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RUNNING HEAD: Power Dynamics

Power Dynamics in Conversation: The Role of Gender

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Abstract

Previous studies have found that men exhibit more “dominance behaviors” (talking longer, interrupting more often) in conversation (Mast, 2002). Much of this work, however, has been conducted with conversation partners who are unfamiliar to each other. Our goal was to test whether the same pattern would emerge in conversations between friends. One possibility is that males are more dominant in conversation in general – both when talking to friends and strangers. A second possibility is that males are only more dominant in conversation when talking with strangers, which is what we predicted. Support for the second possibility would suggest that people are more likely to defer to social norms (in this case that men are more dominant) in contexts where information is more limited.

Keywords: power dynamics, conversational dominance, gender differences.

Power Dynamics in Conversation: The Role of Gender

Introduction

What drives behavior in novel situations? For instance, when conversing with a stranger, who becomes the more “dominant” leader, and who becomes the follower? Does our behavior differ when talking to friends from our behavior when talking to strangers? It is important to study conversational dominance because our dominance behaviors often rely on social norms. Social norms influence many of our behaviors, and unintentional dominance behaviors are often overlooked, and their power underestimated.

This paper explores these questions in the context of conversational dominance. These “dominance behaviors” often refer to posture, the amount of time people spend talking, and the number of times they interrupt their partner (Mulac, 1989; Mast, 2002; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Zimmerman and West, 1996). It is possible that differences in behavior emerge when communicating with people we know, and when communicating with people we do not know. This paper explores the idea that people rely on social norms when talking with strangers because the information we have is more limited in novel situations (Balkwell, 1991; Ridgeway et al., 2004). Limited information may lead people to behave in accordance to expectations that are based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance. In other words, interactions with strangers allow our expectations of

how dominant we should act become self-fulfilling prophecies that lead to stereotypical behaviors (Mast, 2002).

First, I will discuss the implications of studying conversations. In this section I will discuss major findings that are related to my hypothesis. Then, I will describe a study where participants who were involved in romantic relationships failed to show the expected differences in their behavior.

Conversation and Gender

Conversations are one of the most basic forms of communication. The underlying processes that take place during oral communication are different from written word. These processes can provide us with information about when people are more likely to use societal norms to guide their behavior. It is important to know what processes shape our conversations that lead to differences in behaviors and individual outcomes (Clark and Gibbs, 1986).

In order to have a successful conversation, all participants must take turns, allowing time for both parties to express their opinions. Actions such as interrupting mid-utterance are known as conversational rule breaking. Men are much more likely to break these rules and have it go unnoticed (Orcutt and Harvey, 1985).

Interruptions can be used in different ways that inhibit individuals involved in the conversation. They are used when someone simply thinks their idea is better than what the other person has to say, when someone gets overly excited and forgets to wait for their turn to speak, or as a way to show they are paying attention, for example. Many behaviors associated with dominance such as self-perception of behavior, body posture, and language were examined. This study will focus on two

aspects of conversational dominance – total talking time, and total number of interruptions. Talking for a longer period of time allows the speaker to get more ideas across and lead the conversation. Interrupting is a way to cut another person off so that the interrupter can control the focus of the conversation. Since men dominating conversations is seen as a societal norm, rule breaking is unnoticed by both parties in the conversation, and even outside observers were unable to notice that men interrupt more (Zimmerman and West, 1996).

Prior work on the relationship between gender and conversational dominance has shown that men are more likely to use more utterances, longer utterances, and to interrupt more than women (Mast, 2002). For instance, there has been extensive research among strangers on the correlations between dominance and certain conversational elements. It has been found that during conversations with strangers there are significant differences in dominance behaviors between men and women (Mulac, 1989; Mast, 2002; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Zimmerman and West, 1996). These expectations begin to emerge at a very early age. When boys and girls aged 3.5 to 6.5 years old play together, boys interrupt almost three times more. The more boys added to the group, the likelihood of girls interrupting decreases even more (Snyder, 2014). Among preschoolers, boys are more likely to refuse to follow suggestions made by girls (Neppl, 1997). These expectations are taught to us in some of our earliest forms of social interactions away from our parents, and continue to influence the ways in which people talk to each other throughout life.

