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Gender Differences in Conversational Coherence: Physical Alignment and Topical Cohesion*

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INTRODUCTION

In introducing a collection of essays entitled *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*, I defined *coherence* as "underlying organizing structure making the words and sentences into a unified discourse that has cultural significance for those who create or comprehend it," as distinct from *cohesion*, which I defined as "surface-level ties showing relationships among elements in the text" (Tannen, 1984, p. xiv). These definitions now strike me as too static, perhaps more applicable to monologic discourse than to the interactive discourse of conversation. The organization of coherence in conversation must be not a preexisting structure, but an emergent one, much as Hopper (1988) shows grammar to be emergent. In other words, conversation is not like flesh shaped by a preformed skeleton, but a shape which is renegotiated in interaction, created anew by participants in accordance with shared expectations based on previous conversational experience, or what Becker (1988) calls "prior text."

* I am grateful to Bruce Dorval for the enlightening opportunity to study these videotapes and to A. L. Becker for helpful comments and discussion on a pre-final draft. I also benefitted from discussion with panelists Penelope Brown, Penelope Eckert, Marjorie Harness Goodwin, and Amy Sheldon, when I presented findings from this study as part of a panel entitled "Gender Differences in Conversational Interaction" at the 1988 Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown University, Washington DC, March, 1988.

Papers presented in that panel, including a slightly revised and significantly shortened version of this one, are forthcoming in *Discourse Processes*, 13(1), 1990. My thanks to Greta Patten for drawing the illustrations.

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Two elements of emergent coherence in conversation—that is, two elements that create an integrated activity, conversation, out of individuals' separate speech—are physical alignment and topical cohesion. By *physical alignment* I mean the ways that speakers position their heads and bodies in relation to each other, including eye gaze. With Schiffrin (1988), I take "topic" to be "what speakers talk about." *Topical cohesion* then refers to how speakers introduce and develop topics in relation to their own and others' prior and projected talk. This chapter describes and discusses physical alignment and topical cohesion in the 20-minute videotapes of eight pairs of friends, one female and one male pair at each of four age levels: second graders, sixth graders, tenth graders, and 25-year olds.¹

I did not approach these data with the intention of examining gender differences. Rather, I intended to analyze involvement strategies such as repetition and dialogue, in keeping with the focus of my current research (Tannen, 1987, 1988, 1989). However, watching the videotapes of same-sex pairs at each age level, I was so struck by gender-related patterns that I could not resist the drive to study them more closely. My own previous research includes only one study of gender differences, specifically, of indirectness in conversation (Tannen, 1981, 1982). But for a general book about conversational style (Tannen, 1986a), I had reviewed and discussed recent research on gender differences. Some of the patterns I observed in the videotapes of friends talking supported previous studies of which I was aware, but some were unexpected to me. 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. Watching the videotapes of the boys and girls and women and men at these four age levels, I observed that there were patterns which linked the speakers of like gender across the ages and distinguished cross-gender age-mates. At every age level, the girls and women oriented to each other with the alignment of their bodies and gaze far more directly than did the boys and men. 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

¹ I refer to the oldest pairs of speakers as "25-year-olds" in order to avoid the cumbersome but more accurate label, "24- to 27-year olds." The fifth age level in the study, involving speakers of approximately 20 years of age, was eliminated because it was not possible to identify female and male pairs for which legible transcripts were available and which did not include speakers of radically different cultural backgrounds.

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.

A cross-cultural view of gender differences. Despite these findings of gender differences, I question the conclusion made by researchers in the field of family therapy as well as by women who interact with men in everyday life that, because the boys and men are less directly aligned with their interlocutors in posture and gaze, they are not "engaged" or "involved." Furthermore, I question the conclusion that, because the boys produce small amounts of talk about each of a large number of topics, they are evidencing a failure or lack. Rather, I subscribe to 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 Gumperz (1982). That such an approach can be applied to conversations between women and men is demonstrated by Maltz and Borker (1982), on the basis of ethnographic research on language socialization by sociologists and anthropologists, especially the extensive work of Goodwin (see for example, Goodwin, 1980a, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1990) and others. Only a brief summary can be provided here.

Based on microanalysis of conversations among British speakers of English and speakers of English from India and Pakistan in London, as well as among Black and White speakers of English in the United States, Gumperz demonstrates that interlocutors accomplish conversational inferring and identify the speech activity they are engaged in by means of contextualization cues: aspects of talk such as intonation, prosody, loudness, pitch, sequencing, and choice of words, that both signal and create the context in which communication is taking place. But speakers of different cultural backgrounds use different contextualization cues. In other words, they have different habits for contextualizing their talk: different ways of signalling similar speech activities. In cross-cultural communication, such cues, therefore, are likely to be misinterpreted or missed altogether.

Reviewing the work of Goodwin and others, Maltz and Borker (1982) explain that males and females learn their styles of talking in sex-separate peer groups. In this sense, they grow up in different cultural environments, so they too develop different habits for signalling 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.

In the discussion that follows I consider patterns of physical alignment first and then move to topical cohesion.

PHYSICAL ALIGNMENT

Overview. Patterns of physical alignment which link same-gender speakers in all the videotapes studied, and differentiate pairs of speakers of different genders at similar age levels, can be instantly appreciated by watching the videotapes with the sound turned off. Even if there were no differences in how they spoke, their physical alignment, body posture, movements, and eye gaze make for very different forms of conversational involvement.

At each of the four age levels, the girls and women sit closer to each other. They sit across the chairs in order to align their bodies facing each other. They anchor their gaze on each other's faces with occasional glances away. They also occasionally touch each other, and they sit relatively still. In contrast, at every age level, the boys and men are less directly aligned with each other in terms of body posture and gaze. Their chairs are at angles to each other, and they sit aligned with the chairs and, consequently, at angles to each other. They anchor their gaze elsewhere in the room, occasionally glancing at each other, rarely if ever head on. The two younger pairs of boys are restless and seemingly diffuse in their attention; they give the impression that the chairs cannot contain them. The two older male pairs sit still but align themselves more or less parallel rather than facing each other. The tenth-grade boys in particular sprawl out from the chairs rather than sitting in them.²

