in the failure (real or imagined) of the ex-friend's offspring. Meg's presentation of Stan through reported speech portrays him negatively – as a parent who is insensitive to others (through his comparison of his son and Meg's) and who has ridiculously inflated ideas about his son (the reality being that he only got a lower second class degree). Speakers exploit reported speech to adopt a variety of voices, and to animate characters in their stories in ways which fit the bias of their story. Reported speech has an important evaluative function in story-telling (Maybin 1996) and women talking backstage explore alternative femininities through playing with different voices.

One thing that stands out about these two stories is that both Meg and Bea describe their feelings with relish: they make no attempt to hedge what they are saying. Meg says *[Stan's] one of the few people in the world that I feel deeply spiteful towards.* Admitting to feeling 'deeply spiteful' about someone is not part of women's normal front-stage performance. Bea's story reveals her irritation with (and possibly envy of) her New York friend, in particular her exciting job in publishing and her son who she calls a 'little star'. (This phrase irritates her since it contravenes the norm that mothers should be modest about their children's talents and should refrain from eulogising them in public.) Bea's remark *and he's so perfect that you just want to jump up and down 'im and see if he'd squish you know* (lines 9–10) is not only not-maternal and not-nice, it also betrays feelings of violence which are outside the range of 'normal' femininity. But Bea's words express a fantasy, and so are more comparable to the little girls' *let's boil the babies* than to Meg's gloating over Stan's son's mediocre degree.

CELEBRATING DEVIANT WOMEN

The evidence I have looked at so far involves women exposing their not-nice selves to each other either through discussion of not-nice, un-feminine feelings, or through recounting past actions which show them behaving 'badly', or through sharing fantasies about behaving 'badly'. I now want to look at another strategy common in women's talk which has an important role to play in the expression of 'not-niceness'. It has been widely observed that women monitor and attempt to control community norms through discussing *other* women's behaviour (Goodwin 1990; Eckert 1993, 1998; Coates 1996a). These observations have often focused on the way groups position themselves in opposition to the values or attitudes betrayed by third parties, that is, by querying or criticising or even condemning the behaviour of others. But this same strategy – the discussion of others' actions – can be used as an opportunity to celebrate 'bad' behaviour, and has the great advantage of simultaneously keeping the speakers at one remove from such overtly 'bad' behaviour. In the next example Anna describes how her mother arrived at her ex-husband's funeral; this example also reconnects to the theme of growing old disgracefully.[5]

7. when my father died last year
she came down to the funeral
and she got a train- she got a train that got into Euston ⟨LAUGHING⟩
at about-
she got the sleeper
and it got into Euston about six thirty in the morning,
and she said to Charles ''and I- I'll get the train to Esher,
just make sure that the answering machine's not on and that you're up,
so that somebody can come and get me from Esher station'',
and I was staying with my step-mother to keep her company,
so it was all in Charles's hands,
and of course he forgot,
he was fast asleep in bed,
so my mother gets to Esher station at seven thirty in the morning.
and there's no Charles
and it's pouring with rain
so.what does she do?
she walks round the corner,
sees that there's a milk depot, a Unigate milk depot,
and she walked in,
and she asked one of the milkmen to give her a lift to the house. ⟨LAUGHING⟩
and she arrived on a milk float ⟨LAUGHING⟩ for my dad's funeral. ⟨CHUCKLING⟩
it was so funny.

Anna's friends respond to this story with a great deal of laughter, some of it almost uncontrollable, and Sue comments: *oh love it*, an explicit recognition of the positive pleasure such a story provides. Anna's mother, who features in a string of stories told by Anna to her friends, is an unconventional character who

allows for the discussion of unusual, un-feminine behaviour – and for the celebration of such behaviour. While the story concerns an everyday event – a family funeral – the ingredients are unconventional from the start, since the dead man will be mourned by both his ex-wife (Anna's mother) and his second wife (Anna's step-mother). What makes the story so funny is the incongruity of an older women dressed for a funeral travelling in a milk-float. The fact that this is a third-person narrative, not a personal account, is potentially liberating, as the friends themselves are not implicated in the behaviour described.