Gender differences in interruptions have been found in the corporate setting by observing business meetings (Snyder, 2014). It was found that men interrupt more than women overall, where they accounted for two-thirds of the interruptions. Men are close to three times as likely to interrupt women than other men, and women interrupt each other constantly while hardly ever interrupting men. These findings suggest that both genders seem to be more comfortable interrupting women in meetings. Most interestingly, it was found that all of the women who held senior positions within the companies were much more likely to interrupt men. In fact, women in executive positions were the biggest interrupters overall (Snyder, 2014). Since interrupting more makes a person come across as more dominant, it seems to be correlated with women gaining power in the business world. However, these interruptions are among people who don't know each other on a personal level.

When it comes to romantic relationships, there are no significant gender differences in social dominance behaviors (Ostrov, 2007). In late adolescent romantic relationships, gender differences in social dominance behaviors are not present in healthy relationships. These relationships are more likely to be described as egalitarian by those involved and by outside observers. Both parties shared decision-making, power in interactions, and emotional resources equally. These results can transfer to conversational dominance. A study conducted in Professor Darling's lab found no difference in number or length of utterances among adolescent romantic relationships. It is possible that dominance behaviors are less likely to expose themselves with people who know each other personally, as opposed to those who

are unfamiliar. This study aims to find the effects of familiarity on conversational dominance by examining utterances and interruptions among friends and strangers.

The Current Study

In the current study, our participants had two conversations, one with a friend and one with a stranger, both of the opposite sex. We measured participants' familiarity and perception of dominance with each speaking partner using various survey questions. Utterances and interruptions were measured by coding audio recordings. If stereotypical behavior is more prevalent in novel situations, males should speak for more time and have more interruptions during conversations with strangers. Conversations with friends should lead to more similar conversational dominance behaviors across both genders.

Methods

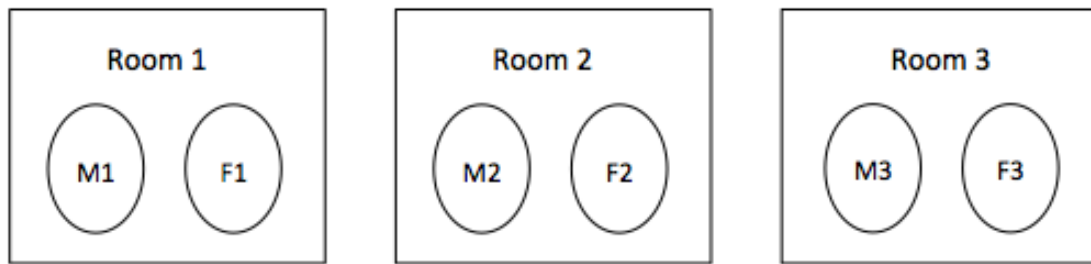
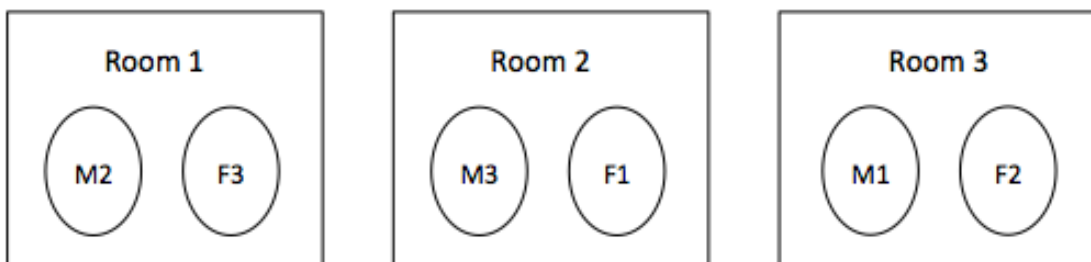
A total of 62 (31 male, 31 female) people aged 18-25 were recruited to participate in the study in exchange for course credit or payment. Participants were asked to come to the lab with a friend of the opposite sex. Each individual in the experiment had two conversations with someone of the opposite sex: one with their friend and one with a stranger. To ensure that everyone would be able to converse with a stranger, three pairs of participants were brought into the lab for each session.

