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**Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party:**
Empowering of Women's Voice in Visual Art

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With his notion of the discursive formation, Michel Foucault has focused attention on the lack of input into mainstream discourse by subordinate groups on the periphery of society. A discursive formation is the code of a culture that governs "its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices" (Foucault, 1970, p. xx). It is the characteristic system, structure, or network that defines the conditions for the possibility of knowledge or for the world view of an age. Various rules govern who is allowed to speak and be heard in a discursive formation, the conditions under which they are allowed to speak, and the content and form their discourse must assume (Foucault, 1972, pp. 41-44, 56-67, 68, 224-225). Knowledge is generated by the discursive practices of a discursive formation so that those individuals who are not "heard" or allowed to participate in the dominant discourse do not have their knowledge incorporated into the common cultural knowledge.

Kramarae (1981) arrives at similar conclusions about the role of a submerged group's discourse in a culture in her discussion of the minority perspective on language. Minority groups in a culture, she asserts, tend to have little power because they have little control over their economic fortunes or social status. Consequently, they find that their speech is not evaluated highly by those in the predominant culture, they generally are not represented in decision-making or policy making processes of that culture, and they thus are denied a voice in it. Samuel Beckett (1958) explained this inability to be heard particularly well: "I
am walled round with their vociferations, none will ever know what
I am, none will ever hear me say it. I won’t say it, I can’t say it. I
have no language but theirs. . . .” (p. 52).

A prerequisite to having their voices heard in a discursive formation
or the dominant culture is that members of a submerged group must
develop their own authentic voice. They must develop knowledge and
discourse out of their own experiences and interpret and label these
experiences in their own terms. Perhaps even more important, they
must come to see their experiences and discourse as legitimate and
valuable. Developing this authenticity and attributing power to it are
difficult for a submerged group, however, because their experience has
been interpreted for them for so long by others and devalued by those
others. The submerged group has been trained to see itself as represented
in the dominant discourse of the culture and has come to subordinate
even its authentic and potentially powerful voice to that culture (Schulz,
1984). Certainly, the submerged group faces difficulties following de-
velopment and empowerment of its authentic voice—it must secure
acknowledgment of its authority to speak by the dominant group. But
empowerment cannot happen without a strong sense of identity within
the submerged group apart from the dominant culture. Group members
first must possess the “courage to be and to speak . . . the Courage
to Blaspheme” (Daly, 1978, p. 264) the definitions of themselves as
powerless that have been established by the dominant discourse.

My purpose in this essay is to identify some of the strategies that
submerged groups use to empower their own perspective or to develop
legitimacy for the knowledge and discourse that are available to them.
I have chosen to examine the discourse of women as a case study of
this process. In a male-dominated culture where “[p]atriarchy is itself
the prevailing religion” (Daly, 1978, p. 39), women constitute a marginal
group. They have been excluded in many ways from public life, and
they occupy largely peripheral and powerless positions when they do
enter that realm. Because of their different positions from men, women
have experience that “is institutionally and linguistically structured in
a way that is different from that of men” (Ferguson, 1984, p. 23). Yet,
this experience, along with the knowledge and discourse it generates,
is submerged, devalued, and generally not heard in the male-dominated
culture. As Daly (1978) explains, “It is when women speak our own
truth that incredulity comes from all sides” (p. 91). Women’s words,
because they do not conform to the rules of the dominant discursive
formation, are treated as “officially worthless” (Daly, p. 92).

While numerous scholars have attempted to identify the characteristic
qualities of women’s perspective or voice as a result of their different
experiences in the culture, I do not want to make a case either for or
against particular qualities as representative of the female voice. Instead,
my focus in this essay is on the process by which women come to see
their symbols, rituals, and regular practices—the content of their ex-
periences that tends to be overlooked in the male world view—as
legitimate.

I have selected for the study of strategies used to empower women’s
voice a work of visual art, Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party (a detailed
description and photographs of the work can be found in Chicago,
1979). I chose this work for my object of study because of its richness
of data. Because it incorporates both discursive and nondiscursive data—
words, colors, lines, textures, and images—it may reveal strategies that
would not be apparent in a work of discursive rhetoric alone. In addition,
if, in fact, women’s perspective is submerged in our culture, a work
that is free to go beyond the bounds of the conventional language
system, which gives voice largely to men, might demonstrate more
clearly strategies used to empower that alternative perspective.

