

Gender Differences in Topical Coherence: Creating Involvement in Best Friends' Talk

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Analyzing videotapes recorded by Bruce Dorval in which 2nd-, 6th-, and 10th-grade same-sex best friends talked to each other for 20 minutes in an experimental setting, the study examines gender differences in topical coherence through the lens of John Gumperz's framework for cross-cultural communication. The girls exhibit minimal or no difficulty finding something to talk about, and they talk about a small number of topics, all related to troubles. There is more concern among the girls with avoidance of anger and disagreement. The boys exhibit more discomfort with the situation. The two younger pairs of boys produce small amounts of talk about a great number of topics. The 10th-grade boys talk about highly personal topics, but each develops his own topic and minimizes the other's. These differences in ways of creating involvement can account for frustrations in cross-gender conversations without blaming either gender for communication failure.

With support from the Society for Research in Child Development, Bruce Dorval organized a study group for which he invited scholars in a range of disciplines to examine videotapes he had made of boys and girls, and women and men, talking to their same-sex best friends.* As one of those invited to participate, I approached the videotapes with the intention of analyzing involvement strategies such as repetition and dialogue, in keeping with my research on the creation of involvement in conversation (Tannen, 1989). However, watching the videotapes of friends at ages ranging from second graders to 25-year-olds, I was so struck by gender-related patterns that I felt driven to study them.

My previous research includes only one study of gender differences, of indirectness in conversation (Tannen 1981, 1982). However, for a book about con-

*Papers that grew out of that meeting, including my own ("Gender Differences in Conversational Coherence: Physical Alignment and Topical Cohesion"), are collected in the forthcoming *Conversational Coherence and its Development*, edited by Bruce Dorval and published by Ablex. My paper in that volume concerns both topical coherence and physical alignment, and it includes 25-year-old speakers. The present paper is a revised version of only the sections dealing with the children and with topical coherence. I am grateful to Bruce Dorval for the opportunity to study these tapes and for permission to use the material for the current paper and to A. L. Becker for comments and discussion on a draft of the earlier paper.

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versational style (Tannen, 1986), I had reviewed and discussed recent research on gender and language. Some of the patterns I observed in the videotapes of friends talking supported previous studies, but some were unexpected. Inspired, in part, by the striking impression made by these data, I decided to devote a forthcoming book to gender differences in conversational style (Tannen, 1990).

OVERVIEW OF GENDER-RELATED PATTERNS IN THE VIDEOTAPES

Dorval visited 2nd-, 6th-, and 10th-grade classrooms and invited students to come to his office and talk to their same-sex best friends for 20 minutes, where he videotaped them during these talks. He also invited adult men and women to bring their best friends to his office for the same purpose. To begin the conversations, he instructed each pair of friends to find "something serious and/or intimate" to talk about, and he informed them that he would be returning in 5 minutes to remind them.¹

Watching the videotapes of the boys and girls and women and men at the various age levels, I observed patterns that linked the speakers of like gender across the ages and distinguished cross-gender age-mates. Whereas all the pairs displayed discomfort with the experimental situation and the assigned task, at every age level, the female friends quickly established topics for talk and produced extended talk related to a small number of topics. In contrast, boys at the two younger ages produced small amounts of talk about many different topics. At the two older ages, the boys and men, like their female counterparts, produced a lot of talk about a few topics, but the level at which they discussed the topics was more abstract, less personal. Finally, the strategies used to create involvement differed along gender lines. In this paper, I present and discuss these patterns in managing and elaborating topics in the videotapes of the children at 2nd, 6th, and 10th grade.

A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW OF GENDER DIFFERENCES

My study of gender differences follows a cross-cultural approach to cross-gender conversation by which women and men, boys and girls, can be seen to accomplish and display coherence in conversation in different but equally valid ways.

A model for understanding cross-cultural communication is provided by

¹Research design always represents a trade-off. Ethnographically oriented researchers would never elicit discourse in an experimental situation and would argue, with justification, that the discourse thus elicited is not "natural." However, as Wolfson (1976) argues, all "natural" speech is simply speech natural to the situation in which it is produced. The experiment designed by Dorval elicits speech natural to the odd situation in which it was produced. Moreover, it provides the otherwise impossible opportunity to compare how speakers of different ages and genders speak in this odd, but comparable, situation.

Gumperz (1982). That such an approach can be applied to conversations between women and men is supported by ethnographic research on language socialization by sociologists and anthropologists, especially the extensive work of Goodwin (see her paper in this issue) and the overview provided by Maltz and Borker (1982). Only a brief summary can be provided here.