Once participants came into the lab, they were brought into a separate room with their individual speaking partner. Three sets of partners had conversations at the same time, but in separate rooms. As soon as the five minute conversation was up, participants were instructed to leave the room and come to the waiting area

without discussing the task they just completed. Then, they were separated again with their second speaking partners. Each participant was in a different room from the first one they had a conversation in. Participants wore microphones in order to record their conversations. The participants sat down across from each other at a table and were given directions verbally, on a computer, and in a printed handout. They were instructed to discuss two topics based on finances of an unspecified college. Participants were given options of where to allocate the money, or take it away, and had to decide on three for each topic (see appendix). A PowerPoint led the participants through the task, where a timer indicated when there was one minute left, and another when the time was up.

The order of the topics and conversation pairings were counterbalanced across participants. No researchers were in the room during the five minutes the participants were having the conversations. From the recordings, we indicated length and number of utterances of each participant, and total number of interruptions. At the end of the conversation the participants were asked by the PowerPoint to come to an agreement about how to allocated or take away the funding. After, they were asked a few questions about who they thought dominated the conversations, as well as a modified version of the friendship quality scale (Bukowski, Hoza, and Boivin, 1994)(see appendix).

Figure 1. Participant Rooms: Each room had one male and one female that were either friends or strangers.

Time 1: Friends**Time 2: Strangers****Coding**

Utterances were coded in Mangold Interact by two independent coders. An utterance is defined as an uninterrupted chain of spoken language. As long as the participant was holding the floor without pausing for their partner to speak, it was considered a separate utterance.

Interruptions were tallied separately as either successful or unsuccessful. A successful interruption meant that the person being interrupted was completely cut off mid-utterance and had to stop speaking because of what their partner wanted to say. An unsuccessful interruption meant that the interrupter started to speak mid-utterance but did not stop their partner's speech. Head nods, "uh-huh", and "um" were not considered interruptions or utterances.

Analyses

Data from the experiment (e.g., the number of times one person interrupted another, the amount of time one person talked) come from the dynamic interaction between conversation partners. As a result, the data for a given individual depends not only on their own behavior but also on the behavior of their conversation partner. For instance, in a five minute conversation, the amount of time that one person is talking will be directly related to the amount of time that their partner is talking. For this reason, traditional approaches to data analysis, which assume that outcome variables from different individuals are independent of one another, are not appropriate for the current study.

To address this issue, we explored the data with statistical techniques that account for the potential influence of one dyad member on the other – the Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling framework (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). One drawback of this approach to analyzing the data, however, is that it may obscure some of the relatively straight-forward findings that we observed in our data. For this reason, we present a set of paired-sample t-tests in the results section below. An important area of future work will be to develop a fuller grasp of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling framework for more comprehensive treatment of the data. Nevertheless, as will be shown below, the patterns of results are fairly clear and we do not anticipate that the primary findings will differ with more sophisticated analyses.

There are two data sets that we analyze below: one comes from survey data that participants completed at the end of the study – on their perceptions of the conversations; the other comes from observations of interruptions. We present paired t-tests that compare: a) females conversing with a friend to females conversing with a stranger; b)

males conversing with a friend to males conversing with a stranger; c) male and female friends; and d) male and female strangers. In other words, we compute four separate tests on each data set to address our primary research question: do people behave differently (with respect to their “conversational dominance”) when as a function of their gender (male or female) and conversation partner (friend or stranger)?

Familiarity. The seven relationship questions that participants answered about their conversation partners (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994) were correlated with one another (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .934$ overall; $\alpha = .742$ and $.879$ when data from friends and strangers were analyzed separated). On average, familiar partners rated themselves as better friends ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .58$) than people who were strangers before the study ($M = 1.47$, $SD = .35$), as shown in Figure 2. Averaging the two partners’ scores with each other for each dyad ($r[60] = .785$, $p < .001$) revealed the expected difference by partner type, $t[48.40] = 14.29$, $p < .001$.