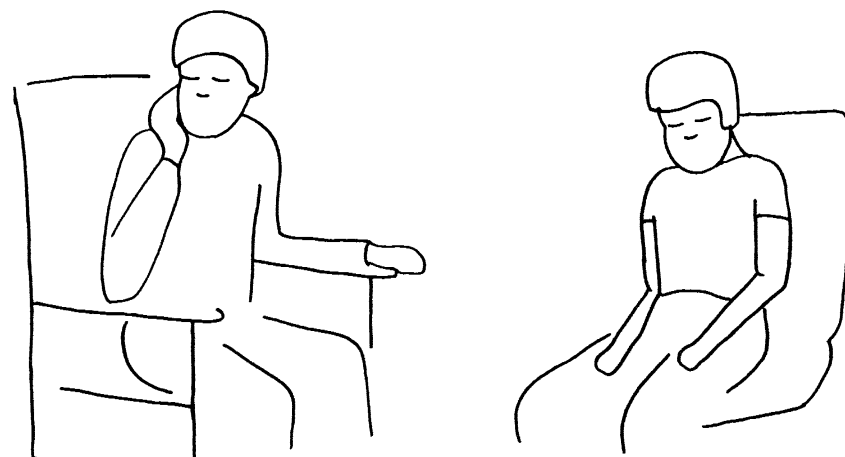
² Schefflen (1976, p. 55) describes what I am calling "tight" or "direct" alignment as a "closed mutual orientation" and "full face-to-face orientation." He does not, however, address gender differences. Aries (1982, p. 127) notes that "men have been reported to assume more relaxed, open postures than women," a finding supported by her own study. These studies do not, however, address the issue of mutual orientation. Citing Exline (1963) as the pioneering source, Henley (1977, p. 160) observes, "Probably the most accepted finding in this area is that women engage in more eye contact than do men, especially with each other." Frances (1979) corroborates this and also finds that male subjects in her study "made significantly more seat position shifts and leg position shifts during the experimental sessions than did female subjects" (p. 531). Thus previous research on posture and gaze has identified the patterns that I observed in the videotapes of friends talking but has not examined these patterns in terms of coherent gender-related strategies for establishing conversational involvement.

In this section, I proceed by age level to describe the physical alignment of the boys and girls or men and women, in comparison to each other at each level.

Grade two. The second-grade boys, Kevin and Jimmy, look at each other only occasionally. They look around the room, look at the ceiling, squirm in their chairs, get up and sit down again, pummel the arms of the chair (the one whose chair has arms), rhythmically kick their feet, make faces, point to objects in the room, mug for the video camera.

The second-grade girls present a strikingly different image. At the beginning of the session, Ellen is sitting at the edge of her seat. Later she moves back into the seat, but then Jane moves to the edge of hers. Thus the space between them remains small. Finally, and for much of the session, they are both at the edges of their seats, sitting very close to each other, almost nose to nose compared to the boys. In all the positions in which they sit, they look straight into each other's faces. When they are thinking of something to say, their eyes and heads veer away, but their bodies remain facing each other throughout. At one point, Jane reaches out and adjusts the headband on Ellen's head.

The contrast in physical composure and level of physical activity is in keeping with prior research on very young boys and girls. Amy Sheldon (personal communication, September 1988) reports that her study of the videotaped interaction of 3- to 5-year-old boys and girls in same-sex triads at play yields similar findings. The boys moved around more than the girls did while playing in the same area. This difference was brought



Drawing #1. Second-grade boys.

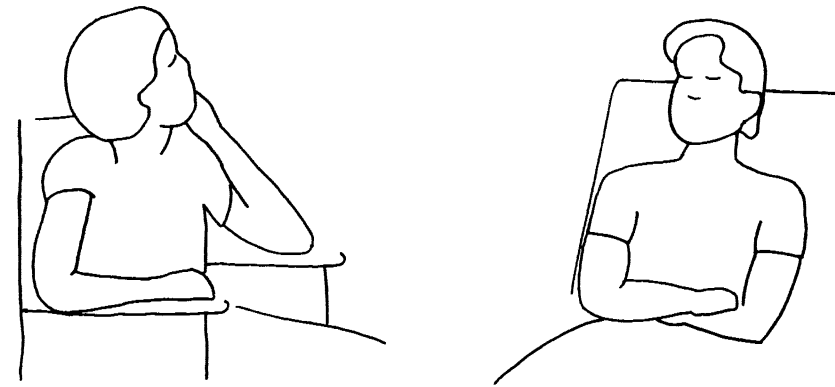


Drawing #2. Second-grade girls.

home by the video technician in Sheldon's study, who had trouble keeping the entire boys' triad in the camera's sights; no such problem arose with the girls.

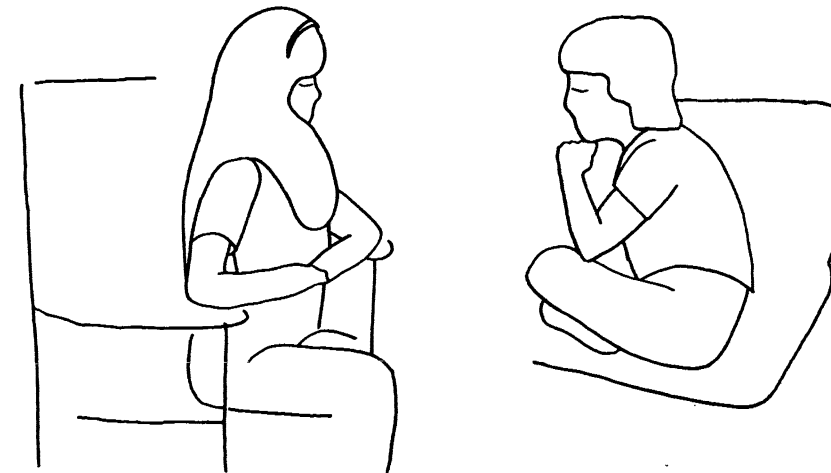
Grade six. The diffuse physical alignment of the sixth grade boys is not as marked as that of the second grade boys, but it follows the same pattern. The sixth grade boys stay in their seats, but one boy, Walt, squirms continually. The lack of direct eye contact is reinforced by Walt's frequently rubbing his eyes and playing with his fingers in his lap, his gaze firmly fixed on his fingers. Tom is less visibly restless, but he spreads his legs out in front of him and occasionally briefly drapes his right arm behind the chair. He sits aligned with the upholstered chair and therefore at an angle to Walt.

Of the sixth-grade girls, Shannon sits quite still throughout the session, with her arms on the arms of her wooden chair. At the beginning she sits at the edge of her chair, and later she sits back in it, but she always has her body aligned to face Julia, and, although her gaze drifts away, it always returns before long to Julia. Julia sits diagonally across her armless upholstered chair in order to face Shannon head-on. Whereas the sixth-grade boy who sits in this chair spreads out across the chair, Julia draws her body up onto it. She places her left ankle on her right knee; she holds her foot and plays with her shoelaces. Al-



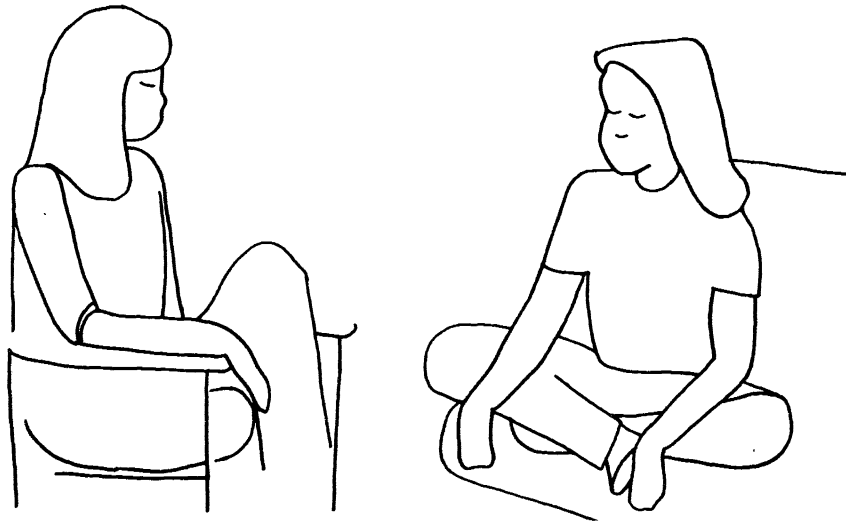
Drawing #3. Sixth-grade boys.

though this partly occupies her gaze, she frequently returns the gaze to Shannon, in contrast with the boy at the same age level whose eyes are anchored on his hands for long periods of time. The sixth-grade girls change their physical positions a few times during the 20-minute session: Julia sits back in her chair and eventually moves forward again. Having put her left leg down, she again raises and holds it at the end. But these shifts are neither abrupt nor frequent, and the girls are always tightly aligned with each other in gaze and body posture.