In selecting The Dinner Party as the data for my study, I am aware
of a number of assumptions I require the reader to accept if this study
is to be seen as capable of contributing to theory development in
communication. First, of course, I am assuming that visual images are
included in the scope of rhetoric or communication. As the conscious
production or arrangement of colors, forms, images, textures, and other
elements in a manner that affects or evokes a response, I see visual
images as forms of rhetoric that attempt, as does discursive rhetoric,
to influence others’ “thinking and behavior through the strategic use
of symbols” (Ehninger, 1972, p. 3).

I also recognize that works of art contain both rhetorical and aesthetic
qualities. Experience of a work at an aesthetic level is the apprehension
or perception of the sensory elements of the object—enjoyment of its
colors or the valuing of its texture, for example. But when a viewer
attributes meaning to those sensory elements and they begin to refer
to images, emotions, and ideas beyond themselves, the response has
become a rhetorical one—that with which I will be concerned here.

No one true meaning or interpretation can be made of an art object’s
function as a rhetorical symbol. To say that an art object has meaning
for a viewer does not suggest that it signifies some fixed referent. Rather,
meaning results from and requires a viewer’s creation of an interpretation
of the visual object. Different meanings are attributed to a work of art,
then, by different viewers as a result of the differing endowments and
experiences brought to the work.

The predominant role of the viewer in the establishment of the
meaning for a work of art, however, does not mean that a viewer has
total freedom to attribute any meaning at all to the work. A viewer’s
interpretation is limited by the actual object itself. Although that meaning is not an inherent part of the object, the solid physical presence of a work of art makes possible the work's aesthetic and rhetorical effects. More important, the physical characteristics render one rhetorical interpretation more likely to occur than another.

In my analysis of The Dinner Party, I will identify the physical or material properties of the work that a viewer is likely to use as the basis for attribution of meanings to it. While my description may seem anthropomorphic in that I will use phrases such as, "The Dinner Party provides" or "the work generates," this style was selected simply as a matter of convenience. I do not intend to suggest that the meaning of the work lies in these physical attributes or that The Dinner Party itself is a rhetor capable of producing purposive communication. Rather, I am suggesting that as the physical embodiment of its creator's intention, the work can be examined as containing particular characteristics that are likely to guide the viewer's interpretation in particular directions. The viewer is free to interpret The Dinner Party or create meaning for it according to her own experiences, as long as the meaning attributed is grounded somehow in the material form of the art object.

The Dinner Party

The Dinner Party opened on March 14, 1979, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The show next traveled to the University of Houston in Clear Lake City, Texas, opening there on March 9, 1980. It was shown at the Boston Center for the Arts in July and August of 1980 and at the Brooklyn Museum in New York from October, 1980, through January, 1981. In July and August of 1981, The Dinner Party was on display in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, followed by its exhibition in Chicago from September, 1981, through February, 1982. It now is in storage until a permanent gallery space can be located for it.

The work itself is a room-size installation piece whose primary element is an open-centered, triangular table approximately 48 feet long on each side and 26 inches wide. Resting on the table are 39 sculptured plates, each representing a woman from history—from the mythical past through the present. The first wing of the table represents women from prehistory to the decline of Greco-Roman culture and includes plates representing women such as the Primordial Goddess; Kali, an ancient Indian goddess; Hatshepsut, an Egyptian pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty; and Sappho, a Greek poet of about 600 B.C. The second wing of the table represents women from the period of Christianity to the Reformation and includes plates for such figures as Saint Bridget,
a sixth-century Irish saint; Eleanor of Aquitaine, a French queen of the thirteenth century; and Petronilla de Meath, a woman who was burned as a witch in Ireland. The third wing represents the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries and includes plates for Anne Hutchinson, a seventeenth-century American Puritan and reformer; Caroline Herschel, a nineteenth-century German scientist; Sojourner Truth, an American abolitionist and feminist; and English writer Virginia Woolf.

Each place setting includes a ceramic or painted china plate, a goldlined ceramic goblet, lustre flatware, a gold-edged napkin, and an elaborate needlework runner that contains the name of the woman represented in gold script. The goblets, napkins, and flatware are the same for all the place settings, but each of the plates and runners is different.

