

Interactional Inhospitableness: A Re-Analysis of the Mansplaining Incident in Rebecca Solnit's (2008) Essay "Men Explain Things to Me"

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ABSTRACT

The neologism "mansplaining" refers to a specific type of social behaviour in which "men [are] unnecessarily explaining things to women" (Bridges, 2021, p. 3). With the focus on "unnecessarily," the verb "to mansplain" calls attention to cases of socio-pragmatic inappropriateness and more specifically to violations of the Gricean Maxim of Quantity. In addition, the creative use of the "man-" morpheme highlights the problematic gendered nature of the phenomenon. This article is an attempt to interpret mansplaining in terms of a notion of interactional inhospitableness. Using a broad-based socio-pragmatic, conversational, discourse-analytical, and praxeological perspective, it will explore the mansplaining interaction (henceforth, the incident) that was recounted and recontextualised in Solnit's (2008) famous essay, "Men Explain Things to Me: Facts Didn't Get in Their Way." The main finding is that though manipulative turn-taking and exploitative epistemic authority played an important role, it was affective asymmetries that made Solnit's (2008) mansplaining episode uniquely "noticeable." At the party where the incident occurred, hospitableness and high-culture competition appeared as two defining but conflicting features. This conflict cast the three main participants – not only as reductively gendered interlocutors but – as a failed and failing host (referred to as "Mr. Very Important" in the essay) and two of his guests (Rebecca Solnit and Sallie). The wider relevance and application of a notion of interactional (in)hospitableness will be discussed.

Keywords: high culture; hospitableness; mansplaining; recontextualisation; social practice

INTRODUCTION

This textual case study is an attempt to interpret the socio-cultural phenomenon of mansplaining in terms of a newly developed notion of *interactional inhospitableness* rather than seeing it exclusively as a discursive manifestation of male arrogance or toxic masculinity. The analytical focus will be on Rebecca Solnit's (2008) famous essay "Men Explain Things to Me: Facts Didn't Get in Their Way." This essay has been credited with launching, not the coinage *mansplain* itself, but the idea of mansplaining as a recognisable, relatively stable form of social interaction. In her essay, Solnit describes, analyses, and reflects on what she refers to as the "incident" (Solnit, 2015, p. 3), namely the incident that took place in 2003 at a party in Aspen, an affluent city in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, United States. At that social occasion one summer night, the host, a man, holds forth on a recently published non-fiction book, namely *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (Solnit, 2003), oblivious to the fact that his guest, Rebecca, is its author. The metapragmatic term "incident" is an evaluative label for what, at some level of pragmatic analysis, is deceptively just another case of flouting the Gricean Maxim of Quantity: "Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange" and "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (Grice, 1989, p. 26). Conversationally, the host also violates yet another maxim, first articulated by Sacks (1971, p. 9), namely *not* to tell people what they already know.

However, there was much more at stake socio-politically and in terms of gender inequalities insofar as the incident drew attention to “an experience that many women can sympathise with to some degree” (Cookman, 2015). The essay had an enormous impact on US society. It “spread quickly and has never stopped going around, being reposted and shared and commented upon” (Solnit, 2015, p. 11). Bridges (2021, p. 4), one of the few academic studies on mansplaining, refers to “hundreds of editorial pieces” (for example, MPR News Staff, 2016), topicalising the incident, essay, and wider socio-political issue of male hegemony, privilege, and entitlement. Note that Solnit published two follow-up essays on the same incident seven years later, namely “The Slippery Slope of Silencings” and “Women Fighting on Two Fronts,” both in Solnit (2015). The purportedly main social actor in the incident is the man doing the mansplaining: he is not referred to by name but, sarcastically, as “Mr. Very Important” or “Mr. Important” and later as the “idiot in Aspen” (Solnit, 2015, pp. 3, 5, 8). Only the first phrase, without the full stop and inverted commas, will be used in this article.

One immediate and perhaps unforeseen consequence of the 2008 essay was the emergence, in that same year, and spread of a neologism to capture the essence of the Aspen incident, namely *mansplain*, a blend of *man* and *explain*. This was followed by derivations such as *mansplainer*, *mansplanation*, and a prodigious range of other *-splain* words – such as *whitesplain* or *thinsplain* – in which *-splain* redefined itself as a “metapragmatic bound morpheme” (Bridges, 2021, p. 1). Many of these metapragmatic blends have since found their way into dictionaries. *Mansplaining* itself, for example, has been defined as follows:

- (1) [w]hen a man explains something to a woman, uninvited, about a topic on which she is either equally qualified or more qualified to talk (Mansplain¹, n.d.)
- (2) to explain something to someone in a way that suggests that they are stupid; used especially when a man explains something to a woman that she already understands (Mansplain², n.d.)