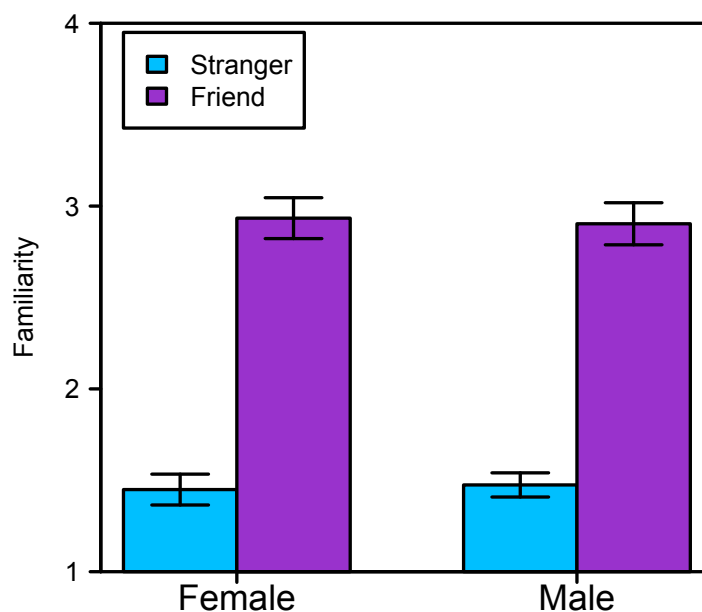


Figure 2: Mean level of familiarity of participants by gender and conversation partner. Error bars denote standard errors of the means.

Perceptions of the Conversations. Participants were asked three questions about their perceptions of the conversation. First, they were asked whether they thought the outcome of the conversation was mutually agreed upon (4-point scale from “Definitely Not” to “Very Mutual”). Most people thought their conversations were “Very Mutual” (72%) or “Fairly Mutual” (26%). Despite finding little variability in this measure, an APIM model revealed that females ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .48$) were marginally more likely to report that the outcome of the conversation was mutually agreed upon than males ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .61$), $\beta = 0.36$, $SE = .20$, $p = .061$. The model did not reveal differences by gender or partner type or interactions between these factors, $ts < 1$, $ps > .4$.

Second, participants reported who they thought was more influential in the conversation. Numerically, males were more likely to report being more influential when talking with strangers (39% compared to 29%), while females were more likely to report being more influential when talking with friends (48% compared to 32%). However, this pattern of results was not statistically significant.

Third, participants were asked who they thought controlled the flow of ideas during their conversations. Similar to the question about influence, males were more likely to report controlling the flow when talking with strangers (61% compared to 55%), while females were more likely to report controlling the flow when talking with friends (52% compared to 48%). Unlike the analysis of perceived influence, however, the APIM model for perceived control of flow revealed a marginally significant interaction between gender and partner type, $\beta = 0.29$, $SE = .15$, $p = .054$

Frequency and Duration

Four separate paired sample t-tests revealed no systematic differences in the frequency that participants talked, $ts < 1.4$, $ps > .15$, or the duration that participants talked, $ts < 1$, $ps > .4$. That is, females and males took roughly the same number of turns talking and talked roughly the same amount of time regardless of whether their conversation partner was a friend or a stranger.

Interruptions

As shown in Figure 3, males interrupted more often – both when talking with friends and strangers. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics related to the frequency of utterances, duration of utterances, successful interruptions, attempted interruptions, successful interruptions per minute of partner talking, and attempted interruptions per minute of partner talking. We focus on analyzing successful interruptions in the analyses below. There were no systematic differences by gender or conversation type in the number of unsuccessful interruptions attempted by participants, $ts < 1.1$, $ps > .3$.