Reviewing the work of Goodwin and others, Maltz and Borker explain that males and females learn their styles of talking in sex-separate peer groups.² In this sense, they grow up in different cultural environments, so they develop different habits for signaling their intentions and understandings. Because they learn to have conversations in same-sex peer interaction, women and men develop different norms for establishing and displaying conversational involvement. These "cultural" differences account for the differing patterns observed among girls and boys and women and men, as well as for mutual negative evaluations that often result from cross-gender interactions.

TOPICAL COHERENCE

The girls' talk with their best friends is more tightly focused, the boys' more diffuse.³ At all ages, the girls and women exhibit minimal or no difficulty finding something to talk about, and they talk about a small number of topics. At all ages, with the exception of the 10th graders, the boys and men exhibit great difficulty finding something to talk about. The two youngest male pairs elaborate no topic and, thus, produce small amounts of talk about each of a great number of topics. The 10th-grade boys talk about a small number of topics, but they develop their topics in seemingly parallel tracks. There are gender differences in terms of what topics are discussed and what concerns emerge in discussion. The boys frequently use the room as a topical resource; the girls rarely do. There are occasional references to violence in the boys' talk, never in the girls'. There is much more concern among the girls than the boys with separation and avoidance of anger and disagreement. I demonstrate these findings by discussing each of the pairs in turn.

SECOND-GRADE BOYS

Among both the second- and the sixth-grade boys, no topic is elaborated. The second-grade boys exhibit extreme discomfort in the situation of sitting in a room with nothing to do but talk. Much of their talk is about finding something to do. They tease, tell jokes, and plan future activities. They talk about what is in the

²Sheldon (this issue) cites such research, and her own study provides eloquent evidence.

³This pattern is similar to that described by Sheldon (this issue) in which 3-year-old boys at play switched themes far more often than did girls of the same age engaged in a similar play activity. Similarly, Aries (1976, p. 13) found that male college students in same-sex group discussions jumped "from one anecdote to another," whereas female groups "discussed one topic for a half hour or more."

room, using what Erickson (1982) calls "local resources" for topics. They look for a game to play (Jimmy: "What games do we- does he have") and try to devise one (Kevin: "Let's play patty-cake"). They do not sustain any topic for more than a few turns. They sing, make motor sounds by trilling their lips, and utter nonsense syllables and scatological words (Jimmy: "You have tu tu in your panties," "and then made a fart- Here he comes!"). There are only two extended turns in the 20-minute conversation: In one Jimmy explains a video game; in another he explains how to play patty-cake (even though it was Kevin who proposed playing it).

Like most of the participants in this study, the second-grade boys begin by talking about the problem at hand. Kevin asks, "What are we going to talk about?" Jimmy responds with a command,⁴ "Look at this," and makes a face by pulling his cheeks down and his mouth out. Jimmy teases Kevin.⁵

Your hair is standing up. Look. It's still sticking up. Still. Still. Still. Still. Let go. It's sticking up. No. Go like this and- Now it's almost down but a little- and then go like this. Go like this. Go like this.

Throughout this teasing, Jimmy is laughing and smoothing his own hair in demonstration. He returns to the same tease later.

Your hair's sticking up. Still is. Your hair always sticks up.

The video shows no evidence that Kevin's hair was standing up, though Kevin seems to take the tease seriously, judging from his words ("I didn't comb it. That's why.") and actions (he mirrors Jimmy's gesture and repeatedly smooths his hair).

The second-grade boys talk about finding something to do.

Kevin: You want to come over to my house one day? Ride my bike?

Jimmy: What we doin' now? _____

⁴There is widespread research support for the finding that boys issue more commands than girls at play (for example, Goodwin, 1980; Sachs, 1987). Gleason (1987) finds that fathers use more imperatives than mothers when talking to their children.

⁵Transcripts are based on those provided by Dorval; I made minor corrections. In them, // indicates unintelligible word or phrase, and a - indicates abrupt cutting off of sound (a glottal stop). A colon indicates elongation of vowel sound. Left brackets (l) indicate simultaneous speech: Vertically aligned utterances on two lines began simultaneously. Right and left brackets (r,l) on vertically aligned lines indicate latching: Succeeding utterance began without perceptible pause following preceding utterance. Ellipses (. . .) indicate lines omitted. Underline indicates emphatic stress. Except when it occurs sentence initially, "god" is written with a small g because it functions as a discourse marker, not a reference to a deity. Numbers in parentheses indicate measured length of pause in seconds. Words in parentheses were uttered in "parenthetical" intonation: lowered volume and flattened intonation contour. Punctuation indicates intonation rather than grammatical structure.

Jimmy: Look. You know what the game- What the game is over there- We play- we had that in first grade. _____

Jimmy: What games do we- does he have.

Kevin: I don't know.

Jimmy: Probably only that. That's a dumb game isn't it?