BACKSTAGE CONSTRAINTS

Although backstage behaviour is much more relaxed than frontstage, there are still constraints. Being backstage 'does not mean that friendly talkers are exempt from problems of framing and staging' (Collins 1988: 56). Moreover, even as the blurring of performer and audience typical of backstage talk produces solidarity among talkers, so it is still important that speakers present themselves as 'good persons', both to protect their own face and that of fellow speakers. In any context, whether formal or informal, a speaker will select the 'least self-threatening position in the circumstances' (Goffman 1981: 326).

This means that, even in talk between close women friends, where self-disclosure is reciprocal and taboo feelings can be acknowledged, speakers have to pay attention to their performance, to the extent that speakers confirm in themselves and each other a sense of being a 'good person'. This is obviously a tricky task where the topic under discussion involves speakers presenting themselves as 'not nice'.

It is noticeable that in many conversations where we find women performing selves that could be seen as un-feminine and not-nice, the participants themselves comment critically on the behaviour they have revealed. After telling her story of the boy who is *a little star* that she would like to *squish*, Bea makes a comment which involves labelling the feeling she has just described as *awful*, a pejorative adjective:

8. 1 Bea: isn't it *awful* [author's italics] the way you DO get
   2 Bea: set up with some people though where you- you- you'd
   3 Bea: actually take pleasure- instead of taking pleasure in
   4 Bea: the triumphs of their children= [. . . .]
   Meg: =yeah/
   5 Bea: you think ''<u>yeah – she fails! innit great</u>!'' ⟨GROWLY VOICE⟩.

This is followed by a discussion where Mary (who arrives after the stories were told) also expresses unhappiness with the idea that we take pleasure from other people's failure, even though she agrees she has done this.

9. 1 Mary: but I don't like feeling like that=
   Meg: =no I don't like
   Jen: =oh it's horrid/

2	Mary:	you know/
	Meg:	feeling like that/ but um [((I think it's
	Bea:	[well it seems
3	Mary:	[but I DO do it/ [a lot/
	Meg:	[xx))	yeah/ =yeah/ oh I feel it
	Bea:	[like we all do feel like [that=
	Sally:	=yes/
4	Mary:	yeah/
	Meg:	a lot/ I feel it most- more than I don't feel/
	Others:	⟨LAUGHTER⟩
5	Mary:	the older I get the more of a horrible bitch I get/
6	Mary:	⟨LAUGHS⟩

This discussion is a clear demonstration of the tension between the need to express not-nice feelings and the need to keep a foothold in the conventional frontstage world where women are always nice and mothers are always loving. On the not-nice side, Bea (staves 2–3) asserts that they all feel these not-nice feelings about other people's children, and simultaneously Mary admits *I do do it a lot* (stave 3). Meg (staves 3–4) pushes this further by claiming that she is more likely to feel 'bad' rather than 'good' feelings about other people's children, an admission which is received with supportive laughter by the others. On the other hand, Mary's claim that she doesn't like feeling *like that* (stave 1) is supported emphatically by Meg and Jen, and Mary later labels herself as a *horrible bitch* (stave 5). In other words, rather than celebrating the fact that as she gets older she feels freer to behave badly, Mary frames her behaviour as a negative, un-feminine development.

This tension between front- and backstage norms, which is a feature of all backstage talk, is exacerbated in the case of women speakers by their position in society, in particular their relationship to symbolic capital (see Bourdieu 1977; Eckert 1993, 1998). According to this perspective, women need to gain symbolic capital on the basis of their character and their relationships with others. Women's symbolic capital is evaluated in relation to community norms, so it is very important that women attempt to control these norms. Penelope Eckert claims that all-female talk is 'the major means by which they do this' (Eckert 1993: 35). This means that women need to pay attention to frontstage norms of femininity even while letting their hair down backstage.

As a result, in women's backstage talk we find women relaxing and letting down the conventional, 'nice' front they normally maintain frontstage. But we also find women expressing ambivalence about these alternative, subversive aspects of their identities. This may be done by explicit self-labelling, as we saw with Mary's remark in example 9 *the older I get the more of a horrible bitch I get*. Alternatively, it may be expressed in the uneasy response of fellow-speakers. In a conversation involving four teenage girls, Hannah exclaims *Laura!* in a disapproving tone when Laura discloses her fantasies about a boy in her class putting hair gel on his pubic hair and combing it. Even when the talk is of third

parties, as in Anna's story of her mother (example 7 above), there is some ambivalence expressed. While Sue and Liz are openly celebratory about her (for example, Sue says, *must be really fun to have a mum like that*), Anna herself tempers her stories with comments such as *she's lunatic* and *she's absolutely nutty.* While these comments are said affectionately, in a context where Anna overall expresses amused admiration of her mother, the choice of the words 'lunatic' and 'nutty' position the mother at the abnormal end of some imaginary spectrum, and distance her from Anna and her friends (who therefore are positioned as more 'normal').