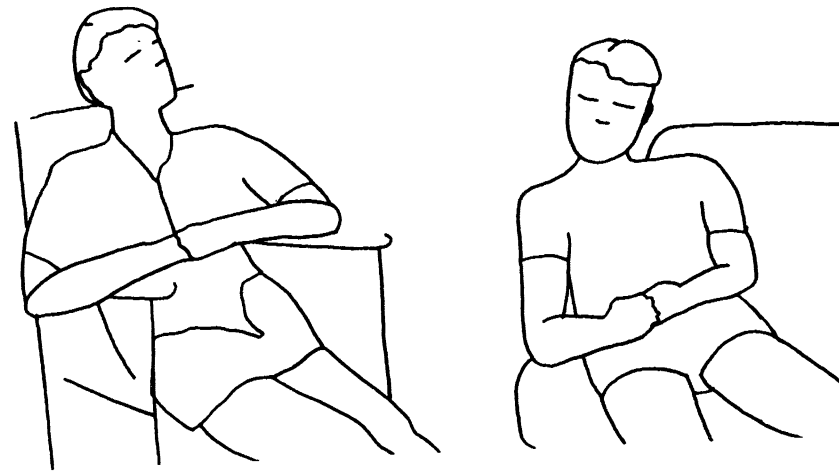


Drawing #4. Sixth-grade girls.

Grade ten. In contrast to the second-grade boys, the tenth-grade boys are relatively still; they significantly change their positions only once. But the postures they maintain are marked. They begin by sitting so that their bodies are aligned with the chairs they sit in, which are at an angle to each other, so their bodies are at angles to each other. In order to face each other, they would have to turn their heads; they rarely do so. For the most part, they look away and out; Todd, on the right in the upholstered chair, steals occasional fleeting glances at Richard, but Richard, on the left in the wooden armed chair, almost never looks at Todd, as if he has been forbidden, as Orpheus was forbidden to look back at his wife. Throughout the 20-minute conversation, Richard sits with his legs extended before him, and he is slouching, almost reclining, in the chair. For the first 5 minutes, Todd sits upright in his chair. But when the investigator leaves following his 5-minute visit, having just told the boys to talk about something intimate, Todd swivels around—away from Richard. He briefly places his hands, one on top of the other, on the back of the upholstered chair and rests his head on his hands, assuming a forlorn and weary posture. Immediately after, he leans back in the chair, extends his legs, and uses his feet to pull a wooden swivel chair on wheels into place as a footrest. As the conversation proceeds, Todd manipulates the swivel chair with his feet, alternately resting them on it and using them to push it around or away. But regardless of what he is doing with his feet, he maintains a reclining position, his back slid



Drawing #5. Tenth-grade girls.

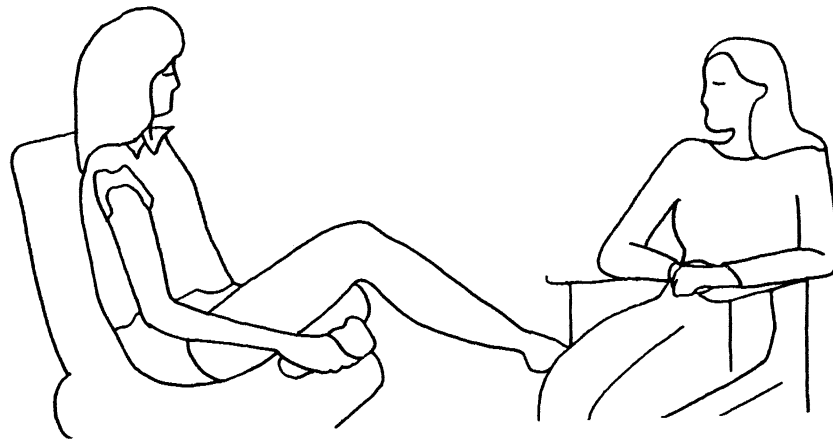


Drawing #6. Tenth-grade boys.

way down. Thus the two boys conduct their conversation with their bodies reclining, parallel to each other, their gazes fastened straight ahead. One person, seeing a brief clip of the two boys aligned in this way, commented that they look like two people riding in a car: side by side, each looking ahead, rarely looking at each other.

The tenth-grade girls provide a startling contrast. Like the sixth-grade girls, they sit across rather than aligned with the chairs in order to face each other. Whereas the boys at this age extend their legs, the girls both draw their feet up onto the chairs. Nancy, on the left in the wooden chair, sits fairly still, hardly changing her position. For a brief time, Sally, on the right, leans back, placing one arm on the back of the upholstered chair; at one point she takes a bottle of skin cream out of her purse and rubs cream on her elbows; but throughout, she sits firmly in the chair and looks steadily at her friend, who looks steadily at her.

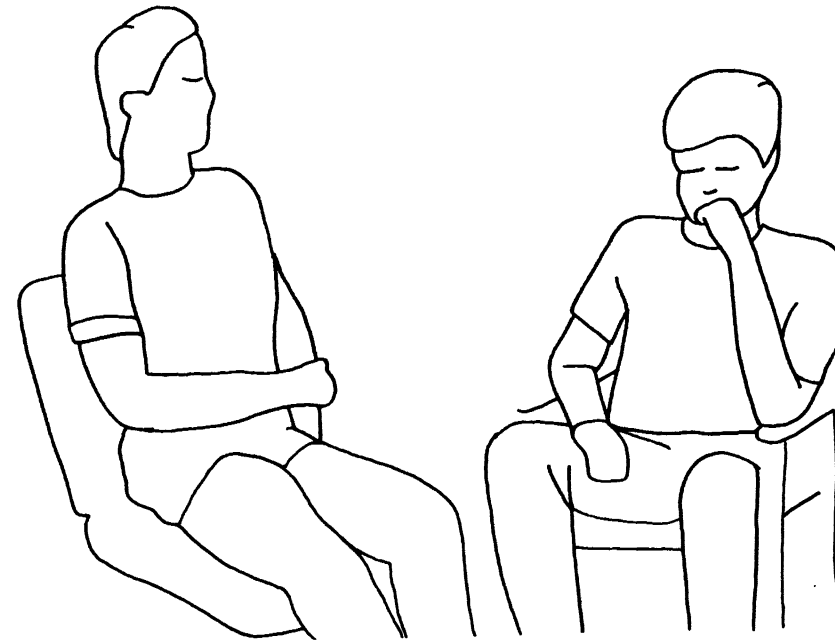
Twenty-five-year olds. The 25-year-old men, like the tenth-grade boys, align themselves with their chairs rather than with each other, so they end up sitting at angles to each other. Furthermore, Winston's chair, on the left, is situated slightly forward, so he has to turn his head not only to the side but also slightly back in order to face Timothy. This he does occasionally—not as rarely as the tenth grade boys look at each other, but not often. When he listens, he looks at Timothy more often than when he speaks, but never for extended time. Timothy keeps his gaze more or less steadily ahead, which means he rarely looks at Winston. He, however, is not looking as far off in another direction as are the tenth graders.