Kevin: Looks pretty good though. _____

Jimmy: I can't wait until we play games. _____

Jimmy: Well if you have something to do, do it.

Kevin: Here he comes back in. What would you like to do?

Jimmy: Play football. _____

Jimmy: Would you find something to do? [*guying*]

Kevin: Patty-cake.

Jimmy: [*laugh*] Look. Patty-cake. Come on, let's do patty-cake. Come on.

To generate talk, Jimmy takes the role of interviewer. He repeatedly asks Kevin, "How you doing in school?" until Kevin objects, "You don't have to keep telling me that." Jimmy also asks Kevin, "How are you playing soccer?" He then recapitulates the topics he deems appropriate to talk about.

Jimmy: I've got four things to say.

Kevin: Yeah.

Jimmy: I've got four things to say.

Kevin: Tell me.

Jimmy: You doing good in your school work, huh.

Kevin: Yeah.

Jimmy: um Play soccer good?

Kevin: Uh huh.

Jimmy: You're nice. What was the last one? How are you.

Kevin: Fine.

Jimmy: It's your turn.

It seems that sitting and talking reminds Jimmy of an interview, being questioned by a parent or other adult. This suggests that simply sitting and talking is not something that he finds natural to do with a friend. Furthermore, at this young age, Jimmy enacts the model that characterizes the conversations of all the boys and men in the tapes I viewed. "How are you?" is a routine opener, and "You're nice" a vague topic. The other two topics Jimmy names, school and sports, are those that the boys and men in the study most often begin with and discuss.

SECOND-GRADE GIRLS

The girls at grade 2 provide an astonishing contrast to the boys of the same age. Whereas the second-grade boys jumped from topic to topic, never fixing on one

nor elaborating any, and talked about activities, the second-grade girls immediately agreed on a topic that was also an activity: They told each other stories.

When the tape begins, Ellen is telling about a shared experience at a party they had both attended. Jane responds with a story about a recent incident at home when she was reading to her brother. Ellen responds with a story about having read to *her* brother. Jane's next turn is a story about another shared experience, at a restaurant. At this point, the first 5 minutes are up, and the experimenter enters and reminds them to think of something serious "and kind of talk about it a little bit." The girls follow his instructions to the letter. They huddle and whisper, apparently talking about what to talk about. They come up with a topic that is indisputably serious. For the remaining 15 minutes, they exchange stories about illness, hospitalizations, falls, accidents, and scrapes. They tell their stories in a stylized intonation pattern beginning with drawn-out rising intonation, such as Michaels (1981) describes for narratives told during "sharing time" in a kindergarten classroom. A particularly brief but representative story exchange goes like this:

Ellen: Remember what when I told you about my uncle? He went up the ladder after my grandpa? And he fell and um cracked his head open? He's and you know what? It still hasn't healed.

Jane: One time, my uncle, he was uh he has like this bull ranch? In Millworth? And the bull's horns went right through his head.

Ellen: That's serious.

Although the girls do not explicitly tie each of their stories to the previous story, it is easy to track the coherence from one story to the next. For example, in the previous excerpt, not only is Jane's story similar to Ellen's in being about an accident, but it is also about an uncle and a head wound. Ellen's evaluation, "That's serious," is touching, not only because it is oriented to the investigator's instructions to talk about "something serious," but also because it is approving, in striking contrast to the mock-hostile teasing of the boys at the same age. (Aries, 1976, and others have documented girls' tendency to provide supportive responses.) The girls also orient their stories to each other by frequently beginning with "Remember?" to remind each other that the experiences recounted were shared. Thus, the girls could be said to discuss a single topic, injuries and illnesses, with many subtopics. Moreover, they seem comfortable engaging in the activity of sitting together and talking.

SIXTH-GRADE BOYS

In their 20-minute conversation, the sixth-grade boys talked about 55 topics. They began by mentioning school and homework and went on to such topics as cable television, sports, sex and violence on television (they disapprove), notic-

ings about the room, other boys at school, Walt's shoes (which he takes out of bag and hands to Tom for inspection), a rock group they play in, inflation, Nancy Reagan buying a dress for \$3,000 (they disapprove), girls, guns, videos, and their friendship. No topic extended over more than a few turns, and only two turns extended for more than a few utterances. One of the two extended turns was not talk: Tom sang a song he had recently composed for their rock group. The other extended turn was a brief story about a bicycle accident. (Erickson, in press, discusses bike accident stories as a genre in which boys and men participate). Most turns were only a single phrase or sentence in length.

Following is a representative segment of the sixth-grade boys' conversation:

Tom: Dang. This is quite a picture. [*referring to picture in room*]

Walt: uh-huh

Tom: I hate it sometimes when you're watching TV and it's really boring.