Our need to position ourselves as relatively 'normal' as well as nice is a constant restraining factor. Women continually monitor both their own and other women's performances in a variety of ways. None of us is ever free of the need to keep up some sort of front.

BACKSTAGE: SAFETY-NET OR REVOLUTIONARY CELL?

In this paper I have explored the ways in which women express not-nice aspects of themselves, despite frontstage pressures to conform to prevailing norms of femininity. I have argued, following Goffman, that backstage is a region which allows the performer to drop her front and talk openly with fellow-performers about aspects of herself which don't fit her frontstage role. Backstage interaction fulfils a vital need in women's lives to talk about behaving badly, whether this means recounting incidents where we behaved badly, or whether it means fantasizing about such behaviour, or whether it means discussing and celebrating the unconventional behaviour of other women. In other words, backstage talk allows women to support each other in challenging or subverting frontstage norms, and in exploring alternative selves.

However, the data I have collected suggests that women feel obliged to balance such subversion by adopting, often simultaneously, more conventional discourses where they express ambivalence about, or label negatively, the not-nice aspects of themselves. I have argued that, even backstage, women are obliged to pay attention to prevailing social norms because of their lack of social power.

The evidence of the conversations I have recorded is that, despite these constraints, women take great pleasure in exploring aspects of themselves which cannot normally be expressed frontstage. The 'warm, easy, relaxed atmosphere' (DeBeauvoir quoted in Goffman 1971: 115) of backstage provides women with a relatively safe space to express less conventionally feminine, less 'nice' aspects of themselves. Women, like men, need to assert their right to wholeness, to having not-nice as well as nice feelings. Jenny Joseph's poem *Warning* with which I began this paper is a rare frontstage assertion of such feelings. It is testimony to women's desire to have the right to be not-nice that the poem is such a favourite.

But it remains to be seen whether the overt expression of alternative and

subversive femininities backstage only serves to perpetuate the heteropatriarchal order, by providing an outlet for the frustrations of frontstage performance. Or is it possible that such backstage rehearsals may eventually lead to new frontstage performances?

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at Sociolinguistics Symposium 12, University of London, March 1998. The questions and comments arising from this presentation have helped me in revising the paper. I would like to thank all those who gave me feedback about the paper, particularly Jenny Cheshire and the anonymous readers for the Journal.
2. The corpus consists of 50 conversations, 20 all-female, 20 all-male and 10 mixed. In total, 88 different speakers were involved in 37 hours and 25 minutes of spontaneous talk. Further details and an account of the methodology employed can be found in Coates (1996), chapter 1.
3. I am grateful to all those who allowed themselves to be recorded for allowing me to use their talk as research material. I am also grateful to colleagues and students who have made data available to me, and to those who have helped me with transcribing the data. The names of all participants have been changed.
4. Narratives are presented in the format devised by Wallace Chafe (1980), where each line represents an 'idea-unit'.
5. Another story celebrating Anna's mother's 'bad' behaviour can be found in Coates (1996a: 100–101, 1996b: 8).

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APPENDIX:
Transcription conventions

The transcription conventions used for the conversational data are as follows:

1. A slash (/) indicates the end of a tone group or chunk of talk.
2. A question mark indicates the end of a chunk of talk which I am analyzing as a question.
3. A hyphen indicates an incomplete word or utterance.
4. Pauses are indicated by a full stop (short pause – less than 0.5 seconds) or by figures in round brackets (longer than 0.5 seconds).
5. A broken line marks the beginning of a stave and indicates that the lines enclosed by the lines are to be read simultaneously (like a musical score).
6. An extended square bracket indicates the start of overlap between utterances.
7. An equals sign at the end of one speaker's utterance and at the start of the next utterance indicates the absence of a discernible gap.
8. Double round parentheses indicate that there is doubt about the accuracy of the transcription.

9. Where material is impossible to make out, it is represented as follows: ((xx)).
10. Angled brackets give clarificatory information about underlined material.
11. Capital letters are used for words/syllables uttered with emphasis.
12. The symbol [. . .] indicates that material has been omitted.

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