Drawing #7. 25-year-old women.

Finally, the 25-year-old women conform to the pattern. Marsha, on the left, sits across her chair so that she is facing Pam directly, with her profile to the camera, a profile which does not perceptibly change during the 20-minute conversation. At the start she has her left leg drawn up onto her chair, and her right leg bent slightly with her right foot resting on the front edge of Pam's chair. This brings her body almost or actually in contact with Pam's. Later she extends her left leg and brings it to rest on the rear left edge of Pam's chair. Throughout, she looks directly at Pam. Thus, although Marsha stretches one leg out for a time, her legs become a physical connection to the other woman rather than being pointed out and away, like the limb extensions of the boys. Furthermore, her body remains upright, not slouched down and spread out. Pam has the wooden chair with arms; she sits squarely in it, with her arms on the arm rests, facing Marsha. Both women maintain steady and rarely broken eye contact throughout their conversation.

Discussion: are males disengaged? The impression made by viewing the physical alignment of the boys and girls and women and men in comparison to each other is that the girls and women are more closely oriented to each other. They seem more involved, one might say more conversationally coherent. When I described the pattern I was observing to a practicing therapist, she commented, "Oh, yeah. When I see families in therapy, the man never looks at his wife and never looks at me. The men are always disengaged." She remarked that the family therapy



Drawing #8. 25-year-old men.

literature includes descriptions of this phenomenon. But is the lack of physical and visual alignment evidence of lack of engagement?

If gender differences are seen in a cross-cultural framework, the evaluation of lack of eye contact and physical alignment as disengagement is taking the women's pattern of showing conversational engagement as the norm. However, the anthropological literature is rich with examples of cultures in which interactants are expected not to look at each other in particular settings and interactions. For example, in many cultures, respect is shown by casting the eyes down and never looking at a superior in the face. No one would conclude, however, that this means the interactants are not "engaged." Rather, in those situations, avoiding eye contact is the appropriate display of conversational involvement. The consistency of the pattern observed in these videotapes by which the boys and men do not directly align themselves with each other physically and do not look each other in the eye suggests that there is a norm among them not to do so. A. L. Becker, commenting on my observation, suggested that, for men, head-on posture and gaze connote combative-

ness, so breaking that alignment signals and establishes friendly engagement.³

The conversation of the tenth-grade boys provides dramatic evidence that physical alignment away from rather than toward each other does not mean lack of engagement. As described above, the tenth-grade boys sit parallel to each other, stretched out in postures that could be interpreted as lackadaisical and careless, in one case occasionally and in the other case almost never glancing at the other. Viewing the videotape with the sound turned off could easily give the impression that these boys are disengaged. But turning the sound up reveals the most "intimate" talk heard in any of the tapes I observed.

In accordance with the procedure followed in the experiment, the investigator entered the room after the boys had been talking for 5 minutes and said, "Hi. I said I'd come back in 5 minutes? And ask you to talk in a serious or intimate way?" After he leaves, the boys snicker and chuckle briefly. Then the following interchange ensues:⁴

³ When he sat down to join me in the conversation in which he made this observation, Becker began by moving his chair. Having found it positioned directly facing mine, he moved it slightly to the side and swiveled it slightly, so that, when he sat in it, he was sitting at an angle to me rather than facing me head-on. This he did without thought, automatically, although we both recognized the result in a flash of recognition and amusement.

Becker also pointed out that the world of animals provides numerous instances of the behavior of individuals which seems, at first glance, unrelated but turns out, upon close observation, to show finely tuned coordination. An example he offered is two geese seemingly self-absorbed in preening their feathers with movements that precisely mirror each other, as if they were performing the same dance to the same music.

Animal behavior also provides a parallel to Becker's suggestion that head-on posture and gaze may suggest combativeness: Horse and dog trainers warn that looking these animals directly in the eye will ready them for attack. The association of gaze with aggressiveness, and the analogy of primate behavior, are also noted by Henley (1977).

⁴ Transcription is based on that provided by Dorval. I have, however, checked and refined transcription of passages I cite, and have laid them out in "chunks" or "lines" which I believe are easier to read because they reflect the natural prosodic and rhythmic chunking of spoken discourse. Three spaced dots (. . .) between lines of transcript indicate a small number of lines has been omitted; three unspaced dots (...) indicate a brief untimed pause. Numbers in parentheses show measured pause length in seconds; spaces between lines of transcript indicate segments taken from different sections of the transcript. In a number of the transcripts, the word *god* appears. I have chosen to render it with a small *g* because I believe it is a formulaic usage, not intended to refer to a deity but used automatically as a discourse marker. (See Schiffrin, 1987b, for discussion of discourse markers.) In instances where the word *god* begins a sentence, I render it with a capital as I would the first word of any sentence. Colon (:) indicates elongation of preceding vowel sound. Underline indicates emphatic stress. /?/ indicates unintelligible word(s). Brackets show overlapping speech. = indicates latching (no interturn pause). - indicates a glottal stop (abrupt cutting off of sound.)

Todd: What the hell we supposed to talk about?
I mean I know what's bugging me.

Richard: What's bugging you?

Todd: [snicker] That we don't talk.

Richard: Who don't talk?

...

Todd: We're doing it again.

Richard: What?

Todd: Not talking.

Richard: I know. Well, go.

Todd: We're not even making small talk any more.
[laugh]

Richard: Right, okay. (3.4)

I mean you know.

What can I say? (3.6)

I mean,

if you meant everything you said last weekend,
and I meant everything I said. (1.0)

Todd: Well of course I did.

But I mean I don't know.

I guess we're growing up.

I mean- I don't know.

I guess I live in the past or something.

I really enjoyed those times

when we used to stay up all night long

and just you know

spend the nights over someone else's house

just to talk all night.

Richard: mhm

Todd: They were kinda fun.

Richard: Yeah that was fun.

(2.2)

Todd: But now we're lucky if we say anything
to each other in the hall.

Richard: Oh, all right! [challenging intonation]

Todd: I'm serious.

I remember walking in the hall

and I'd say "Hi" to you

and you'd say "Hi there"

or sometimes you'll push me in the locker,
if I'm lucky.

[laugh]

(1.4)

Richard: We talk. [protesting]

Todd: Not the same way anymore.

(4.8)

Richard: I never knew you wanted to talk.

The conversation continues in this vein until the investigator enters and ends it. Todd reveals deep feelings of hurt and disappointment that his friendship with Richard is not as close as it once was.

SUMMARY: PHYSICAL ALIGNMENT

In summary, then, my analysis of the postural and visual alignment of the pairs of friends indicates that girls and boys and men and women achieve and display their involvement with each other and with the conversation in different ways. The girls and women are more physically still, more collected into the space they inhabit, and more directly aligned with each other through physical proximity, occasional touching, body posture, and anchoring of eye gaze. The boys and men do not touch each other except in playful aggression, do not anchor their gaze on each other's faces, and spread out rather than gather themselves into the space they inhabit. The boys in the youngest pairs are more physically restless, more diffused in the room both in their movements and in their gaze. The boys and men in the two older pairs are more physically still but still less directly aligned with each other in posture and gaze. However, this does not mean that the men and boys are not engaged, not involved. It simply means that their means of establishing conversational engagement are different. These differences, however, are likely to lead to negative evaluation and the impression of lack of engagement if measured by women's interactional norms.⁵

TOPICAL COHESION

The pattern of topical cohesion is analogous to that of physical and visual alignment: The girls' and women's talk is more tightly focused, the boys' and men's more diffuse. 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 tenth grade boys discussed above, the boys and men exhibit great difficulty finding something to talk about. The two youngest pairs elaborate

⁵ The suggestion, made earlier, that psychotherapeutic norms of interactive behavior may reflect women's norms is supported by a psychiatric study (reported in *Psychiatry* '86, August 1986, pp. 1,6) which found that women are more effective therapists when they are new to the field, but that the gender difference in effectiveness fades among experienced psychotherapists. This suggests that psychotherapeutic training and experience teach men to behave in ways that women do with minimal or no training or experience.

no topic, so they produce small amounts of talk about each of a great number of topics. The two older pairs talk about a small number of topics, but they discuss the topics on a more abstract level. At all four ages, there are differences between the genders in terms of what topics they discuss and what concerns emerge in their choice of topics. The males frequently use the room as a topical resource; the females rarely do. There are occasional references to violence in the boys' talk, never in the girls'. Finally, there is much concern among the girls 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. They talk about finding something to do. They tease, tell jokes, plan future activities. They talk about what is in the 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, utter nonsense syllables, utter 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: one in which Jimmy explains a video game, and another in which 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, "Look at this," and makes a face by pulling his cheeks down and his mouth out. Jimmy teases Kevin:⁶

Your hair is standing up.
Look.
It's still sticking up.
Still. Still. Still. Still. Still.
Let go.

⁶ There are many aspects of the way the boys and girls and women and men in these videotapes talk that suggest gender-related differences other than those discussed in this chapter. For example, as supported by this excerpt, it seems likely that agonistic teasing is more frequently done by boys than girls. Furthermore, Jimmy's use of imperatives is in line with Goodwin's (1982) finding that boys use more imperatives than girls at play, and Gleason's (1987) observation that fathers use more imperatives than mothers when talking to their children. The pattern of interaction I found among these boys is very similar to that described by Leaper (1988) for 5-year-old boys in his study.

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

Kevin's response to the teasing is to make a gesture of shooting Jimmy. (The boys at sixth grade also make a shooting gesture; no girls do.) At other times, Kevin ignores the teasing, for example when Jimmy tells him, "I know Jerome doesn't like you at all."

The boys talk repeatedly about finding something to do:

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

Jimmy: What we doin' now?

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. ["he" refers to the investigator]

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.

In order 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 Jimmy's model for sitting and talking is an interview, perhaps that of a child by a parent or other adult. This suggests that simply sitting and talking is not something that seems natural to do with a friend. Furthermore, at this young age, Jimmy has articulated the model that seems to characterize 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 indeed those that the boys and men in the study most often begin with and discuss.⁷

⁷ It is difficult to resist observing that Jimmy seems to be taking a leadership role in this interaction. He has the only extended turns; he gives orders and instructions; he teases and initiates most of the conversational moves. Of the sixth-grade boys, Tom seems to be a leader, since he raises most of the topics and is the main speaker, with Walt contributing and supporting. Of the 55 topics covered in their interaction, Tom raised 40. Walt raised 15 topics, of which six were noticings about the room (for example, "That's a funny looking picture"). The interaction between the sixth-grade girls sheds light on the complexity of the question of leadership. One might initially be inclined to identify Julia as the leader. Of 14 topics discussed, Julia raises 12. Furthermore, most of the discussion

Second-grade girls. In topical cohesion as in physical alignment, the girls at grade two provide an astonishing contrast to the boys at the same grade level. Whereas the second-grade boys jumped from topic to topic, never fixing on one or 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 says,

Oh well folks
remember I said I'd come back after a little bit?
Yes so you could think of something serious
to talk about.
Well it's about time
so why don't you go ahead
and think about it
and kind of talk about it a little bit
and I'm gonna go away
and come back in a little while again
okay?

The girls follow these 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 rest of the time, they exchange stories about illness, accidents, hospitalizations, falls, and scrapes. They tell their stories in a stylized intonation pattern beginning with drawn-out rising intonation, such as Michaels and Cook-Gumperz (1979) describe for narratives told during "sharing time" in a kindergarten classroom. A particularly brief but nonetheless representative story exchange goes like this:

Ellen: Remember
what when I told you about my uncle?

centers around Julia's relationship with Lizzie, her concerns about keeping friends, and her anxiety about separation and loss. When the experimenter briefly enters the room at the 5-minute mark, it is Julia who talks to him. Yet it is Shannon who "chooses" the topic of Julia's relationship with Lizzie as the one to fulfill the experimenter's request. Similarly, most of the tenth-grade girls' talk is about Nancy, but it is Sally who proposes Nancy's problems as a topic for talk. Thus the issue of leadership is suggested by many of the excerpts presented here, but it is a complex one that requires much further analysis.

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 their stories to the previous story, it is easy to track the cohesion from one story to the next. For example, in the above 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. The girls also orient their stories to each other by frequently beginning with "Remember?", reminding each other of previous shared experiences and conversations. Thus the girls could be said to discuss a single topic, serious misfortunes, with many subtopics. Moreover, they settled upon the activity of exchanging stories with no visible discomfort; rather, they seem comfortable engaging in the activity of talk.

Sixth-grade boys. In their 20-minute conversation, the sixth-grade boys touched on 55 topics. They began by mentioning school and homework and went on to such topics as cable TV, sports, sex and violence on TV, noticings about the room, other boys at school, Walt's shoes (which he takes out of a bag and hands to Tom for inspection), a rock group they play in, inflation, Nancy Reagan buying a dress for \$3000, 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 these two extended turns was not exactly a turn at 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, this volume, discusses bike accident stories as a conversational genre in which boys and men participate). Most turns were only a single phrase or a sentence or two in length.

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

Tom: Man school is getting a pain.
Walt: I know.

- Tom: Everyone's starting
to get on each other's back.
Mrs. Gladdis-
- Walt: I hope Jerry don't come anymore.
I don't know why.
- Tom: I used to like him- but now-
I don't know what happened
but he lost my interest.
- Walt: Sid's been suspended man.
- Tom: I know.
Man I- I'll flunk if-
I just went down a little bit in school.
Because Sid give-
What's that guy's name?
Jerry? Jimmy? That likes Sid.
Sitting right by me talking.
- Walt: I know.
- Tom: While I can't even sing and he sings right.
I don't want to sing.
- Walt: Yeah I know what you mean.
- Tom: I sing the new songs we write.
Man, we got to fix up our rock group
or we're going to be out of it man.

I chose this segment about other children at school and their relationships, because it is closest to the girls' in topic. But it also shows that the topics are not elaborated: The references are elliptical and brief. On a more surface level, it is noticeable that many of Tom's topic-introducing turns (11 in all) begin with "man" as a discourse marker.

Sixth-grade girls. As with the second graders, the sixth-grade girls present a staggering contrast with 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.

In contrast, when the sixth-grade girl who opens the talk tells about what happened at home the night before, 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 go:d.
And I bit him.
I couldn't believe it.
Oh go:d!
- Shannon: Oh my go:sh. Did he get mad?
- Julia: Yeah, but not- not right now just-
I went in my room.
I locked the door.
Uhuh.
- Shannon: [Uhuh.
- Julia: Oh go:d.

Not only is Julia's turn about a family member. It is 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: the concern that fights destroy intimacy. Whereas "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 "go:d" or "oh go:d," of which there are 20 occurrences. Moreover, the crux of Julia's story is expressed in dialogue: her father's demand that she pick up after herself ("Julia you gotta pick up, by yourself") and her protest that her father was asking more of her than of her brother ("Well, if my brother doesn't have to").

Immediately after this, 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 flareups of anger:

- Julia: I'm so glad that Lizzie, um,
and the rest're not mad at me anymore.

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, after which Julia declares that she hopes she and Shannon will remain friends in high school, even though they will be going to different high schools. The danger of their falling out 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 with Lizzie:

- Shannon: Too bad you and Lizzie
are not good friends any more.
- Julia: I know.
Go:d, it's- she's so mean sometimes.
...
And then- what was so sad
she just- gets ma:d at you
all of a sudden.
And like if she does somethin'
I don't like,
I mean, I just- I don't li:ke it,
I mean, I don't get ma:d at her!

Their discussion continues at length about how Julia wanted and tried to be friends with Lizzie, but Lizzie made the friendship impossible. Here, as elsewhere, much of 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 ma:d 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: concern with separation and loss. After more talk about Lizzie, Julia leaps forward in her chair and says,

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

The girls go on to discuss who is or might be adopted and why they think so. Then Julia says, "I like getting a friend and keeping it for:ever," thereby initiating a discussion of friendship which leads to a dis-

ussion 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 cohesion 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, is clear: Julia suspects that Lizzie's unacceptable character is the result of her parents' divorce; she believes that expression of anger leads to separation, so when her parents fight, she's afraid they will get divorced and her character will be ruined like Lizzie's ("I'd hate to be turned into a snob.").

Before leaving discussion of the sixth grade girls' conversation, I will remark on two related aspects of their speaking style which is very noticeable when one hears their voices. First, their talk has a highly stylized sing-song quality that is easily recognizable as typical of teenage girls' talk. This quality results from sharp shifts in pitch, strong emphatic stress on many words, intonation which rises and remains steady at the end of phrases, and elongation of vowels. Second, much of their talk is made up of what I term "constructed dialogue" (Tannen 1989), as seen above when Julia performs her fear that her parents are "just gonna say, 'Well, I'm gonna get a divorce.'"

Tenth-grade girls. There is such a striking resemblance between the tenth-grade and sixth-grade girls that I will discuss the tenth-grade girls here and contrast the tenth-grade boys after.

The tenth-grade girls spend the first 5 minutes 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 the investigator'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 problematic relationships with her boyfriend and her mother. There is a parallel to the situation with the sixth-grade girls in that the talk focuses on one of the girls' problematic relations with other people, and in that these 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?

It emerges that Nancy and Sally were part of a group on a trip to Florida, from which Nancy summarily left at her mother's insistence. The rest of the talk elaborates this experience, focusing on Nancy's departure and the effect of her trip and her early return on her relationships with John and other male friends.

There are other ways that the talk of the tenth-grade girls is similar to that of the sixth-grade girls. Although not quite as stylized as those of the younger pair, the intonation patterns here too tend toward sing-song intonation, elongation of vowels, marked shifts in pitch, and constructed dialogue. There are also words and expressions that Nancy uses which are reminiscent of Julia, such as "go:d" and "I couldn't believe [it]". This pattern emerges immediately after they settle on a topic. Sally tells Nancy about the effect of Nancy's departure on her friends:

Nancy: Go::d, it was ba::d.
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 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], "ah".
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 ri::ght!!"
She was upset, Marge,
I was like "Go::d" =

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 nu::ts!"
Sally: Did she say anything?

Nancy: Not really.

As in teenage girl's narrative I have described elsewhere (Tannen, 1988), 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 (Tannen, 1986b) is "be + like" followed by not so much what someone said but what someone was feeling like, as displayed in an utterance: "I was like 'Go::d'." 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 tenth-grade boys' conversation is partly anomalous among the boys and men, and partly conforming to pattern. Although they do not look at each other, neither do they look aimlessly around the room, as did the second- and sixth-grade boys. Similarly, they do not use objects in the room as resources for talk. Unlike the two younger pairs, but not unlike the oldest, they talk at length on topic.

Although it includes many intertwined subtopics, the tenth grade boys' talk revolves around two related topics, each one reflecting the preoccupation of one of the boys. Both topics grow out of the boys' relationships, feelings, behavior, and conversations that arose during a party they attended the night before. Richard's main concern is his drinking: When he took Anne home after the party, she told him he behaves badly when he drinks and should either learn to drink moderately or stop drinking altogether. Todd's main concern is his feeling of alienation from Richard and the group. This sense of being left out, not fitting in, was triggered the night before when Richard walked out of the party to talk privately with Mary.

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

Richard: When I took Anne 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 after I thought,

"Well, look at the hypocrite

look at the hypocrite who's talking,

and I s- I didn't say that.

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 calls Anne hypocritical because, later in the same conversation, "she goes, 'can't wait to go to Joe's tomorrow night and get drunk off our behinds'." But he takes her criticism seriously and 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. Rather than sharing Richard's sympathy for Mary, Todd responds with a comment that reveals 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 Janet, 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 Anne, 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, ...
yknow 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: Yah, '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."). After a brief response in which he expresses no sympathy for Mary ("She's not going to stay home, it's ridiculous. Why doesn't she just ask somebody?"), Todd returns to his own concern, his sense of alienation: "I felt funny again last night" because "I felt so out of place." Todd goes on to explain that that was why he himself disappeared:

Todd: And, ah, I just felt out of place again,
so I just ran out on the back courts
for a second
and I came back
and there's this big search party looking for me.

For the tenth-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.⁸

The boys, like the girls, talk about other people. They also spend a lot of time putting others down. But whereas the girls are specific in criticizing the behavior of others (the way they dress, that Lizzie gets angry), the boys (especially Todd) put them down in a general way (Mary and Richard's mother have "zero brains," someone else is "such a clod").

The pattern of topical cohesion mirrors the pattern of physical alignment displayed by the tenth-grade boys. Just as Richard and Todd sit

⁸ Another common theme is the intimacy exhibited in spending the night at each other's houses. This emerges in the conversations of the sixth-grade girls as well as the tenth-grade boys. It is also the issue which causes a dispute among middle-school girls analyzed by Eder (1990).

parallel to rather than facing each other, so their conversation proceeds on parallel tracks. As has been shown, Richard and Todd simultaneously discuss two main topics, one of concern to each of them, whereas the girls at grades six and ten focus on the troubles of one of them. Furthermore, as has also been shown, each boy frequently brings up his own topic in immediate response to the other's expression of his. Moreover, both boys frequently downplay or dismiss the concerns expressed by the other. Several examples of this have already been given: For example, it was seen earlier that Todd denied that Mary deserves sympathy for having no date for the dance. Other examples follow.

In the next example, when Todd explains why he doesn't want to ask Janet 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 Todd's 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 Ed Rierdon and them
feels like now. [laugh]
Richard: [laugh] No I don't think you feel as bad
as Ed Rierdon 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 expression of feeling out of place by first asking why he feels that way and then countering Todd's answers 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 with 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 Anne 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, Anne-
Sam told Anne 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.

Thus, though they all talk about personal problems and concerns, the tenth-grade boys differ from the sixth- and tenth-grade girls. Whereas both pairs of girls focus on the problems of one, elaborating and agreeing in their perspectives on it, each boy talks about his own concerns and disagrees with the concerns expressed by the other 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 Richard's mother for having "zero brains" because, notic-

ing that something was bothering Todd, she thought he might be displeased "because we put the cake out so early."

Women frequently express dissatisfaction with the way that men respond to their concerns. Whereas they would like the men to express understanding and sympathy, what they hear is downplaying of the problem (or, if the problem is acknowledged, advice about how to solve it). Observation of the tenth-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 women might perceive it) but rather a means of reassurance.

Twenty-five-year-old-men. The men in the oldest pair exhibit palpable difficulty finding a topic, marked not by giggling, chuckling, or joking, but by displays of cerebral effort and strain. They begin with school:

Timothy: You know looking back
seriously speaking uh
I'm sorry I didn't major in psych.

This topic lasts only a short time, after which Winston articulates their discomfort at finding a topic:

Winston: Ain't exactly easy
just to come up with something
along these guidelines.

Timothy: Boy it sure isn't
(25.0)

This conversation is slow both in interturn and within-turn pacing and pausing. However, the 25-second pause shown in this example is a particularly long one, evidence of the difficulty the men experience finding a topic for talk that seems "serious." Soon, however, they agree upon the topic that occupies them for the rest of the time:

Winston: How about marriage.

Timothy: That's a serious enough topic.

Winston: Serious topic,
and it doesn't receive a lot of attention.

Timothy: Dave told me he thinks
it will be easier to get to heaven ...
as a married person.

The men take seriously their charge to find a serious topic, and they seem to believe "serious" requires a topic of general as well as personal

significance, something about which one can make a meaningful contribution ("it doesn't receive a lot of attention").

Although marriage is a topic of personal concern to everyone, these men's conversation about marriage is carried on for the most part on a theoretical level:

Timothy: Why do you think uh
so many marriages ain't makin' it?
That's uh you know a broad question.

Winston: I think most people rush into it
for one thing. (6.0)
Just can't wait to get married.

Timothy: I think uh I think people
a lot of people
and I'm not saying I do
but a lot of people
don't have an adequate or uh mature you know
definition in their lives of what love is.
You know uh I don't know
'cause a lot of the strife
you know in my opinion
in marriages and relationships
is because the person has the uh
you know selfish attitude.

Elsewhere, the men agree that women are more concerned with getting married than are men. Winston explains that he learned in an adolescent psychology course that "women have their whole personality on their ability to relate with the opposite sex yknow whereas men just, it's them and the world more yknow."

Late in the discussion the men turn to their personal positions on the topic, but even these are kept fairly abstract. Timothy is dating a woman, and he says he is considering marrying her, but he explains that he feels very cautious, because a commitment to marriage will be forever.

and uh yknow I'll admit for the first time
I'm thinking about it seriously
but uh that's just what it says
thinking about it seriously though
I'm no closer to making any kind of a commitment
than I was before.

After a few more remarks about how he and his girlfriend are maintaining a "wait and see attitude" until she finishes school, Timothy shifts

the focus to Winston by saying, "Yknow I don't just want to talk about my situation." After a pause, Winston responds:

Well mine's with school
and school is just the epitome
of being an unsettled person.

Winston seems to be implying that, being a student, he is feeling too unsettled to think about marrying. But he expresses this feeling indirectly, as a general statement about school.

Similarly, earlier in the conversation, Winston says that sometimes men become shy of relationships because they have been hurt:

I think a lot of people start off
like maybe when they're young
they might have the attitude
of what they think is 100% give
and then they get torched.
Or what they think is torched.
And it's liable to just yknow give them yknow
a pretty shy attitude towards it
for a long time.

This statement suggests that Winston may have been hurt, or "torched," in a romantic relationship, but if this is so he does not say it. He does not say anything about any relationships of his own.

The men's talk is characterized by slow pacing (there is no overlapping), formal register ("strife," "receive" instead of "get"), and numerous hesitations, fillers, and formulaic expressions ("seriously speaking," "you know in my opinion," "let's face it"). They make broad and relatively abstract rather than personal statements which they hedge by stressing that these are only their opinions.

Twenty-five-year-old women. The conversation between the last pair, women in the oldest age group, covers their own relationship with each other as well as their personal life plans and choices. The conversation has an odd tension about it which I believe results from an early misunderstanding. After briefly mentioning a few topics like school, leisure activities, and general inquiries ("How have you been?"), Pam turns the talk to their friendship:

Pam: = Yeah one thing about you
is that you always agree with me.
One thing I like.

Marsha: That's because we pretty much think alike.

Pam: Yeah but you agree with-
I mean, you know how to talk to people
when they have a problem.
One of your favorite expressions is,
"I hear ya- I hear that."

Marsha: Oh, god.

Pam: That's the way you say it.

Marsha: I'll have to remember that.

Pam seems to intend her observation that Marsha knows "how to talk to people" as praise, but Marsha seems to interpret it as a put-down, perhaps implying, "You are wishy-washy; you have no mind of your own." Marsha appears embarrassed by Pam's mimicry of her voice ("One of your favorite expressions is, 'I hear ya- I hear that.'"), as if the mimicry were mockery.

This tension drives the ensuing conversation. Marsha explains that, because others in her family talk a lot, she "kind of learned to sit back and listen." But she explains that appearing to agree can mask not listening:

Marsha: But sometimes what people don't realize
is that I'm not really like um hm,
that I don't, yknow-
it's a bad habit,
kinda tune 'em out.