Walt: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah the only thing you ever see on TV anymore is sex and all that.

Walt: And like the crime rate's not like it really is in the real world.

Tom: I know, I mean you go to- you don't go into a department store every day and get shot.

Walt: I know.

Tom: I was watching James Bond today. They're- I don't think they're gonna have motor bikes like that. The crooks come after one detective with machine guns in their motor bike. That's what I want, a motor bike, but my dad don't like motor bikes.

Walt: Neither does mine. He says they're too dangerous.

Tom: You heard of that new song, it's called Miss Dance? Flash Dance?

Walt: Yeah.

Tom: I don't know, she's on a dance team or something.

Walt: I like that song.

Tom: Wha- what ??? report card this time, Oh Jesus.

Walt: Pretty good. They went up.

As this segment shows, the boys switch topics often, and no topic is extensively elaborated; references are elliptical and brief. The boys do, nonetheless, negotiate a lot of agreement—a style that has been associated with girls (see Eckert, this issue).

TOPIC OPENERS OF SIXTH-GRADE BOYS AND GIRLS

As with the second graders, the sixth-grade girls present a staggering contrast to the boys of the same age.

Both the girls and the boys at this age begin by talking about what happened at home the night before. But they focus on very different aspects of their home interaction. Of the sixth-grade boys, Tom opens the topic by mentioning objects: a jet plane and a television.

Tom: Man- Yesterday? We were sitting and watching cable? Some big old jet came flying by sounded like he was going to land.

Walt: [laughs]

Tom: And then our cable went out yesterday.

Walt: Ours too.

This closes the topic for the boys. In contrast, the sixth-grade girl who opens the talk also tells about what happened at home the night before, but she recounts an emotionally charged incident involving a family member.

Julia: Um: Guess what happened last night.

Shannon: What.

Julia: Um I went um, okay. Last night, um- my brother um, my b- Okay my dad said, "Julia you gotta pick up, by yourself." And /?/ I said, "Well, if my brother doesn't have to" and so me and my dad got into a big fight and everything yknow? And u:m, oh god. And I bit him. I couldn't believe it. Oh god!

Shannon: Oh my gosh. Did he get mad?

Julia: Yeah, but not- not right now just- I went in my room. I locked the [door.

Shannon: [Uhuh.

Julia: Oh god.

Not only is Julia's turn about a family member, but it is also longer than any turn produced by the boys at the same age; indeed, it is a story. And it is about a particular kind of family interaction, a fight. Most of the sixth-grade girls' talk concerns intimacy and fights, revealing their concern that fights destroy intimacy. Whereas the emotionally neutral and terse "man" is the characteristic discourse marker of one of the sixth-grade boys, the discourse marker that peppers Julia's talk at topic boundaries or points of unease is the emotionally expressive "god" or "oh god" (there are 20 occurrences), uttered with the vowel elongated.

SIXTH-GRADE GIRLS

Immediately after this interchange, Julia raises the topic that accounts for most of the talk in this conversation: her friendship with another girl, Lizzie, which ended because of Lizzie's flare-ups of anger. After a short spate of talk on this topic, Shannon raises a different one: "Tomorrow I want to go ice skating." Both girls then evaluate their own ice skating ability negatively, and then Julia declares that she hopes she and Shannon will remain friends in high school, even though they will be going to different schools. The danger of their friendship ending is raised by reference, again, to Lizzie: "'Cause you know that's what happened to you and Lizzie." Shannon protests that "Lizzie did that herself." In the midst of

a short exchange of remarks on relationships at school and on an upcoming picnic, Julia gives Shannon a friendship pin. Before long, however, they are back to Lizzie.

Shannon: Too bad you and Lizzie are not good friends any more.

Julia: I know. God, it's- she's so mean sometimes.

And then- what was so sad she just- gets mad at you all of a sudden. And like if she does something I don't like, I mean, I just- I don't like it, I mean, I don't get mad at her!

The discussion continues at length about how Julia wanted and tried to be friend with Lizzie, but Lizzie made the friendship impossible. Here, as elsewhere Julia's concern centers around the destructive effects of anger and her claim that people should not get mad at each other (for example, "My mom does things that I don't like a lot, an- I just- I mean I don't get mad at her."). Another related concern Julia expresses is the pain of losing friendships ("It hurts when you lose your best friend").

The next three topics are raised, rather suddenly, by Julia. On the surface they seem like topic switches, but, on a deeper level, they are new phases of the same topic: fear of separation and loss. After more talk about Lizzie, Julia leaps forward in her chair and says,

Oh! I forgot I have to ask you something. Have you ever felt that you're adopted?