The place setting representing Emily Dickinson, for example, contains a very feminine, pink plate with a vulva-like center surrounded by six rows of real lace that were dipped in liquid ceramic and then fired. The plate rests on a round pink-and-white lace “collar” or placemat, and the gold runner beneath it is edged in the same pink lace of the plate.

The plate that represents Susan B. Anthony also contains a center vaginal form—this time in a deep red color, edged by a fold of lighter red. Four molded, draped “wings” spread out from this center and curl up at the edges of the plate, suggesting a butterfly rising from the plate. The butterfly form is a luminescent red, which seems to vibrate against a beige background. The plate rests on a bright red triangle of sturdy woven fabric edged with fringe. Streaming out from behind this triangle are strips of white and black fabric, representing a “Memory Quilt” for Anthony. Embroidered on each white strip is the name of a suffragist from Anthony’s period, including Anna Howard Shaw, Harriot Stanton Blatch, and Paulina Wright Davis.

In the plate of Theodora, a Byzantine empress of the sixth century, the illusion of separate mosaic tiles in green, pink, and gold is created through a series of lines etched into the plate. While this plate is flat, in contrast to Dickinson’s and Anthony’s, it again features a butterfly form. The butterfly image is composed of circles, diamonds, and other forms that suggest traditional designs of stained-glass windows. Theodora’s plate rests on a round, braided gold placemat on top of a gold satin runner. At the front of the runner, below Theodora’s name, is a strip of purple satin edged with purple and gold lace and ribbon.

The table, containing 39 such place settings, rests on a raised triangular platform called the Heritage Floor. It is composed of more than 2,300 hand-cast white pearsescent triangular tiles. Written across the tiles in gold script are the names of 999 women, grouped by historical
period around the woman's place at the table who represents that particular period.

The Dinner Party was the creation of artist Judy Chicago, born Judy Cohen in Chicago in 1939. She studied art at the University of California at Los Angeles, where the sexually feminine images she employed in her work were ridiculed by her male professors. She began to realize the need for more support for women artists and for recognition that the images produced by women artists would be different from those produced by men. She became known as a feminist artist and in 1969 denounced "all names imposed upon her through male social dominance" (Chicago, 1977, p. 63) and chose her own name: Judy Chicago.

While teaching at Fresno State, Chicago organized an art class for women. With the members of the class, she founded WomanSpace, an exhibition space for women housed in an old mansion in Los Angeles. She went on to develop a Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, which led her to conclude that women artists need an entirely independent structure in which to work. She then organized the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles. In 1973, the Workshop, WomanSpace, and other feminist galleries and organizations were incorporated into the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, which was designed to provide a feminist context for women artists.

Chicago worked on the execution of The Dinner Party by herself for three years, studying ceramics and china painting in order to learn the techniques necessary for the execution of the piece. In October, 1975, faced with the growing awareness that she could not complete a work of this magnitude alone, Chicago began taking on help. She obtained the assistance of a graduate student with experience in porcelain to work on the execution of the plates, an assistant to supervise the needlework on the runners, researchers to compile the biographies of the 3,000 women from which the names for the floor tiles were selected, and an assistant to supervise the casting and sanding of the floor tiles. Diane Gelon, an art historian, was added to coordinate the entire project and to serve as second-in-command to Chicago.

In addition to the five or six individuals who fully participated during the three-year cooperative period of the project, about 125 individuals were considered "members of the project," and another 300 assisted with smaller contributions of both work and ideas to the execution of the piece. The work was carried out in Chicago's Santa Monica studio, which had been remodeled with the assistance of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to include a ceramics studio, an electric kiln, a needlework loft, and a dust-free china painting room. Thus, although the piece was conceived and directed by Chicago, it incorporated the work and ideas of many others as well.

Strategies of Empowerment

Analysis of The Dinner Party reveals three primary strategies used in the work as means to empower and legitimize women's authentic voice: (a) The work is independent from male-created reality; (b) it creates new standards for evaluation of its own rhetoric; and (c) women are clearly labeled as agents.