Pam: Well you know how not to argue
because you know how to be patient
and listen to what they have to say.
(1.6)

Marsha: Well (1.9)

Pam: You always done that with me.
I don't think you've ever argued with me,
though.

Marsha: Sure we have.
That's what we're doing right now.

Marsha refers to the characteristic which Pam identified, showing verbal agreement, as "a bad habit," claiming that rather than showing good listenership, it often masks not listening ("tune 'em out"). Pam's attempts to assure Marsha that "that's good" never really take hold.

As seen in the preceding as well as the following excerpts, Pam begins to sound like the sixth-grade girl, Julia, insisting that friends do not fight, whereas Marsha, as if to proclaim her independence of thought, maintains that they do disagree:

- Marsha:* um god Pam, I know we've had arguments before
 . . .
- Marsha:* We disagree on a lot of things, though.
 um School for instance.
 And since you've got such a positive
- Pam:* [um yeah well no you've got such-
 Positive? You saw me a few minutes ago.
 [Investigator briefly interrupts]
- Marsha:* You've got such a positive attitude.
Pam: No I don't.
 . . .
- Marsha:* See that's one thing that we do disagree on.
 Maybe I'm not a very confident person,
 I guess, and you've got my share. =
- Pam:* = Well- I- well,
 what do you think of my computer science attitude
 right now.

Pam's insistence that Marsha is more positive and has more confidence sounds like accusation and criticism rather than praise. Just as Pam resisted the description of herself as agreeable, Marsha resists the description of herself as positive and confident.

The conversation includes many small struggles such as these. For example, Marsha seizes upon Pam's remark that she hopes to get an A in a course as evidence of their differences:

- Marsha:* See, that's another thing.
 You're always, I mean
 I'm just so bad about this.
 I get into a class
 and the highest that I really hope to get
 is may- a B,
 if I can get, a B, out of a course,
 I guess it's just been so long
 since I have gotten an A.
- Pam:* That you don't think about it?
- Marsha:* Yeah well I don't think that it's attainable.
- Pam:* I don't either.
- Marsha:* But Pam, every, yknow, every semester
 when we start school,
 it's like you talk about it though,
 that you've got to get an A in this course.
- Pam:* A's, I get B's.
 I try but I never get A's,
 I always get B's.
 Well, maybe except in my psychology courses,

maybe.
 But not all of 'em.

As with Marsha's suggestion that Pam is confident, Pam seems to take Marsha's suggestion that she gets good grades as an accusation to be resisted rather than as a compliment to be accepted. As if in counterattack, Pam points out that Marsha did well in a religion class ("You do well on the tests, 15 out of 15" whereas "I hadn't even read those chapters"). Symmetrically, Marsha disclaims merit ("It's a lot of common sense").

Much of the remaining conversation focuses on the women's plans for the future. Marsha tells Pam she is an excellent tutor and should consider becoming a teacher; Pam encourages Marsha to take up tutoring too and argues against Marsha's disclaimer that she doesn't have enough patience. Throughout their conversation, the women seem to be vying for the distinction of having little confidence, low grades, lack of ability, and poor communication skills; when they do admit to positive qualities, they belittle them. They seem to be engaged in a ritual which Beeman (1986), describing Iranian interaction, terms "getting the lower hand." But whereas Beeman explains that this strategy reflects status differences in Iranian society, Pam uses self-denigration to achieve equality by claiming to be the same as Marsha.

SUMMARY: TOPICAL COHESION

Examining the eight videotapes in this study provides a view of each pair of friends as unique, with unique concerns and styles of speaking, but also of some patterns that are shared by friends of the same gender. It seemed easier for the girls and women to choose topics and talk about them, they devoted more talk to fewer topics, and their topics more often focused on personal and specific concerns. The youngest girls exchanged stories about misfortunes. The sixth- and tenth-grade girls engaged in "troubles talk" focused on the troubles of one of the girls. The 25-year-old women discussed their comparative personalities and plans for the future. Of major concern to them, as to the sixth-grade girls, was interpersonal disagreement and harmony.

The boys and men divided into two groups. The boys at the second- and sixth-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. The tenth-grade boys and 25-year-old men, despite signs of discomfort, did talk at length about a limited number of topics. The men discussed a potentially personal topic, marriage,

in relatively impersonal and abstract terms. The tenth-grade boys discussed topics of intense personal concern, but they differed from the girls who discussed personal concerns in a number of 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 to the girls who complained about relationships with others who were not present.

CONCLUSION: THE CONGRUENCE OF POSTURE AND TOPIC

Although I have discussed physical alignment and topical cohesion separately, the patterns observed in these two elements of conversational involvement are analogous and operate simultaneously in conversation. 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 tenth-grade boys' parallel focus on their own concerns in contrast to the sixth- and tenth-grade girls' joint focus on the concerns of one, is a verbal analogue to the way they were sitting: The tenth-grade boys sat aligned but parallel, both looking out rather than at each other, whereas the girls sat facing and looking at each other.

I have cautioned, however, against concluding with value judgments such as that girls and women are more "engaged" than boys and men. For example, although the girls are more visibly aligned with each other both physically and topically, nonetheless, in keeping with patterns observed by researchers such as Goodwin (1980b) and Eder and Sanford (1986), the girls express complaints against friends who are not present, whereas the complaint of the boy who expresses a significant complaint is aimed directly at his friend who is present.⁹ In this sense, the tenth-grade boys could be said to be more "engaged" with each other than any of the girls in these tapes. Moreover, the talk of the tenth-grade boys displayed more intense intimacy than that of any of the other pairs, although their physical postures were indirectly rather than directly aligned, and they never looked directly at each other.

This and other observations of the boys and men demonstrate that, although they did not align themselves directly to each other, they were

⁹ Goodwin (1980b, forthcoming) finds that boys tend to express disagreement directly, whereas girls tend to do so indirectly, to other girls. This is not to say, however, that girls never express conflict directly to each other. Eder (1989) and Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) discuss situations in which they do.

clearly orienting to each other and conversationally involved. This is a crucial point. One of the main observations of Gumperz's (1982) analysis of cross-cultural communication is that ways of signalling intentions and meanings, ways of constituting the context of communication, are not universal but culturally relative. I suggest, following Gumperz and 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 face them head on and maintain eye contact, do not pursue a topic at as great length as women do, and respond to concerns either by raising a topic of their own concern or by denying or belittling the basis for the woman's concern. If cross-cultural differences are at play, then these patterns of conversational involvement do not indicate lack of listenership but rather different norms for establishing and displaying conversational involvement.

That the girls and women showed less discomfort finding a topic, elaborated topics at greater length, physically 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 may be because, as Lever (1978) 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 believed, counterevidence to the claim that boys do not play in pairs. But the activity she observed her son and his friends engaging in is 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 made use of 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 four age levels is limited in scope but allows analysis in depth. Examining what was said and how each individual's behavior is oriented to the behavior of the other provides insight into the process of conversational involvement that would not be available using other methods alone.

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