The girls then discuss who is or might be adopted and why they think so. Then Julia says, "I like getting a friend and keeping it forever," thereby initiating a discussion of friendship that leads to a discussion of children's relationships with peers and parents, including criticism of children who are too self-centered and demanding or too catered to by their parents. Not surprisingly, one girl who comes in for such criticism is Lizzie. All these topics are concerned with intimacy and fear of its loss. Finally, Julia says, without apparent coherence with previous talk,

When um, well- I hate for my parents to be divorced. That's what happens when they get in fights. I think that they're just gonna say, "Well, I'm gonna get a divorce." And then whenever, whenever they get in fights, just rushed through my mind Lizzie and Jonah.

The coherence, however, emerges: Julia suspects that Lizzie's objectionable behavior is the result of her parents' divorce. Julia believes that expression of anger leads to separation, so when her parents fight, she's afraid they will get divorced and then her character will be ruined like Lizzie's ("I'd hate to be turned into a snob").

TENTH-GRADE GIRLS

There is such a striking resemblance between the 10th- and 6th-grade girls, that I will discuss the 10th-grade girls first and contrast the boys after.

The 10th-grade girls spend the first 5 minutes of their conversation giggling, joking, and laughing. Their 20-minute talk includes 18 topics, but 16 of these are found in the first 5 minutes, before they settle down to talk. After Dorval's reminder at the 5-minute mark that they should talk about something "serious and/or intimate," the girls quickly fix upon two related topics: Nancy's boyfriend and her mother. As with the 6th-grade girls, the talk focuses on one of the girls' problematic relationships with other people, and the topics are raised by the other girl.

Sally: Talk about John. That's serious and/or intimate.

Although John does eventually become the topic of talk, that does not happen immediately. After a few noncommittal exchanges (such as Nancy's "What about him?"), Sally suggests the second of Nancy's problems.

Nancy: Okay. Well, what do you want to talk about?

Sally: Your mama, did you talk to your mama?

As Nancy collaborates on this topic, it emerges that Nancy and Sally participated in a group trip to Florida, from which Nancy summarily left at her mother's insistence. The rest of the talk concerns this experience, focusing on Nancy's departure and the effect of her trip and its untimely conclusion on her relationships with John and other male friends.

There are other ways that the talk of the 10th-grade girls is similar to that of the 6th-grade girls. Although not quite as stylized as the younger pair, the 10th-grade girls' talk is similarly characterized by singsong intonation, elongation of vowels, marked shifts in pitch, and constructed dialogue.⁶ Furthermore, some of Nancy's words and expressions are reminiscent of Julia's, such as "god" and "I couldn't believe it". This pattern emerges as soon as the topic is settled. Sally talks about how Nancy's departure affected her friends.

Nancy: God, it was bad. I couldn't believe she made me go home.]

Sally: [I thought it was kind of weird though, I mean, one minute we were going out and the next minute Nancy's going "Excuse me, gotta be going." *[both laugh]* I didn't know

⁶Constructed dialogue is a term I have devised (Tannen 1989) to refer to what is commonly called "reported speech" or "direct quotation." I use the term to reflect the creative component of representing ideas by animating others' voices.

what was goin' on, and Mary comes up to me and she whispers, (the whole place knows), "Do you know that Nancy's going home?" And I go, "What?" *[both laugh]* "Nancy's goin' home." I go "Why?" She goes, "Her mom's makin' her." I go, *[makes a face]*, "ahh." She comes back and goes, "Nancy's left." Well I said, "Well that was a fine thing to do, she didn't even come and say goodbye." And she starts boiling all over me. I go *[mimicking yelling]* "All right!!" She was upset, Mary, I was like "God"]

Nancy: [I just had to go home.

[clears throat] I know, when I was going home, I said, I said, "Mom, could we hurry up? I want to go home and call John." I'm going, I was trying to tell her, "Look, I gotta do something or I'm going to go nuts!"

Sally: Did she say anything?

Nancy: Not really.

As was seen among the sixth-grade girls and is often the case in teenage girls' talk, the dialogue is central, and the most frequent verb of saying introducing the dialogue is a form of the verb "go" ("I go 'Why?'"). An alternate and also frequent form for introducing dialogue is some form of "be + like" followed by not exactly what someone *said* but rather what someone was feeling *like*, as displayed in an utterance ("I was like 'God'"). The intonation contours are exaggerated, and the pivotal events are relationships among people and the speaker's feelings about them.

TENTH-GRADE BOYS

Whereas the patterns that link the girls' and women's conversations are fairly constant across the ages, the 10th-grade boys' conversation is partly anomalous among the boys and men and partly conforming to pattern. Although they discuss many intertwined subtopics, the 10th-grade boys' talk revolves around two main related topics. However, rather than both boys' discussing the concerns of one boy, each of the two topics discussed reflects the preoccupation of one of the boys.