In the academic literature, two recent definitions, after Solnit (2008), are:

- (3) a verbal expression of male intellectual superiority over women whereby men, by being men, feel they have both the knowledge and the right to “educate” women on a specific field (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 14)
- (4) a verb that generally refers to a man patronizingly telling a female about a topic she already understands (Bridges, 2021, p. 3)

These and numerous other definitions foreground three distinct pairings, namely (i) man and woman, (ii) speaker and hearer, and (iii) someone who knows something and someone who is assumed to be ignorant or unable to understand something; many also emphasise that these differences go hand in hand with a particular style or tone on behalf of the mansplainers (e.g., condescension). As such, the definitions bring into sharp relief various gender-related issues in society, the challenges of turn-talking management in conversation, and epistemic imbalances or inequalities during talk-in-interaction (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990).

At a deeper, more basic level of social interaction, however, mansplaining, and *-splain* words more generally, also serve to underscore the importance of the joint performance of practical action-in-context, namely the intersubjective accomplishment of what social actors do “as if for another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9), which, in the case of mansplaining, would be more accurately the lack thereof “yet again.” To identify and examine these interactional failures in more detail, the present study will make use of Van Leeuwen’s (2008, 2009) socio-semantic model of discourse analysis. As Bridges (2021, p. 25) points out, instances of mansplaining such as the one in Aspen can be studied “without focusing on neologisms like *-splain* words, which some view as silly, worthless, unhelpful, or even contemptible [sic]” (see, among others, Cookman, 2015). As Bridges goes on to remark, a “fuller understanding must be broadened beyond the discussion of *splains* as just words,” with praxeology a suitable starting point.

Using Solnit’s (2015) essays on the subject as our main textual data, two research questions will guide the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the 2003 mansplaining incident and mansplaining in general:

1. What interactional failures made the incident at the Aspen party recognisable and intelligible as mansplaining?
2. What are the wider relevance and potential theoretical significance of interactional inhospitableness as a new concept in the study of discourse and society?

Overall, the purpose is to examine these archival data innovatively – drawing on a broad socio-pragmatic, conversational, discourse-analytical, and praxeological perspective – with a view to “revealing new patterns formerly undetected or ignored” (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 107).

Given that the research reported here is trying to break new ground, there is no extant body of literature from which these questions have been directly derived, nor is there any prior scholarship that has engaged with the same interests and concerns. In respect of other sociolinguistic and metapragmatic aspects of mansplaining, Bridges’s (2021, p. 4) review of the literature concludes that there has so far been “very little scholarly attention.” The main intention, therefore, is to put a new notion on the map and to illustrate how this notion can be usefully applied in the discourse analysis of the mansplaining incident that occurred in Aspen in 2003. At the same time, it is hoped that through detailed case analysis and the three-pronged approach to be outlined below, the phenomenon of mansplaining itself will become better understood. Though textual studies can be usefully conducted to examine phenomena of interest directly (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 97), the present analysis is restricted to a reconsideration of this “systematic sociocultural silencer” (Kidd, 2017) through Solnit’s resemiotisations. To my knowledge, there is no comprehensive account of mansplaining in the context of a sociological theory of symbolic violence or everyday sexism. Reference can be made, however, to Knowles’s (2019) critical review of the broader scholarship of gendered speech practices such as mansplaining.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The notion of “interactional hospitableness” is meant to bring together two research strands, and in doing so, to help re-examine mansplaining as the three-fold combination of (i) *conversational* turn-taking failures, (ii) *epistemic* and *communicative* failures, and (iii) *affective* failures, occurring within a social practice context of entertaining guests at home.

The first body of literature to which the phrase refers is the study of social order, whose primary object of enquiry is forms of unmediated synchronous interaction among people who are together at the same time in one place. Ethnomethodology comes to mind (Garfinkel, 1967) and conversation analysis as one of its “tools” (Sacks, 1971; Sacks et al., 1974). The party at which the incident took place is one such recognisably social situation, and in that sense is also “an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities.” A social situation arises when two or more individuals become aware of their mutual presence, “however divided, or mute and distant, or only momentarily present the participants [...] appear to be” (Goffman, 1964, p. 135). Encounters such as the Aspen party are both guided (facilitated) and limited (constrained) by norms considered adequate in the specific social situation. These norms involve, among other things, “the social organization of shared current orientation” and “an organized interplay of acts of some kind” (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 696). It is these situated actions that on each occasion produce social order as a local accomplishment “as if for another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9).