Independence from Male-Created Reality

In The Dinner Party, the presentation of women's culture occurs entirely apart from the male-dominated world outside the setting of the exhibition. It is a separatist piece not only because it deals exclusively with women's culture but also because it lacks reference to anything male. Women's achievements are the sole focus of the work, and men are not referred to in any way in it. The work is formed entirely from women's traditional arts such as china painting and needlework, art forms not recognized as having value in the male-dominated art world. Further, female imagery predominates. The triangular shape of the table is a primitive symbol of the feminine; vaginal images appear in the centers of many plates; and the dinner-table setting suggests women's traditional concerns. The Dinner Party, then, encourages the viewer to focus on women, a stance that has two consequences.

First, the work's independence from male culture defines women's culture as derived from women's positive experiences rather than in opposition to men's culture. It presents the creation or formation of a new, separate symbolic order for women that "does not essentially depend upon an enemy for its existence/becoming" (Daly, 1978, p. 320). Refusal to create in opposition to a male enemy allows the formulation of positive, affirming discourse in contrast to that created from a sense of inferiority.

The danger of focusing on an enemy as the basis for creation and empowerment of an authentic voice, explains Daly (1978), is that it does not allow that voice to grow and develop. It remains at the level of attacking the enemy. The individual who defines herself and her voice only in opposition "may become fixated upon the atrocities of androcracy, 'spinning her wheels' instead of spinning on her heel and facing in Other directions" (p. 320). Betty Friedan (1981) makes the same point, asserting that there is value in a fight "within, and against, and defined by that old structure of unequal, polarized male and female sex roles. But to continue reacting against that structure is still to be defined and limited by its terms" (p. 40). In contrast, in The Dinner Party, women's culture by itself is portrayed as rich, abundant, self-
sufficient, and positive, with energy and worth arising from its own special qualities. It is seen as having authentic qualities that constitute a significant and valuable perspective in and of themselves.

Definition of women’s culture totally apart from men’s also enables The Dinner Party to present an alternative to the male-dominated view of the world more effectively. It creates this view not by comparing the female perspective to that of men but through presentation of an alternative vision on its own terms. Ferguson (1984) makes a strong case as to why empowerment of a dissenting voice will not result from the integration of the subordinate group into the existing structure. When members of a submerged group attack the system from within by integrating themselves into the system, climbing to the top, and then attempting to change it, they are doomed to fail. As Ferguson asks, after “internalizing and acting on the rules of [the dominant system] for most of their adult lives, how many . . . will be able to change? After succeeding in the system by using those rules, how many would be willing to change?” (p. 192). She continues: “It is hard to be a ‘closet radical’ when an inspection of the closets is part of the organization’s daily routine” (p. 193). The dominant system, then, cannot be resisted on its own terms, since they are terms that render opposition invisible.

Ferguson (1984) explains how discourses of opposition must function in order to be effective: they must present their visions in terms other than those of the dominant structure. This task is accomplished by “unearthing/creating the specific language of women, and comprehending women’s experience in terms of that linguistic framework rather than in terms of the dominant discourse” (p. 154). By creating a rhetoric in terms other than those of the dominant discourse, Ferguson explains, experiences are changed:

Just as our experience is defined by the intuitive and reflective awareness that our language makes available, our language in turn is circumscribed by our experience; to alter the terms of public discourse one must change the experiences people have, and to restructure experiences one must change the language available for making sense of those experiences. (p. 154)

The Dinner Party, then, frames a world and uses images and forms rooted in the female experience. Thus, it poses an alternative to the dominant discourse, the “old molds/models . . . by being itself an Other way of thinking/speaking” (Daly, 1978, p. xiii). The Dinner Party, through its presentation of women alone and lack of reference to men, suggests that women “eject, banish, depose the possessing language—spoken and written words, body language, architectural language, technological language, the language of symbols and of institutional structures” (Daly, 1978, p. 345), inspiring and empowering their own vision of the world.

Creation of New Standards for Evaluation of Rhetoric

A second strategy used in The Dinner Party to authenticate the female experience is the development of new standards for judging women’s rhetoric. Just as viewers are led, in The Dinner Party, to reject the male-dominated perspective as the only reality, so they are encouraged to develop new means of evaluating women’s discourse. Rejection of male domination and focus on the creation of an independent women’s reality frees participants from dependence on, as Daly (1978) names it, “Male Approval Desire” (p. 69)—male standards of evaluation. Thus, participants are able to construct their own expectations and criteria for evaluation derived from the authentic experiences of women’s culture: “Depending less and less upon male approval, recognizing that such approval is more often than not a reward for weakness, we approve of our Selves. We prove our Selves” (Daly, 1978, pp. 341–342).