Both topics that are elaborated grow out of relationships, feelings, behavior, and conversations associated with a party they attended the night before. Richard's concern is his drinking: When he took Estelle home after the party, she told him he behaves badly when he drinks and should either drink moderately or stop drinking altogether. Todd's concern is his feeling of alienation from Richard and the group. This sense of being left out, of not fitting in, was triggered the night before when Richard left the party to talk privately with Mary.

In the following excerpt, Richard introduces his concern by using constructed dialogue but not the extreme intonation contours that characterize the girls' use of dialogue:

Richard: When I took Estelle home last night she told me off.

Todd: Really?

Richard: You see when she found out what happened last Thursday night between Sam and me?

Todd: uhuh

Richard: She knew about that. And she and she just said and then she started talking about drinking. You know?

And then she said, you know, "You, how you hurt everybody when you do it. You're always cranky." And she just said, "I don't like it. You hurt Sam. You hurt Todd. You hurt Mary. You hurt Liz." And I said, "Oh, make Richie out to be the alcoholic."

Richard repeatedly returns to the question of whether he should try to limit his drinking or stop it altogether.

Todd repeatedly returns to the topic of his feelings of alienation. The first topic of talk is an upcoming dance, which Richard raised in reference to his talk with Mary the night before: Richard is concerned because Mary does not have a date for the dance. Todd responds by revealing that he doesn't have a date for the dance either: "See, I don't feel like asking anyone." Furthermore, he says he went on a date with a girl named Judith, but it just made him feel bad because "It gets boring after one date. [laugh] That's all there is to it." Later on, as Richard continues to talk about his conversation with Estelle, Todd again brings up his own concern: He has felt cut off from Richard, and he resents the time Richard spends with Mary.

Richard: I mean, when she told me, you know I guess I was kind of stunned. (5.6) I didn't really drink that much.

Todd: Are you still talking to Mary, a lot, I mean?

Richard: Am I still talking to Mary?

Todd: Yeah, 'cause that's why- that's why I was mad Friday.

Richard: Why?

Todd: Because.

Richard: 'Cause why?

Todd: 'Cause I didn't know why you all just wa- I mean I just went back upstairs then y'all never came back. I was going "Fine. I don't care." I said, "He's going to start this again."

Rather than pursuing Todd's complaint about his disappearing from the party with Mary, Richard returns to the topic he raised at the outset: his concern that Mary has no date for the upcoming dance ("God, I'm going to feel so bad for her if she stays home.") Todd expresses a lack of sympathy for Mary ("She's not going to stay home, it's ridiculous. Why doesn't she just ask somebody?") and returns to his own concern, his sense of alienation: "I felt funny again last night"

because "I felt so out of place." He goes on to explain that that was why he himself disappeared from the party.

For the 10th-grade boys, as for the girls of the same age, friendship alliances are of central concern, and one way these are observed is in party behavior: who is there and who defects.

Thus, Richard and Todd simultaneously discuss two main topics, one of concern to each of them, whereas the girls at Grades 6 and 10 focus on the troubles of one of them. Furthermore, each one frequently brings up his own topic in immediate response to the other's expression of his. Moreover, both boys downplay or dismiss the concerns expressed by the other. Several examples of this have already been seen. For example, it was seen that Todd denied that Mary deserves sympathy for having no date for the upcoming dance. Other examples follow.

In the next example, when Todd explains why he doesn't want to ask Judith to the dance, Richard expresses lack of understanding.

Todd: I felt so bad when she came over and started talking to me last night.

Richard: Why?

Todd: I don't know. I felt uncomfortable, I guess.

Richard: I'll never understand that. [laugh]

Richard responds to Todd's repeated expressions of feeling left out by reassuring him that he shouldn't feel that way. For example, in response to Todd's remark that he felt out of place at the party the night before, Richard argues that his feelings are unfounded.

Richard: How could you feel out of place? You knew Lois, and you knew Sam.

Todd: I don't know. I just felt really out of place and then last night again at the party /?/ I mean, Sam was just running around, he knew everyone from the sorority. There was about five.

Richard: Oh, no, he didn't.

Todd: He knew a lot of people. He was- I don't know.

Richard: Just Lois, he didn't know everybody.

Todd: Hum. I felt /?/ I just felt really out of place that day, all over the place. I used to feel, I mean]

Richard: [Why?

Todd: I don't know. I don't even feel right in school anymore.

Richard: I don't know, last night, I mean-

Todd: I think I know what Jim O'Connor and them feels like now. [laugh]

Richard: [laugh] No I don't think you feel as bad as Jim O'Connor feels.

Todd: I'm kidding.

Richard: Uh- uh. Why should you? You know more people-

Todd: I can't talk to anyone anymore.

Richard: You know more people than me.

Richard responds to Todd's expressions of alienation first by asking why he feels that way and then by arguing that the reasons are unjustified: Todd knows a lot of people, Sam and he know no more, Todd couldn't feel as bad as he says.

Todd responds to Richard's concern about his drinking in a similar way, by denying that it is a problem.

Richard: Hey, man, I just don't feel- I mean, after what Estelle said last night, I just don't feel like doing that.

Todd: I don't think it was that way. You yourself knew it was no big problem. [*moves chair and puts feet up*]

Richard: Oh, Estelle- Sam told Estelle that I fell down the levee.

Todd: It's a lie. [*hissing*]

Richard: I didn't fall. I slipped, slid. I caught myself.

Todd: Don't worry about it.

Richard: But I do kinda. I feel funny in front of Sam. I don't want to do it in front of you.

Todd: It doesn't matter 'cause sometimes you're funny when you're off your butt.

This pattern supports Eckert's (this issue) observation that high school boys do talk about personal topics, but they do so differently from girls. Whereas both pairs of girls focus on the problems of one, elaborating on and agreeing in their perspectives on it, each 10th-grade boy talks about his own concerns and counters the other's concerns in order to downplay his problems. The closest congruence in point of view displayed by the boys is when they join in ridiculing someone else; for example they laugh at both Mary and Richard's mother for having "zero brains." (Eckert also found girls to bond through denigration of others.)

These differences in responses to each other's expressed problems might account for dissatisfaction and mutual complaints in adult cross-gender conversations. Women frequently express dissatisfaction with the way men respond to their expressions of concern. Whereas they would like the men to express understanding and sympathy, what they hear is downplaying of the problem or advice about how to solve it. Observation of the 10th-grade boys supports the suggestion that such dissatisfaction is the result of cross-cultural differences. Neither boy shows dissatisfaction with the other's response. Denying the basis for the other's complaint seems not to be a failure of empathy (as it would appear if measured by the standard of the girls' conversations) but, rather, a means of reassuring a friend, "Your problem isn't so bad, so you shouldn't feel bad about it."

SUMMARY

The six videotapes examined in this study provide a view of each pair of friends as unique, with unique concerns and styles of speaking, but they also illuminate a

view of social patterning. In some ways, the boys and girls are similar: They are all concerned with shifting alliances, with friends growing apart. But there are some patterns that distinguish the genders. It seemed easier for the girls and women to choose topics and talk about them, they talked at length about a few topics, and their topics were focused on personal and specific concerns. The youngest girls exchanged stories. The 6th- and 10th-grade girls engaged in "troubles talk" focused on the troubles of one of the girls.

The boys at 2nd and 6th grades devoted small amounts of talk to each of a great number of topics. The youngest boys, moreover, repeatedly expressed the desire to find something to do, and both the 2nd- and 6th-grade boys appeared intensely uncomfortable in the situation. The 10th-grade boys, despite apparent discomfort, did talk at length about a limited number of topics. They discussed topics of intense personal concern, but they differed from the girls who discussed personal concerns, in two ways. First, each tended to focus on and return to his own concerns and downplay the concerns expressed by the other. Second, one confronted the other directly with a complaint about their relationship, in contrast with the girls, who complained about relationships with others who were not present.

The patterns of topical coherence are analogous and operate simultaneously with patterns of physical alignment (discussed in the longer paper on which this is based but omitted from this paper for reasons of space). In both the alignment of posture and gaze and the development of topics, the girls and women focused more tightly and more directly on each other than did the boys and men. For example, the 10th-grade boys' parallel focus on their own concerns, in contrast with the 6th- and 10th-grade girls' joint focus on the concerns of one, is a verbal analogue to the way they were sitting: The 10th-grade boys sat aligned but parallel, both looking out rather than at each other, whereas the girls sat facing and looking at each other. (This is reminiscent of the pattern described by Sheldon in this issue in which 3-year-old boys engaged in more parallel play than 3-year-old girls, who coordinated their play.)

I conclude, however, by cautioning against concluding with value judgments such as the commonly expressed one that girls and women are more "engaged" in interaction than boys and men. For example, although the girls are more tightly aligned with each other topically, nonetheless, in keeping with patterns observed by researchers such as Goodwin (this issue), the girls express complaints against girls who are not present, whereas the complaint of the boy who expresses a significant complaint is aimed directly at his friend who is present.⁷ In this sense, the 10th-grade boys could be said to be more "engaged" with each other than any of the girls in this study. Moreover, the talk of the 10th-grade boys

⁷This is not to say, however, that girls never express conflict directly to each other. Eder (in press) and Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) discuss situations in which they do.

displayed more intense intimacy than that of any of the other pairs, although one would not expect this, judging from their postures and demeanors.

This and other observations of the boys and men demonstrate that, although they did not align themselves directly to each other, they were clearly orienting to each other and conversationally involved. This is a crucial point. One of the main contributions of Gumperz's (1982) analysis of cross-cultural communication is that ways of signaling intentions and meanings, ways of constituting the context of communication, are not universal, but culturally relative. I suggest, following Maltz and Borker (1982), that gender differences can be understood as cultural differences. It is likely that one source of the most frequent complaint by women about their relationships with men—that men do not listen to them—issues from differences demonstrated by this study: Perhaps the men do not pursue a topic at as great length as women do, and perhaps they respond to concerns by either raising a topic of their own concern or denying or belittling the basis for the woman's concern. If cross-cultural differences are at play, then these patterns of conversational strategies do not indicate lack of caring but rather different norms for establishing and displaying conversational involvement.

The fact that the girls and women showed less discomfort finding a topic, elaborated topics at greater length, squirmed less, and generally looked more physically relaxed seems to indicate that they found it easier to fulfill the assigned task of sitting in a room and talking to each other than did the boys and men. This could be because, as Lever (1976) and Goodwin (1982) observe, in natural interaction, sitting inside and talking is a familiar and frequently self-selected activity for girls, whereas boys more frequently choose to play games outside, in groups. If this is true, then the experimental task was a more familiar one to the girls and women than to the boys and men.

Support for this view is found in a recent description by Hoyle (1988) of boys' play at home. Hoyle observed that her son frequently played in their basement with one or another friend, providing, Hoyle argues, counterevidence to the claim that boys do not play in pairs. But the activity that she observed her son and his friends engaging in was sportscasting. While playing indoor basketball or video games, the boys spontaneously took the role of sports announcer, casting themselves as players and providing a running account of their actions in sports announcer register. This self-selected activity supports the prior research, also supported by the present study, in a number of dramatic ways. First, the boys elected to play a game rather than talk. Second, finding themselves in a pair, they used sportscasting to bring more characters into the room. Finally, by taking the role of sports announcer, they distanced themselves from the immediate intimacy of one-on-one interaction. Hoyle notes that her son and his friends did not engage in sportscasting when there were more than two boys present.

My discussion has much in common with what Geertz (1983) calls a cases and interpretations approach to analysis, as distinguished from a rules and instances approach. Analysis of a single pair of friends at each of three age levels is limited

is limited in scope but allows analysis in depth. Examining how each individual participated in topic management and elaboration provides insight into the process of conversational involvement that would not be available using other methods alone. My analysis supports the growing body of research suggesting that there are gender-related patterns in conversational interaction but also that there are similarities and overlaps woven into the web of differences. Taking a cross-cultural view of gender differences in establishing and displaying conversational coherence allows us to see similarities and differences that explain negative impressions made by cross-gender conversations without casting blame or making negative value judgments.

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Cooperative Competition in Adolescent "Girl Talk"

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Differences between male and female participation in speech events are based in differences in gender roles in society as a whole. Fruitful discussion of such differences, therefore, must account for the function of male and female interaction within a social theoretical framework. Such an approach is taken here to girl talk, a typically female speech event involving long and detailed personal discussions about people, norms, and beliefs. It is argued that the function of girl talk derives from the place of females in society, particularly as a function of the domestication of female labor. Deprived of direct power, females are constrained to focus on the development of personal influence. Thus constrained to define themselves, not in terms of individual accomplishments, but in terms of their overall character, females need to explore and negotiate the norms that govern their behavior and define this character. Girl talk is a speech event that provides females with the means to negotiate these norms and to measure their symbolic capital in relation to them. An examination of 2 hours of girl talk among six adolescent girls shows the verbal means by which this negotiation is accomplished. The girl talk interaction constitutes a temporary community within which norms are cooperatively defined through a painstaking process of negotiation and consensus.

I think girls just talk too much, you know, they- they- talk constantly between themselves and- about every little thing. Guys, I don't think we talk about that much. (*What kinds of things do you talk about?*) Not much. Girls . . . cars, or parties, you know. I think girls talk about, you know, every little relationship, every little thing that's ever happened, you know.

As reflected in the foregoing quotation from an adolescent boy, it is commonly believed that girls and women regularly engage in long and detailed personal discussions about people, norms, and beliefs and that boys and men do not. Such speech events are frequently but inaccurately referred to as gossip sessions. Although they often contain instances of gossip, they also contain a great deal of other kinds of discussion. For want of a better name, I will call these events by their alternative popular name, "girl talk." This paper examines part of a girl talk event involving six adolescent girls, with a view to uncovering its purpose as a

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