	Stranger		Friend	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Frequency	33.55 (8.5)	33.81 (7.39)	35.55 (13.72)	36.48 (12.9)
Duration	144.69 (39.42)	145.45 (44)	141.44 (36.56)	136.21 (45.49)
Successful	1.65 (1.45)	4.06 (1.95)	1.55 (1.31)	4.1 (2.23)
Attempts	3.13 (1.84)	5.48 (2.36)	3.16 (1.68)	5.29 (2.65)
Interruptions per minute of partner talking	.62 (0.70)	1.83 (1.02)	.86 (0.81)	1.96 (1.31)

Table 1: Means frequency and duration of utterances, successful interruptions, total attempts at interrupting, and successful interruptions per minute of partner talking, by partner and gender type (with standard deviations in parentheses).

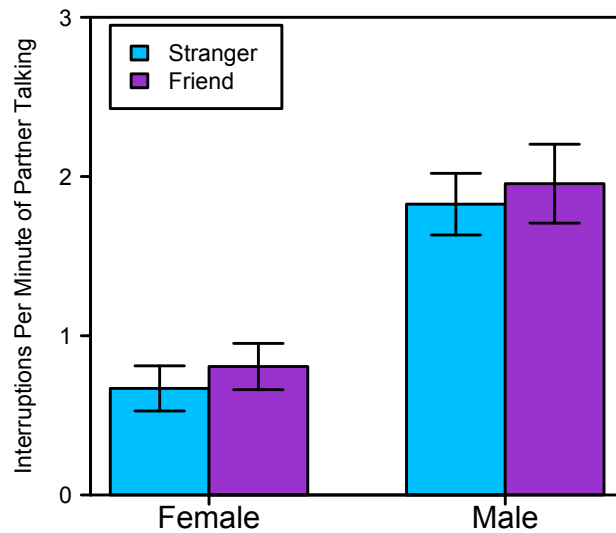


Figure 3: Mean number of interruptions per minute of partner talking by gender and conversation partner. Error bars denote standard errors of the means.

Strangers. When the male and female conversation partners were strangers, males interrupted more often ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.85$) than females ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 1.32$), $t[27] = 6.56$, $p < .001$, consistent with our hypothesis. There was no correlation between the number of times female and male conversation partners interrupted each other in this context, $r[26] = .198$, $p = .313$.

Friends. When the male and female conversation partners were friends, males also interrupted more often ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 2.21$) than females ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.45$), $t[27] = 4.11$, $p < .001$. This finding was inconsistent with our hypothesis, as we expected less male-dominant behavior when the conversation partners were friends. As with data from the strangers, there was no correlation between the number of times female and male conversation partners interrupted each other in this context, $r[26] = .261$, $p = .180$.

Females. We also tested whether females were more or less likely to interrupt their male conversation partner when the partner was a friend versus a stranger. We found no difference, $t[27] = .769, p = .449$. Females interrupted a male stranger ($M = 1.46, SD = 1.32$) about as often as they interrupted a male friend ($M = 1.79, SD = 1.45$). There was not a significant correlation between the number of times female participants interrupted friends and strangers, $r[26] = .275, p = .156$.

Males. Finally, we also found that males interrupted a female stranger ($M = 4.00, SD = 1.85$) about as often as they interrupted a female friend ($M = 4.07, SD = 2.21$), $t[27] = .128, p = .899$. There was not a significant correlation between the number of times male participants interrupted friends and strangers, $r[26] = -.054, p = .783$.

Discussion

In this study, participants were recorded speaking with a friend and a stranger, each of the opposite sex. They were given surveys afterwards as a self-reporting measure. Utterances and interruptions were coded for in order to analyze dominance behaviors. Self-report measures were consistent with the hypothesis in that females perceived themselves as more dominant when talking to friends, and that males perceived themselves as more dominant when talking to strangers. Observed measures were inconsistent with the hypothesis in that males were more dominant overall regardless of who they were speaking with.

With this study, we add to the previous research on conversations in which males are significantly more likely to interrupt. The underlying mechanisms that contribute to this effect are often overlooked, but are important to understanding why women are

interrupted so much more than men. The data does not suggest that this is due to level of familiarity. Men and women were consistent in the amount of times they interrupted no matter with a friend or stranger. However, an effect between perception and level of familiarity was found in the survey data. Males were more likely to perceive themselves as controlling the flow of conversation when talking to strangers. Females were more likely to perceive themselves as controlling the flow of conversation when talking to friends. When asked who was more influential, the data was trending in a similar way.