The evaluation typically accorded the discourse of a submerged group such as women tends to be negative. One of the earliest to express this view formally was Otto Jespersen in 1922, who described women’s speech as an aberration of men’s. He said women use less complex sentences, talk faster and with less thought, and have less extensive vocabularies than men. Studies that revealed that women’s speech contained more hedges and qualifiers frequently were interpreted as suggesting women’s lack of certainty and confidence, while nonverbal gestures sometimes described as characteristic of women, such as more frequent smiling and eye contact, were seen as suggesting powerlessness and submissiveness. These kinds of conclusions illustrate a view of women’s speech as a deviation from “real speech.” It is “non-standard” because it is different from the speech of men and does not conform to the norms of male speech; consequently, it is inferior. When women’s rhetoric is judged negatively according to the standard of conformity to male rhetoric, it is accorded little status and is unable to affect, in any significant way, the dominant discourse (Kramarae, 1981, pp. 95–97).

In The Dinner Party, viewers are able to see a number of possibilities for new standards for judgment of women’s discourse. They center not around the impact of women’s rhetoric on the dominant discourse but rather around the effects of women’s rhetoric on themselves. One standard that emerges is the degree to which the rhetoric corresponds to women’s experiences, suggested from the focus in The Dinner Party.
on the dinner-table setting. The dinner party setting is a traditional one for women. It points to the domestic role usually assumed by women, which includes setting tables, preparing meals, and giving dinner parties. The traditional art forms of needlework and china painting used in the work—traditional art forms for women—also are derived from women's experiences, as are the vaginaly suggestive images of many of the plates, corresponding to women's biological and physical experiences.

A second standard suggested by The Dinner Party to use in assessing women's rhetoric is whether female imagery is presented as positive and valuable. Application of this standard suggests that images unique to or at least typical of the submerged group must not be demeaned, as they might be outside of the culture. In The Dinner Party, Chicago almost makes the feminine holy by elevating and celebrating female imagery and traditionally female arts to provide affirmative symbols for women. Because each woman represented at the table stands for one or more aspects of women's experiences and achievements, the viewer is led to see that women have achieved in many areas throughout history, which also points to the notion that the feminine is valuable. The idea is repeated in the sophistication and excellent craftsmanship of the plates and runners, suggesting that women's creations and women as creators are outstanding and certainly deserving of positive evaluations. The 13 place settings on each side of the table, which suggest the 13 individuals seated at the Last Supper, encourage the conclusion that this is a gathering of particular worth and significance, again suggesting the value of the female.

The Dinner Party has the potential capacity to evoke a number of strong emotions in its viewers, suggesting yet another standard by which to judge women's rhetoric—its capacity to evoke emotions. A submerged group develops authenticity and legitimacy only when its users are excited by that discourse and thus have strong desires to use and maintain it. One emotion evoked by The Dinner Party is hope or optimism, which is generated by the work's presentation of steady progress in women's status and condition. This progress is suggested by the gradual rising of the butterfly images of the plates as they move from historical to contemporary times. The plates representing the contemporary women appear as though they may fly off the plates, suggesting continued growth and movement for women in their accomplishments and achievements. Viewers also are encouraged to feel the emotion of pride in the accomplishments of women through the numerous women represented in the work as well as anger that the many achievements of women presented in the piece have been ignored for so long. The variety and the brightness of the colors used in The Dinner Party also function to induce qualities of joy, celebration, and excitement in the female experience.

A fourth criterion offered in The Dinner Party by which women's rhetoric might be judged is whether or not the rhetoric provides a context in which it should be viewed. When rhetoric is presented apart from the dominant culture, it may appear disconnected, irrelevant, and perhaps even a bit absurd simply because it does not conform to the standards established in the dominant discourse. To avoid these negative perceptions, a new context is needed so that the users of the rhetoric understand it in a context in which it is significant and legitimate.

The provision of context can assume many forms. In The Dinner Party, context is provided for women's voice through a presentation of the history of that voice. Of particular importance to a submerged group is the need for knowledge of its history—usually a history that has been forgotten or suppressed by the dominant group. The recapturing of that history provides a basis for constructing current culture and generates a sense of pride in it. In The Dinner Party, women's history is re-created for viewers through the traditional women's art forms of needlework and china painting. It is also shown in the presentation of women's accomplishments from the past, both in the plates representing women and in the names of women on the Heritage Floor.

A second way in which context can be provided for a submerged group's discourse and knowledge is through presentation of a vision for that group in the future. Such a vision suggests to members of the group that their rhetoric will survive and that it will continue to create a version of reality that is authentic and strong. The Dinner Party helps viewers envision the future of women's culture, discourse, and knowledge in a number of ways. The butterfly image of many of the plates is a conventional symbol of flight and growth. As the butterflies lift farther off the plates as they progress through time, they indicate that women currently are capable of flying much farther than they have in numerous realms of endeavor. The table setting itself creates expectancy and anticipation in the viewer that women will continue to achieve and make valuable contributions. The table is ready, and food presumably has been prepared; the hosts now await the arrival of the guests, just as the viewer awaits further contributions by women.

The rhetoric of The Dinner Party, then, standing apart from the dominant discourse and the usual context it provides, creates its own context with a past and a future. Thus, the female voice gains greater authenticity as a legitimate alternative to that dominant discourse.

A final criterion for evaluation that emerges from The Dinner Party concerns a work's accessibility. If discourse is to have sufficient impact on its users to be given legitimacy as an authentic and powerful voice,
it must be accessible to them. This requirement does not mean that all symbols used must be conventional and concrete and that nothing abstract or ambiguous can be included in the rhetoric of a submerged group. But major aspects of the rhetoric must be available to all participants—regardless of their stage of development as participants in their own culture. The Dinner Party exemplifies this accessibility in that it is a work of art that almost any viewer can understand. It relies heavily on conventional form—an everyday, familiar dinner-table setting—that is easily understood and accessible in its meaning. This form evokes expectations that have been learned from past experience with the dinner-table form and that the viewer brings with her to the work of art. Experience with the form, then, makes the image and thus the voice represented comfortable and familiar; the reactions of bewilderment and puzzlement that many viewers may have to contemporary art are not those accorded The Dinner Party.

Just as The Dinner Party rejects the view that male culture is normative by creating a culture apart from it and refusing interaction with it, so are male standards of the dominant discourse rejected for judging women’s discourse. Instead, The Dinner Party suggests a new set of standards by which to judge rhetoric derived from the culture of a submerged group: the goodness of fit with the experiences of the submerged group; the degree to which the images of the submerged group are presented as positive; the rhetoric’s capacity to evoke emotions; the capacity of the rhetoric to provide a context in which it is seen as appropriate and significant; and the degree to which the rhetoric is accessible to members of the submerged group.

Labeling of Agents

A prominent feature of The Dinner Party is that it specifically and clearly names who the agents are in the rhetoric it presents—who has the power and authority to act in the world presented. In contrast to rhetoric in which the agent who is communicating is not revealed, subjects of the rhetoric are clearly named in The Dinner Party. The women represented at the table and those whose names appear on the Heritage Floor are described in biographies available to viewers and in the images used to depict them in the plates and the runners. Viewers can learn a great deal about the women who serve as the subjects of The Dinner Party.

Simply viewing the place setting of Theodora, for example, tells a great deal about who she was. The tiny squares on her plate that create the illusion of mosaic work suggest her connection with churches. The placemat of gold embroidery that surrounds her plate suggests a gold halo and thus rule in the religious realm. The runner of gold and purple satin suggests royalty, as does the illuminated capital letter of her name on the runner. Thus, viewers of The Dinner Party leave the work with a sense of the individuality of these distinctive women’s experiences and qualities.

Two consequences arise from this specific labeling of agents in The Dinner Party. First, it shows women how they can create and control the discourse and knowledge of their world. Total lack of control and responsibility is the result of rhetoric that mystifies, deletes, or hides the agents involved (Daly, 1978, pp. 120, 123–124). In such rhetoric, women are not able to control the world because that control belongs to some unknown authority that cannot be questioned and challenged simply because it is unknown.

In contrast, when agents are specifically named and described, as they are in The Dinner Party, women are able to question old authority and control structures. They are allowed to see that women have been and are active agents who have the capacity to control their lives; this control is not exerted by some unknown source. Thus, clear labeling of who the agents are and the nature of their qualities enables the viewers of The Dinner Party to begin to conceptualize about themselves as controllers in relation to one another and to the world.

A second consequence of the labeling of agents in The Dinner Party is that it allows and encourages a relationship to develop between the viewers and the subjects of the work. It suggests a reciprocity between the viewers and the women who are the subjects of the work by providing points of identification between the two parties. The agents, because they are made known in such detail, then, may begin to have an impact on the viewers and affect their existence so that viewers’ and agents’ lives become related. As the viewers investigate and analyze why the subjects made the decisions they did to follow particular paths, the women who are the subjects of The Dinner Party may perform the role of guides.

Viewers thus may find in the lives of these women qualities and models to make their own lives whole or more meaningful. A viewer of a place setting representing a woman who clearly was the architect of her own choices, for example, might experience confidence or uncertainty about her own choices or lack of them. Personal identifications may develop between subjects and viewers of The Dinner Party as the subjects offer their stories, encourage, and suggest new options for the viewers in their own lives. By understanding better the sources of their respective positions in the world and gaining a clearer sense of themselves from the subjects of The Dinner Party, viewers may become better
able to see the legitimacy and value of their own discourse and knowledge.

_The Dinner Party_ avoids naming the enemy in order that undue attention is not given to responding and reacting to that enemy. Instead, the focus of the work is on women themselves as subjects. These agents are specific women with concrete stories and personal qualities much like those of the work’s viewers. _The Dinner Party_ thus creates a strong sense of who women are and of their potential to control that definition, meeting a criterion essential to the development of a powerful and legitimate voice for women.

**Implications for Generative Theory**

Investigation of the strategies used by submerged groups to develop an authentic voice and legitimize that voice in the face of a dominant discourse yields findings relevant to a number of research areas. One is the possibility it raises for the development of generative theory. A generative theory “is one that unsets common assumptions within the culture and thereby opens new vistas for action” (Gergen, 1982, p. 133). It is a theory that has “the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted,’ and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action” (Gergen, p. 109). A generative theory may accomplish these tasks by instigating doubt, generating doubt and implying alternative courses of action, or fully articulating alternatives to current investments (Gergen, p. 169). Certainly, some research in gender and communication already is contributing to the development of generative theory, but other research is done within the framework of the dominant discourse. What I am advocating is the development of theories about gender and communication that challenge that framework systematically, comprehensively, and consistently.

An investigation of the efforts of a submerged group to develop its own authentic discourse encourages the construction of generative theory in two ways. First, it provides a new set of data or “facts” from which to develop theory. While most researchers generally hold that theory should be premised on sound facts, what counts as a fact is determined by the theoretical framework in which the researcher is operating. When an investigator begins with the facts of how rhetoric operates in the dominant discourse, he or she already has incorporated the consensus of that framework, and “the potential for a generative outcome is thereby reduced” (Gergen, 1982, p. 135). But when an investigator views and collects as data the rhetoric of a submerged group that is not valued by or given input into the dominant discourse, a new theory of communication or implications for current theories may be discovered that encourage us to invent and study “new modes of Be-ingSpeaking” (Daly, 1978, p. 33).

A second way in which this type of investigation may result in generative theory is through an examination of theory in its linguistic aspects. The chief products of research and inquiry are essentially word systems, and the theoretical language selected determines the function the language and thus the inquiry plays in the culture (Gergen, 1982, p. 95, 98). Every theory or form of interpretation can be viewed as a potential form of social control, legitimizing and victimizing various groups by the conceptions expressed in the language of that theory. By formulating theory in the language of a submerged group, the linguistic context of research can be critically examined, suggesting new theoretical conceptions as a result.

When we develop generative theory, as the study of submerged rhetoric encourages, we will have the satisfaction of knowing that we have not necessarily or unjustly constricted our inquiry by neglecting alternative views of understanding, and we will not “place a range of significant restrictions over the kinds of theories that are likely to be developed and sustained” (Gergen, 1982, p. 133). Our central product of research, then, will not be simply an elaboration and extension of a singular world view. Instead, we will have a clearer picture of the production and maintenance of the dominant order from which some of our biases about women’s communication and their associated ideologies are derived and clear the air of “the conventions of the powerful solidified into universal truths” (Ascher, 1984, p. 101).

**References**