Putting aside fundamental differences in respect of *a priori* assumptions about the nature of social life, social practice theory may provide a convenient framework for capturing the homogeneity and stability of social situations through their recontextualisations in discourse. For that reason, reconstruction and interpretation of the incident in Aspen could, for example, draw on Van Leeuwen’s (2008, 2009) socio-semantic model. His central argument is that when one social practice, for example, having a party, is incorporated into another (*writing about* having a party) and this across a wide range of texts and genres, the recontextualisations, Solnit’s (2008) essay, among them, create new “ways of knowing some aspect of reality” (Van Leeuwen, 2009, p. 144).

The second strand is something untried before, namely the study of hospitableness and its significance to private or domestic hospitality (Lashley, 2011). Hospitableness is an “emotionally laden concept” that is “felt easily” but difficult to define (Tasci & Semrad, 2016, p. 30). A recent review of the literature concludes that this socio-psychological concept refers to the “human dimension” and the “true sense” of hospitality; it is a “genuine hospitality” underlaid by “an altruistic motive” (Chau & Yan, 2021, p. 2). Within this broad concept, hospitableness can, for example, be thought of as a “trait possessed by hospitable people” (Telfer, 2011, p. 38), while other scholars highlight attitudinal or behavioural features. Critically, the various factors that contribute to hospitableness conspire to produce an *integrative* effect on guests’ *feelings*, an effect which minimally includes “being welcomed, respected, cared for, and feeling safe” (Chau & Yan, 2021, p. 2). In other words, hospitableness is about *affect*, about the *heart-warming*, *heart-assuring*, and *heart-soothing* feelings distinguished by Tasci and Semrad (2016, p. 30).

As the preceding paragraph shows, the main indicator of *inhospitableness* would be the provision of some form of hospitality but *without* the human dimension of welcoming, respecting, caring, and protecting (it would be a *heartless* hospitality). If so, the first approximation of a notion of *interactional* inhospitableness might be that it encompasses a wide range of negations, as perceived by the guests, of that “true sense” or “human dimension” of hospitality. Such negations would include expressions of insincerity, cynicism, negligence, and disengagement in showing hospitality to others. It is understood that these negations may or may not be remarked upon, openly criticised or otherwise problematised by other participants, whether immediately or subsequently. An interpretation of Solnit’s (2008) mansplaining incident as interactional inhospitableness will hopefully provide additional clarity on how to define and refine the notion more rigorously. In what follows, the immediate focus will be on the linguistic or discursive expressions of inhospitableness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research design was adopted to study Solnit's (2008) recounting and discursive recontextualisation of the Aspen mansplaining incident and to find out if additional insight could be obtained by assessing the interaction in terms of interactional inhospitableness. The secondary archival data were supplemented with information gleaned from the two essays on the same incident published in Solnit (2015). These textual source materials were described, analysed, and interpreted from within a broad socio-pragmatic framework, including conversation analysis (Sacks, 1971; Sacks et al., 1974) and the critical study of discourse as advanced by Van Leeuwen (2008, 2009). Where relevant, the data were coded in terms of Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor and social action networks as well as other fine-grained lexico-grammatical distinctions typical of his approach. No prior familiarity with the model is assumed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings will be reported separately for the two questions guiding the present study: (i) the three interactional failures that characterise the mansplaining incident – the so-called “triple failure” – and (ii) the wider relevance and application of the notion of inhospitableness and of the three-dimensional approach to be adopted.

A TRIPLE FAILURE

My study and reading of the incident – as based on Solnit's (2008) recontextualisations – has so far produced one major contention, namely that Mr Very Important failed in three major areas of constructing and sustaining social organisation. In social encounters such as the dinner party in Aspen, social actors have to assume various monitoring roles more or less simultaneously to coordinate whatever actions or sequences of actions in which they are engaged. As the following will show, coordination, alignment, organisation, or orderliness did not seem an immediate interactional concern for Mr Very Important. Referring back to Goffman's (1964, p. 135) definition of a social situation, he was neither mute nor distant but how *present* he was, is doubtful.

MAXIMS AND TURNS AT TALKING

As a semiotic recontextualising practice, Solnit's (2015) essay is itself an instance of a stabilised and defining configuration of meaning-making, a form of social interaction with its expectations, conventions, regularities, anticipated topics, references to other genres, and so forth (e.g., Bazerman, 2012). As a genre, an essay is unlikely to offer a detailed account of what happened that evening, let alone a Jeffersonian transcription of the talk, “as it was” when it occurred. Nonetheless, there are enough direct speech utterances, all of which are taken “as is,” together with representations of other semiotic actions to form an idea of how things unfolded.

Note that in the reconstructed “interplay of acts” cited below, “we” and “our” refer to Rebecca and Sallie, and “I” and “me” to Rebecca; the parts in italics refer to predominantly material actions.

Reconstruction of the interaction during the mansplaining incident

- *We were preparing to leave.*
- Our host said, “No, stay a little longer so I can talk to you.”
- *He sat us down at his [...] wood table.*
- He [...] said to me, “So? I hear you've written a couple of books.”
- I replied, “Several, actually.”
- He said [...], “And what are they about?”
- I began to speak only of the most recent [book].
- I mentioned Muybridge.
- He cut me off soon after I mentioned Muybridge. “And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year?”
- [does not wait for Rebecca’s reply]
- He was already telling me about the very important book, holding forth, going on [...] about this book [I should have known].
- Sallie interrupted him, to say, “That's her book.” Or tried to interrupt him anyway.
- But he just continued on his way.
- She had to say, “That's her book” another time.
- But he just continued on his way.
- She had to say, “That's her book” a third time.
- But he just continued on his way.
- She had to say, “That's her book” a fourth time.
- He finally took it in.
- He was stunned speechless – for a moment before he began holding forth again.
- *We left.*
- *We were politely out of earshot before we started laughing.*

There seems to be a certain *modus operandi* or *format* to mansplaining, which at the level of turn-taking organisation and maxims consists in manipulating the social situation, interaction, and interlocutors into obtaining for oneself an extended turn at talking (Hansen & Svennevig, 2021). It starts innocently enough with the first few adjacency pairs such as Mr Very Important’s request for validating a statement and Rebecca’s indirect confirmation that she is indeed a published author while also expressing her disagreement about the actual number of books that she has written:

- Mr Very Important: So? I hear you've written a couple of books.
- Rebecca: Several, actually.

However, what happens next is that Rebecca’s “Muybridge” is taken as a prompt to ask the question about the “*very important* Muybridge book” (hence the man’s derisively ironic epithet). Note that pragmatically, it is neither a genuine request for information; a “current speaker selects next” technique, nor a rhetorical question; rather, it is a deceptive form of “self-selection” to keep speaking (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 704). Mr Very Important accomplishes this by seizing hold of the topic (“Muybridge”). This is then followed by a long stretch of “holding forth” talk, during which Sallie’s attempts at self-selection are deliberately ignored.

Two more remarks are in order. First, the turn-by-turn development of the incident shows that Mr Very Important fails to collaborate with his interlocutors in the joint achievement of shared discourse goals; instead, he is narrowly focused on telling them about “the *very important* Muybridge book.” As Solnit (2015, p. 13) put it in her “Postscript,” “some men [...] don’t hear things they should.” As the incident shows, without listening, the things they should hear are not even attended to or heard. It is not that men would be incapable of listening or paying attention, only that in men-only interaction they would perhaps be more likely to be “cooperative and supportive,” witness their use of minimal responses like *yeah, okay, really* and similar “cooperative enhancers” – features that are often considered typical of female interlocutors (Mohajer & Jan, 2022, p. 24). However, Mr Very Important doggedly pursues the Muybridge topic even when at one point it becomes clear that he has violated the Maxim of Quantity. It may be instructive to quote in full Sacks’s (1971, October 19, p. 9) parenthetical discussion of the second maxim of quantity, showing that there are potentially two aspects to this violation:

it might be said that to be overinformative is not a transgression of the Cooperative Principle but merely a waste of time. However, it might be answered that such overinformativeness may be confusing in that it is liable to raise side issues; and there may also be an indirect effect, in that the hearers may be misled as a result of thinking that there is some particular point in the provision of the excess of information.

Mr Very Important’s overinformativeness is all the more remarkable seeing that despite his awareness of the maxim violation and loss of face, he ignored many opportunities for repair, apologies, self-deprecation, alternative rejoinders such as showing genuine interest in the people he was with, verifying assumptions, or using *prospective* metapragmatic comments such as “Stop me if anybody has said this before” (De Rycker, 1993). This raises the question as to what might have been the “particular point in the provision of the excess of information,” an issue elaborated in the next subsection.

Thirdly, there is the intriguing role that Sallie plays in all of this. Mr Very Important seems to ratify only Rebecca as a hearer (“so I can talk to *you*,” “said to *me*,” “cut *me* off” – italics mine – instead of an inclusive *you* or plural *us*); Sallie is treated as a mere bystander, an inadvertent hearer (Goffman, 1979). This may explain why it took so many “That’s her book” interruptions for Mr Very Important to register the information. Another observation is that it is Sallie who is making the interruptions. It might be argued that the interlocutor most affected by someone’s norm-breaking behaviour would be the one to draw attention to the violation. However, there was some hesitancy on Rebecca’s part: “there was a moment there when I was willing to let Mr. Important and his overweening confidence bowl over my more shaky certainty” (Solnit, 2015, pp. 4 & 5), which effectively silenced her but also created room for Sallie to speak up for her. The question can be asked whether the evening would have been different if Sallie had not been there.

Incidentally, Bridges’s (2021, p. 3) own recontextualisation – in footnote 2 – of Solnit’s (2008) first-hand account of the incident does not refer to Sallie by name. Let me cite it in full:

In the essay posted on her blog, Solnit recounts an incident in which a man she had just met proceeded to tell her about “a very important book” Only after her friend repeated, “That’s her book” four times did the man stop explaining (Solnit 2008).

Instead, Sallie is referred to as “her friend.” Van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 40 – 45) refers to this as relational identification, a type of social actor representation that *categorises* people rather than *nominates* them. Instead of representing them in terms of a unique identity, they are put in a “box” with others. It is always of interest – Van Leeuwen goes on to say – to investigate which social

actors in a practice get nominated in a given discourse – and how – and which ones do not. Typically, the nomination will be realised through the use of a proper noun. Rebecca’s friend is called Sallie (Solnit, 2015, p. 2), who in the essay is only ever represented by her name or the pronoun “she.” Observations like these matter because they are potentially indicative of otherwise hidden ideologies. Hyper-critical discourse analysts might even highlight the fact that in Bridges (2021), the story was relegated to a footnote. The reason is, of course, genre-specific and text-internal as the incident is considered to be merely supplemental information. Yet, this view can be challenged. Maybe it only becomes supplemental owing to its location in a footnote. To avoid this kind of “slippage into [...] unaccountable ontology” (Bartesaghi & Pantelides, 2018, p. 158), it would make sense to examine other recontextualisations of Solnit’s account of the Aspen incident. The main reason for raising this point is that in my analysis, Sallie’s role is essential to the mansplaining episode at that party, and that, more generally, other women, whether their presence is real, virtual, imagined or felt, play a crucial role in a cultural reading of the phenomenon of silencing.

Silencing others by not listening and silencing others by way of a monologue often works in tandem, as in the Aspen mansplaining incident. This statement needs to be qualified in two important respects. First, certain types of mansplainers, “some men,” do listen, but they do so very selectively and in some social situations, perhaps, more than in others. Secondly, though “holding forth” or “going on” about something is usually an indicator of interactional misalignment or failure, there are social situations in which extended turns at talking are considered less problematic. More on this in the next subsection and the dinner party.

THE EXPLOITATION OF EPISTEMIC ASYMMETRIES

Because of space limitations, the argument will be based on the more curious infringements and infractions that can be noticed in the incident, viewed no longer in terms of its turn-taking organisation but as talk-in-interaction during the party and what was being topicalised, talked about, and how. My main observation concerns the relationships between hospitableness, entertainment – i.e., the provision of amusement and diversion – and high culture. It is difficult to interpret the interaction – Solnit’s (2008) dialogue given above – without some understanding of the *typicality* of dinner parties, especially discursively. In making sense of “multimodal clusters of signs,” including language, “we [...] depend on typicality: on knowing what is most likely being meant, given the situation and setting, the culture and subculture, the field, the discipline, the topic, the attitudes of the producers, and so on” (Lemke 2012, p. 84). Parties in themselves constitute an interesting social phenomenon and socio-linguistic topic.

Epistemic asymmetry, i.e., the fact that guests do not have access to each other’s knowledge, largely drives the entertainment part of this kind of social gathering. It may be instructive at this point to briefly refer to Gans (1999). His study on high culture and taste in American society may help to gauge the kinds of people that may have attended the 2003 Aspen party and of what their entertainment consisted. Gans (1999, p. 89) draws a distinction between “creator-oriented” versus “user-oriented” high-culture consumers, with the former being interested not merely in “a creator’s products,” but also in “his or her methods” and “the problems associated with being a creator.” What both kinds have in common is that these high-culture consumers “are almost all highly educated people of upper and upper-middle class status, employed mainly in academic and professional occupations” (Gans, 1999, p. 89), the kinds of people who, among other things, read book reviews and read books (or pretend they do), and talk about both. Somewhat

exceptionally, the party in Aspen was also attended by an actual “creator” in the person of Rebecca Solnit.

Though further research is needed, entertainment among high-culture users partly consists in sharing their latest experiences, discoveries, travels, and purchases within their distinctive but overlapping spheres of cultural consumption and taste. This mingling and small talk occasionally segue into subtle epistemic battles accompanied by interruptions and self-selections, with at some point, an extended turn at talking. Insofar as high-culture consumers value and enjoy listening to each other’s experiences and expertise, it is perfectly acceptable to either negotiate permission to claim an extended turn at talking or be granted permission to do so, all within the usual boundaries of the social practice. These longer turns at talking tend to be built around a common theme or subject (e.g., a cultural trip, an art exhibition, a political memoir, a theatre play, and so forth). They will vary in terms of the amount of audience participation encouraged, but if any such participation does take place, it will function as an embedded sequence within the overall structural organisation of the story. The first time these longer turns at talking occur, the storytelling will be largely shaped by the discursive contingencies of the moment. However, over time, and perhaps party by party, these tellings may develop into well-rehearsed, stable, entertaining, and interesting performances.

Using a term from journalism, such a frequently told story still has to have “news value” for those hearing it for the first time and not violate the Maxim of Quantity. Mr Very Important fails on both counts: no proper audience analysis in the opening part, and no course correction when the violation is finally signalled. So, concerning the quotation from Sacks given earlier, what is the particular point in the provision of this excess of information? One answer would be that his “holding forth again” (Solnit, 2015, p. 3) should be partly attributed to the phenomenon that once underway, these frequently told stories are near-unstoppable. It is not unlikely that the book review, the book or Mueybridge himself had already taken the shape of a self-contained story *prior* to the incident. It is also not unlikely that he had told it several times before, on different social occasions, but each time in the form of an extended single-turn contribution and telling; perhaps Mr Very Important had also shared it that evening with some of the guests described by Solnit (2015, p. 1) as “dull in a distinguished way.”

This is no excuse, of course. First, the extended speaking turn is not the only tactic for sharing high-culture experiences, and not even the most frequent one. Second, not all high-culture consumers who use this tactic are like Mr Very Important, although it is a familiar type of person. Some guests come to parties equipped with prefabricated stories about “very important” things; they interact with others only to make use of the first topical prompt they hear to launch into some extended talk of their own. Almost by default, all their topics, stories, and pronouncements are “very important” because it takes a “very important” person to distinguish between what is and what is not “(very) important.” Epistemic asymmetries in terms of high-culture experiences and expertise may, however, lead to the competition when other “very important” guests claim superiority in the same area, arrive with a similar repertoire of ready-made stories and canned anecdotes, and try to stake out their territory. To use Gans’s (1999) distinction, this style of high-culture consumption is neither “creator-oriented” nor “user-oriented”; it is self-oriented.

Again, an extended turn at talking is not in and of itself an interactional failure, nor is it necessarily a case of “holding forth.” However, through such turns, epistemic asymmetries can be exploited to pursue other goals than those of (i) entertainment, amusement, and diversion or (ii) negotiating identities, social comparison, winning the “what’s in and what’s not” competition, and making the next party’s guest list. In respect of the second goal, reference can be made to early seminal work on dinner-party conversations by Ng and Bradac (1993). They found that turn-taking

is a powerful resource for social influence: people whose aggregated talk and interruptions are high are more likely to be ranked socially higher. This mechanism can be easily leveraged by dinner party guests who seek to exert and extend their social influence.

It is here, therefore, that the incident takes on a more sinister complexion. After all, longer high-culture turns at talking are just as much regulated – *formatted* – as other elements in the “dinner party” practice. Following Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 12), the semiotic action of telling other guests about a high-culture event that may interest them has to meet certain *eligibility conditions* for the action to be performed adequately and to be recognised and made intelligible for what it is. To cite Blommaert’s (2019, p. 4) analysis of Garfinkel’s “intuitions,” social actions “occur as *formats*, the characteristic features of which are recognisable to others and, thus, *intelligible* as action x, y or z.” A careful reading of “Men Explain Things to Me” shows that most of these “formatting” conditions were not met. The most disturbing deviations were those about the four practice elements of participants, time, location, and performance mode (i.e., how the semiotic action is performed).

Consider the following summary table:

TABLE 1. Extended high-culture turn at talking: Eligibility conditions

<i>Practice element</i>	<i>Eligibility condition</i>	<i>The incident</i>
Participants	A group of guests or all of them, an audience	Rebecca and Sallie (“us,” “we”)
Time	During the party	As Rebecca and Sallie “were preparing to leave” After the party (after “the other guests [had] drifted out into the same night”)
Location	Open seating, space to move around freely	“[seated] at his authentically grainy wood table”
Performance mode	Neutral, unassuming, affable	“in the way you encourage your friend’s seven-year-old to describe flute practice,” “smug(ly),” “eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority,” “out-and-out confrontational confidence,” “overweening”

Instead of his extended turn arising more or less naturally from within the talk-in-interaction during the party itself, Mr Very Important actively detains Rebecca and Sallie when they are on the point of leaving by asking them to “stay a little longer” *after* the party. Whereupon, as the only remaining guests, the two of them were “sat down”, i.e., made to sit down, at the wooden table (Solnit, 2015, pp. 1 & 2), effectively becoming a captive audience. Although Rebecca and Sallie are guests at *his* party and in *his* house, Mr Very Important does not seem to know either personally or by name, and instead must go by hearsay when opening the conversation with “So? I hear you’ve written a couple of books.” Note the choice of “a couple of,” meaning a small number and implying insignificance; it sets the tone for what will be the dominant semiotic performance mode during the incident.

Solnit’s (2008) version of the incident seems to suggest that some planning may have gone into arranging that last-minute encounter. There is also an element of desperation and urgency as if Mr Very Important spent most of the party feeling bored with his “older” guests, perhaps his regular circle of friends. All along, his intention might have been to meet “the occasion’s young

ladies” (Solnit, 2015, p. 1) and to impress them with his witty charm, erudition, confidence, good looks (for his age), and wealth. He seems keen to talk to Rebecca, whom he has already cast in the role of “ingénue” (Solnit, 2015, p. 2) even before making her acquaintance. With the now empty log “cabin,” the dusty “kilims,” the dead “elk antlers,” and the “wood-burning stove” (Solnit, 2015, p. 1), there is a sense of foreboding; the trap has been set, the conditions are in place for Mr Very Important to hold forth, to “go on” about things irrespective of what his audience already knows or cares to know. In this case, however, his party routine of high-culture consumption stories is exposed as mansplaining. Judging from his “ashen” face, his state of being “confused” and “stunned speechless” (Solnit, 2015, p. 3), this has perhaps never or only rarely happened to him before.

Of course, premeditation and premonition cannot be inferred from the essay’s recounting of the incident, and are in any event external to how social situations or social practices are theorised. However, other aspects are sufficiently actual and observable: the social actors (the host and the two women as a “captive” audience), the timing (that grey area between one well-defined social practice and another, a transition that is often socially less regulated; here, the end of the party but then again, not quite the end), the location (the cabin and the wooden table), the performance mode (e.g., “with that smug look” and “smugly” to cite Solnit (2015, p. 3)). All of these elements now appear as if taken out of the mansplainer’s playbook, one by one. Except that it is not a sport or a game. The incident is unsettling and disturbing but arguably, the interpretations proposed so far are not the nub of the matter. What made the Muybridge episode so uniquely noticeable and more difficult to walk away from, laugh off, and forget, even after five years, was the host’s failure as a host.

A FAILED AND FAILING HOST

When performed by the person hosting a social occasion, mansplaining is never just a “minor social misery” or “an amusing incident” (Solnit, 2015, p. 14). It is a red flag indicator of interactional inhospitableness. Regardless of the specific circumstances such as the number of guests affected, the timing, duration, and location, or the performance mode, its mere occurrence makes genuine hospitableness noticeably absent. It is not only conversationally or discursively that Mr Very Important fails his guests; some of his other actions are decidedly un-host-like such as his insistence that Rebecca and Sallie should stay even though they were on the point of leaving. He could have *asked* if they wanted to stay a little longer, or suggested a less socially awkward alternative. The reason for his request also raises eyebrows: “so I can talk to you.” Parties perhaps are not primarily meant for hosts to talk to their guests, but here again, high-culture entertainment and hospitableness collide: some hosts may see themselves as the perfect guest at their own parties and cannot help but behave as such. It is also somewhat unusual that Mr Very Important persuades his two guests to stay a little longer only to keep them waiting “while the other guests drifted out into the summer night” (Solnit, 2015, pp. 1 – 2), a deliberate and calculated delay, functioning as an integral part of the mansplainer’s modus operandi.

All of these observations converge on the notion of *affect* and its role in “what language is doing.” To cite Lemke (2012, p. 85), “there is no meaning without feeling.” Similarly, there is no hospitality without hospitableness. If a feeling of hospitableness could be consciously harnessed and allowed to animate and permeate every single social situation, the risk of affective asymmetries would be substantially reduced. The emotionally charged incident at the Aspen party is seen to be a direct result of the host’s casual, almost cavalier lack of hospitableness in all its

material and discursive aspects. It might even be said to have been emotionally charged to a *higher* and *more noticeable degree* than what might have been the combined affective fallout of merely turn-taking misalignments, maxim violations, and a spurious claim to epistemic superiority in the field of high culture. Instead of sharing his own home with others (Telfer, 2011, p. 38) and bringing people together at the moment, the “rugged luxury cabin” (Solnit, 2015, p. 1), the scene of the incident, managed to achieve the opposite. It is not unlikely that the incident might not have taken place, or not in the same way, if the party had taken place at Rebecca’s house or in a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1989). Ironically, before acting in the way they do, mansplainers need to feel “safe” too.

WIDER RELEVANCE AND APPLICATION

If some of the above findings and hunches stand up to further scrutiny, it should be possible to slow down, isolate, and assess the “forces [behind mansplaining] that are usually so sneaky and hard to point out” (Solnit, 2015, p. 3). A detailed description and interpretation of the Aspen incident can then be used to detect, analyse, and interpret other incidents in terms of their conformity to, or departure from, the patterns and strategies observed. This kind of comparative analysis may help to uncover the *typicality* of mansplaining.

Insofar as a notion of interactional inhospitableness adds a valuable perspective, the three-dimensional analytical template – the “triple failure” approach – could also be applied to mansplaining incidents that occur within other social situations. The question can even be raised as to whether there is critical mileage in approaching *any* social situation – also in digital spaces and in the online-offline nexus – *as if it were* a party gathering, and looking for the metaphorical equivalents of “host” and “guest(s),” and the extent to which the former “welcomes” the latter into that “shared space” and provides a “shelter” in which the guests feel cared for and respected. As Solnit (2015, p. 15) remarks in her essay, “[h]aving the right to show up and speak are basic to survival, to dignity, and to liberty.”

To my knowledge, the present study is the first attempt to conceptualise and theorise situated social action, social situations, talk-in-interaction, and discourse in terms of hospitableness and with the host-guest relationship as its nexus. Of course, the idea of safety or security itself is not new: Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists have long emphasised that social encounters need to provide “a degree of security,” and that this depends, among other things, on the observation of so-called *involvement obligations*, for example, “reciprocally exchanged moral expectations” (Rawls, 1987, p. 140), with benevolence as arguably one such obligation or expectation. What is new, however, is relating that degree of security to a metaphorical concept of hospitableness, and construing hospitableness as a point of departure. As a sociological imagination, it would inspire and infuse all socially situated interaction, thus enabling the emergence-through-action of individual “hosts” and “guests,” and, overall, a stronger orientation on the part of all social actors towards discursively affective symmetries and emotional alignment.

In other words, whenever two, three or more people find themselves in a social situation, *any* social situation (Goffman, 1964, p. 135), their relationship should also be understood in terms of their roles as metaphorical “host” and/or “guest,” and not only, or not exclusively or predominantly, in terms of differences in age, gender, identity, socio-economic status, participant role, and epistemic imbalances. In addition, such a view would imply that there will always have to be a discursively hospitable “home,” where “hosts” perform the discursive equivalents of

welcoming, showing respect, looking after, and providing “shelter” as part of their interactional hospitableness.

Note that a consideration of interactional inhospitableness is not meant to diminish the severity of real and symbolic violence, particularly against women. Inhospitableness frequently takes on a threatening and violent dimension, especially when the notion is extended to *non-hospitality* situations. What interactional inhospitableness does, and not just at dinner parties, is to make guests feel neglected and even unwanted, which is the ultimate contradiction. As such, the notion is analytically useful in that it puts affective asymmetries centre stage: in emphasising the emotional impact of a host’s interactional failures, it helps to build a more heartfelt reading of the mansplaining phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

For now, a theory of interactional hospitableness must remain work in progress. It is hoped, however, that the current paper has at least sketched out the contours of an alternative approach to mansplaining, an interpretation that construes the incident not only as a discrete discursive event, a predatory social action or a gendered cultural phenomenon but also as a failure to offer interactional hospitableness.

In Solnit’s (2015) oft-quoted final assessment, “mansplaining is not a universal flaw of the gender, just the intersection between overconfidence and cluelessness where some portion of that gender gets stuck” (p. 11), as it so glaringly and infamously did at that party in Aspen, Colorado, one summer night in 2003. Bridges (2021) reiterates that “individual comments are never just about the micro-level event or macro-level culture that they reference” (p. 25); they are also about identities and the substance of the socio-political topic. In other words, events, cultures, issues, and identities are all interconnected. In the case of the Aspen incident and numerous other instances of mansplaining before and since, that substantive macro-level issue is the endurance of male arrogance and toxic masculinity. If so, the mansplaining incident in Aspen owes its *raison d’être* not exclusively to the happenstance of three people meeting and their temporary material and semiotic actions.

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