What is it that allows for men to get in so many more interruptions no matter the level of familiarity of the person they are speaking with? When asked questions on perceptions of power, females perceived themselves as more influential when they were talking to friends, but men interrupted the same amount of times as when they were talking to strangers. This suggests observed dominance behaviors and self-perceptions do not match up. These effects trickle down to those that are close to us, unknown to us, and almost all other aspects of life because power dynamics affect what kind of jobs people get. Men being perceived as more powerful and having overall greater abilities have led to great disparities in income. If our perceptions do not match up with our actual behaviors, it is difficult to correct ourselves without intervention of some sort. If we can unpack the mechanisms behind this behavior, we can work towards creating equality in more than just the work place.

Further work could take a deeper look at how interruptions are used between strangers and friends. It is possible that friends use interruptions as additions to their partner's speech, while strangers use them to interject a new idea. It is difficult to know when only taking into account whether or not they were successful. Many aspects of the

development of adolescents are strongly influenced by their friendships and relationships, even though they may seem short lived and insignificant to adults. Same sex dyads may tell a different story from opposite sex dyads. It is unknown if dominance behaviors manifest themselves in other ways when two people of the same sex are having a conversation. Romantic partners, whether opposite or same sex also needs to be further researched. Relationships with romantic partners and close friends can be very similar, but perhaps this doesn't reflect across dominance behaviors. Age may also play a big role in dominance behaviors. We have reason to believe that male adults are consistently being more dominant than female adults however, children as young as 4 show similar patterns of interrupting to adults. This needs to be unpacked from the beginning in order to change the behaviors that lead to noticeable differences in the way males and females are able to live their lives.

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Appendix A: Conversation topics.

A donor has decided to give a large sum of money to their alma matter but did not specify how they would like the money to be spent. The college is trying to decide how to best use the gift and is interested in your opinion. Below are a list of services/programs/facilities that have been identified as potential recipients of funding. How would you allocate the money to these programs?

- Athletics
- Student Health Services
- Student Mental Health Services
- Housing
- Dining
- Recruiting Low Income and Minority Students
- Environmental Sustainability
- Financial Aid
- Other (pick your own)

You and your partner have 5 minutes to come to an agreement.

In recent years the college's endowment has decreased as a result of global financial instability. Unfortunately, the college has to make some difficult decisions about services/programs to cut funding for. Which programs/services should get less funding?

- Athletics
- Student Health Services
- Student Mental Health Services
- Housing
- Dining
- Recruiting Low Income and Minority Students
- Environmental Sustainability
- Financial Aid
- Other (pick your own)

You and your partner have 5 minutes to come to an agreement.

Appendix C: Survey questions used to analyze dominance and level of familiarity.

Please circle options below in response to the questions. The first set of questions refer to the **first** conversation you had:

- a) Was your **first** conversation with?:

The person who came with you
to the lab (your friend)

The person you were “assigned”
to talk with

b) Was the outcome of this conversation mutually agreed upon?

Definitely not

Not really

Fairly mutual

Very mutual

c) Who do you think was more influential in the conversation? Why?

You

Your partner

d) Who do you think was more in control of the flow of ideas?

You

Your partner

e) Do you think your partner understood and listened to your ideas?

Definitely not

Not really

Yes, to some
degree

Yes, very
much

f) Do you think you understood and listened to your partner’s ideas?

Definitely not

Not really

Yes, to some
degree

Yes, very
much

The following questions ask about the relationship between you and **the person you were “assigned” to have a conversation with:**

Generally speaking, how would you describe your relationship with this person?

Never met

Acquaintance

Close friend

Very close friend

Generally speaking, how much time do you spend with this person?

Never Infrequent Occasional Frequent

How well do the following statements describe the relationship with this person?

I can get into fights with this person.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree

I would be inclined to talk to him or her about issues I was having in school.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree

I would be inclined to talk to him or her about social or personal issues in my life.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree

He or she would help me if I needed it.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree

He or she does not know me particularly well.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree