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## *Building power asymmetries in girls' interaction*



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**ABSTRACT.** This study, based on three years of ethnographic research (and over 60 hours of videotaped interaction) in a Southern California elementary school, investigates how enduring asymmetrical relationships among females in a multicultural peer group are built in moment-to-moment interaction. By exploring how relations of power, based on forms of opposition, bullying, and exclusion, are both built interactively and commented upon in female groups, I call into question the generalizability of accounts of female same-sex talk which focus exclusively on cooperative or polite interactive practices. I employ both ethnographically grounded observations and the methodology of conversation analysis to analyze practices for building power asymmetry in naturally occurring same-sex female talk during play and at lunch.

**KEY WORDS:** *bullying, children's social organization, conversation analysis, dispute, gender and language, peer socialization, peer victimization*

### *Introduction*

For over three decades, the work of feminist conversation analysts has demonstrated concern with issues of power asymmetries in interaction and with developing political commentary. For example, studies of language and gender have documented relations of dominance (de Francisco, 1998; Fishman, 1978; West, 1979) in male–female interaction and how patriarchy is constituted in moment-to-moment cross-sex interaction (Davis, 1988). As yet, however, few studies have examined how relations of power are constituted in all-female interaction. Perhaps because of a lingering dualistic association of female interaction with cooperative interaction among ‘difference’ theorists<sup>1</sup> we have tended to associate relations of power with all-male or male–female interaction.<sup>2</sup>

Most models of female interaction, based on white middle class participants, have proposed that male speakers are socialized into a competitive style of

discourse, whereas women are socialized into a more cooperative style of speech (Coates, 1994: 72). Maltz and Borker (1982) propose that the gender segregation that girls and boys experience results not only in differing activities which are the focus of their worlds, but also alternative ways of speaking; girls' collaborative talk is said to contrast with boys' competitive talk. Females learn to value relational closeness and avoid relationship-threatening types of criticism. Maltz and Borker's arguments have been updated in Mulac et al.'s (2001) psychological experiments that find 'men's language is relatively *direct, succinct, and instrumental*, whereas women's style is *indirect, elaborate and affective*' (2001: 128). Barnes and Vangelisti (1995: 354) argue that mitigation in female talk expresses female concerns for 'affiliation, reciprocity, and efforts to protect others' face.' Similarly, Tannen (1998: 436) argues that females are more likely to be indirect than males, preferring to reach agreement through negotiation because this allows a display of solidarity 'which women prefer to the display of power.' In this article, I examine how asymmetrical relations of power in same-sex female interactions are co-constructed by looking at: (i) initiating moves which are treated as socially imposing (as attempts to position oneself above another), (ii) next moves to first pair parts of adjacency pairs which are formulated as face-threatening moves, and (iii) commentary on moves of social imposition. By exploring how relations of power are both built interactively and commented upon in female groups I wish to call into question the generalizability of accounts of female same-sex talk which focus on cooperative (Coates, 1994, 1997; Maltz and Borker, 1982) or polite (Holmes, 1995) interactive practices. I also wish to contribute to studies of girls' 'relational aggression' (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Psychologists (e.g., Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Juvonen et al., 2001) have typically used questionnaires and surveys to study forms of aggression, treated as an internal psychological state. Instead, by examining the actual exchanges that constitute forms of bullying or exclusion I wish to examine the interactive processes through which girls delineate asymmetrical relations of power.

### *Methodology and fieldwork*

Conversation analysis (CA) provides a powerful methodology for documenting how people position themselves relative to each other in their moment-to-moment conversation. By examining the sequential organization of the stream of talk-in-interaction (Sacks et al., 1974), as well as the affective alignments towards talk that participants provide (Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000) we can investigate how participants display for each other the meaningfulness of a prior action. By examining actual instances of negotiated interaction, we can document the processes through which social organization of any social group is built, and hopefully avoid perpetuating essentialist generalizations about gender roles which have permeated the literature on language and gender (Bergvall et al., 1996; Freed, 1995).

Arguing from a perspective quite different from that of cultural feminists, in a

recent article Schegloff (1997: 182), with an argument consistent with Sacks (1984), contends that social categories such as male and female should not be imposed by the analyst on materials under investigation; rather through analysis of conversational activities we ought to investigate the 'forms of conduct by which persons . . . display and invoke participants' orientations to features of the interactional context' which index aspects of identity. In tune with arguments made by Schegloff (1997: 166), Stokoe (2000: 556) and Kitzinger (2000: 170) state that rather than uncritically linking particular patterns to gender, or presuming an a priori set of categories, we instead need to attend to the meanings, interpretations, and understandings of the participants themselves observable in the data. Hopper and LeBaron (1998) and Stokoe (2000: 558–9), for example, examine how gender categorization is made explicit in conversational exchanges. Kitzinger (2000: 188), in her study of 'doing coming out', examines women as active agents and 'as participants in the social world, rather than simply as victims of hetero-patriarchical structures.'

McHoul (1998: 230) has argued that CA can address issues important for researchers concerned with the dynamics of power; however, researchers need to locate inequities in actual conversations rather than assuming that power is an inherent property of particular social roles. To investigate how asymmetry is built in interaction I examine sequences organized through one of the most basic forms of conversational social organization: adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973): two utterances, adjacently placed, produced by different speakers with a relative ordering of parts. Participants display to each other their analysis of a prior action without researchers applying their own categories to the data.

In accomplishing children's social organization, directive/response sequences constitute the primary way that children organize their play with one another. Directives can be formatted either in either highly mitigated or aggravated ways (Labov and Fanshel, 1977). In their discussions of adult conversations, Labov and Fanshell (1977: 84) argue that 'in all discussions of discourse, analysts take into account the subject's desire to mitigate or modify his expression to avoid creating offense'.

Goodwin (1990: 75–108) has analyzed how children can build either symmetrical or asymmetrical relationships in their play. Among African American working class boys aged 9–14 engaged in a task activity, making slingshots, certain patterns are salient. The turns of those who position themselves above others within the boys' group are not built through mitigated action. Instead they utilize bald imperatives, pejorative address terms, insults, accounts that index arbitrary needs and desires of the speaker rather than requirements of the group, and explanations that allude to the speaker's ultimate control. Boys who position themselves as leaders issue directives formulated as direct commands, though they receive indirect requests from others. They contradict proposals and requests of others while expecting and getting compliance to their own. Finally, boys in power can usurp the turn space of others without sanction. Directives and

responses to them affirm and ratify who has the right to make decisions about various optional ways that the game can be played.

Analyzing the activity of cross-sex jump rope among a group of fourth grade girls and boys of mixed ethnicities in a Southern California elementary school, Goodwin (2001) found similar patterns of asymmetry. At the start of the cycle of jump roping, girls were the more proficient players. Girls issued directives and responded to boys' requests to play in ways that demonstrated their control of the activity, for example, accompanying their refusals to requests to play with accounts indexing arbitrary reasons for the boys' exclusion. The girls told the boys what the ground rules were when asked if they could play. The girls stated in no uncertain terms that particular moves had to be made by the boys if they wanted to play with the girls. An asymmetrical situation of power developed in which the rules invoked by girls for boys as mandatory, were ignored by the very girls who articulated their obligatory nature. However, when the boys became more proficient over a month's time, and were no longer in a position of subordination with respect to girls, the forms of speech actions they invoked to construct social identities became more like the girls' forms. Rather than being sex-linked, features of language use were closely related to one's achieved position in a specific context.<sup>3</sup>

The work reported in this article examines how asymmetrical relationships that endure over time are built in moment-to-moment interaction. It is based on three years of research in the Southern California elementary school. I observed a number of different third through sixth grade children's groups at recess and in class, in all over 30 children. In order to understand the ebb and flow of children's activities in some depth, such as how talk at one point of time influenced subsequent social processes, I focused on a core group of girls of mixed ethnicities and classmates who interacted with them. These girls regularly ate lunch and played together. I observed the group over a three-year period as they passed from fourth to sixth grade, audiotaping and videotaping their interaction with one another; 60 hours of videotape and 20 hours of audiotape form the corpus of the study. The composition of the group was somewhat fluid, depending on who was available for lunch on any particular day. During the fourth grade members of the group included two Japanese American middle class girls, two Caucasian girls, one middle class and one working class girl, an African American middle class girl, and a South Asian middle class girl, who was in the fifth grade. Most of the girls had attended the school since kindergarten, and were considered the most popular girls at the school.

Ethnographically based studies of naturally occurring interaction in the life-world of a particular group permit us to view the range of diverse types of social organization which are possible for that group (Goodwin, 1990, 2001; Kyratzis, 2002; Ochs, 1992). Stereotypes about women's speech fall apart when talk within the fullest array of activities is examined. In constructing social personae appropriate to the events of the moment, the same individuals articulate talk differently as they move from one activity to another (Goodwin, 1988) or become

more skilled in a particular task (Goodwin, 2001). Among the core group of fourth graders I observed not only were cooperative forms of interaction observable in the social organization of talk at lunch or in the orchestration of games; in addition, competitive and exclusionary forms were present as well.

### *Power asymmetry between older and younger girls*

Early work in conversation analysis was concerned with the preference organization of agreements, showing how they are basic to sociality (Silverman, 1998: 160). Conversation analysts have found that in polite adult conversation disagreement is a dispreferred activity (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987), marked through such practices as delay of an action within a turn or across a sequence of turns, the qualification or prefacing of an action, mitigation, and accounts.

Such forms are noticeably absent in the conversations of working class African American Maple Street children in Philadelphia (Goodwin, 1990), which more typically displayed a preference for disagreement than agreement. Through oppositional talk children created miniature versions of 'character contests' (Goffman, 1967: 254), enabling them to realign the social organization of the moment. In interactions among older and younger girls' in the multicultural Southern California group in the present study similar patterns were observable. Fourth grade girls were frequently taunted by some of the sixth graders. Sixth graders felt free to jump into a game of rope that fourth grade girls had organized without asking. At lunch, they often insulted members of the fourth grade girls' group by calling them names and tried to entangle them in he-said-she-said disputes with age-mates. A particular example of the power moves by an older girl and the counter-responses of younger girls to such moves will be considered in some detail.

Dionne, a sixth grader, not only invaded the younger girls' play and eating space; in addition she would attempt to confiscate the fourth grade girls' food from their lunch boxes. In the following sequence, we can see rounds of attempts by Dionne to place herself in a position of power and the responses of younger girls to such moves. The fourth graders treat Dionne's observably invasive comments and territorial intrusions as violations.

- (1) *((Dionne approaches a group of five fourth graders who are seated eating lunch. She asks where one of their group members is.))*
- 1 Dionne: Where's Aretha.
- 2 Janis: She's-
- 3 Lonnie: In the art room.  
[
- 4 Janis: At-
- 5 Janis: the art room.
- 6 Lisa: Why:.  
[
- 7 Dionne: Don't talk to me Janis.

- 8 Dionne: Can I see what you have in your lunch?  
9 (0.6) ((reaching into Lisa's lunch bag))
- 10 Lisa: °Mm hm.°
- 11 Dionne: Oh my go:sh.  
12 Can I have this? ((taking drink bottle from Lisa))  
[
- 13 Sarah: ((collusive mouth wrinkle toward Janis)
- 14 Lisa: No.((taking bottle back))
- 15 Dionne: You smell.
- 16 Dionne: Okay.=What do you have in your lunch.  
17 ((looking in Lonnie's empty lunch box))
- 18 Sarah: Dionne you're such a big bully.
- 19 Dionne: Did you see us-  
20 that milk commercial last night?  
21 (1.5)
- 22 Dionne: Do you watch tv?  
[
- 23 Sarah: ((eyes look down))
- 24 Yes. I do. ((raising eyes))
- 25 °But I couldn't leave it on for the milk commercial.°
- 26 Dionne: °I'm sorry Sarah.° ((bends over putting hands on knees))
- 27 Sarah: °Hmph.° ((nodding two small nods)) Now go!  
28 ((extends arm, and points towards another part of playground))
- 29 Sherry: eh heh heh heh!  
[
- 30 Lisa: hnh hnh hnh hnh!
- 31 Janis: GO BACK TO YOUR- ((palm opens, points to Dionne))
- 32 Janis: ((extends arm and points towards the direction Sarah had previously))
- 33 Dionne: SHUT UP JANIS.  
[
- 34 Janis: (°over there°.)
- 35 Dionne: I don't like talking to you any more.
- 36 Sarah: Eh uhm ((throat clear))  
[
- 37 Janis: (° °)
- 38 Dionne: After what you said lastertime when y-  
39 yesterday-  
40 last week.  
[
- 41 Sarah: EH UHM! ((stands up, facing Dionne, spreading arms out as a road block))
- 42 Dionne: Sarah, ((stands up, extending arms with palms up))  
43 [eh heh heh heh  
44 [eh heh heh!
- 45 Sherry: [eh heh heh!
- 46 Dionne: And nobody here has a good lunch. ((hands on hips))  
[

- 47 Lonnie: ((stands up spreading hands imitating Sarah's roadblock))  
 48 Dionne: And where's Aretha.

Power is observable in the ways that Dionne physically intrudes into the girls' space, attempts to take their food, delivers a personalized insult (l. 15), and initiates topic shifts that index her status (ll. 19–20) when she is refused food. The girls treat these actions as objectionable in several ways: (i) They address Dionne with a negative person descriptor (Goodwin, 1990: 84–85) in l. 18. (ii) They speak to her with bald imperatives (ll. 27, 31–32), the most face-threatening type of directive (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Goodwin, 1990) and gestures signaling their opposition in response to her moves – telling her to leave.

Commonly, when someone initiates interaction s/he provides a first pair part in a greeting, a form of 'supportive interchange' (Goffman, 1971). However, alternatively, as argued by Sacks (1995b: 159), 'one can think of the tactics in the greeting sequence as possible ways to, e.g., control, who gets a first chance to raise a "first topic".' When Dionne initially approaches the girls, she avoids any of the conventional ways of bracketing entry into an interaction; she begins the interaction with 'Where's Aretha'. Dionne uses a highly aggravated question form, demanding rather than requesting information about one of the group members. Moreover, she provides no warrant for why she is asking this information.

Differentiated responses follow. Two of the girls respond immediately to Dionne's question with an answer, overlapping one another (ll. 3–4), whereas Lisa, a girl who herself challenges others' argumentative mores, responds to Dionne's question with her own question: 'Why:' Providing an answer to a question is one possible trajectory in question/answer adjacency pair sequences, whereas another is the initiation of an insertion sequence (Schegloff, 1972) following the question. Insertion questions treat a question as something requiring more information before it can be addressed. Lisa makes explicit that the initial question posed to the group is one requiring some explanation.

A next series of questions and moves is constructed in oppositional ways as well. In overlap with Lisa's 'Why:' Dionne asks Lisa 'Can I see what you have in your lunch?' as she reaches into Lisa's lunchbag (ll. 8–9). The fact that the question is accompanied by reaching makes it more than a simple request for information. The action that occurs here is visibly an intrusion into someone's 'territory of the self' (Goffman, 1971: 28–61). Lisa's first response to Dionne's invasive action is a whispered '°Mm mm.°' (l. 10). However, when Dionne takes Lisa's drink bottle as she states 'Can I have this?' Lisa responds with a more emphatic negation: 'No.' and reclaims the bottle (l. 14). Sarah, an onlooker to the scene, responds silently and nonvocally with a collusive wrinkle of her mouth towards Janis (l. 13).

Dionne has attempted to build within the interaction a specific slot (Sacks, 1995a: 308) in which the issue of whether or not Lisa will acquiesce to demands

from her can be publicly witnessed. When Dionne is unsuccessful in this attempt, she initiates a dramatic topic shift: a personal insult: 'You smell.' Though Dionne's move shifts topic, it does not shift addressee: it is sequentially relevant in that it sustains the pattern of moves of opposition towards Lisa, moves which position her as subordinate to Dionne. Such types of shifts in frame are useful strategies in children's arguments following refusals (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1990: 95–8).

Dionne's next move is to shift addressee, moving to a next recipient (Lonnie) in her 'round' (Sacks, 1995a: 292–5) of questioning and invasions of lunch boxes. She brackets her move to a new recipient with the word 'Okay': 'Okay. What do you have in your lunch' (l. 16). As we saw with the last request for food, recipients have available various responses, alternative ways of expressing 'no' or commenting through a collusive facial gesture. Here, however, the next move following these intrusive moves by Dionne is an explicit commentary on Dionne's behavior. Sarah categorizes the activity as a form of intrusion – and more explicitly, as a form of domination by using a negative person descriptor, 'big bully,' in her statement 'Dionne you're such a big bully' (l. 18).

Accusations generally make relevant a denial or some type of counter move by their recipients (Goodwin, 1990: 240–1). However, rather than addressing this charge Dionne responds to her addressee by once again radically shifting topic while keeping the floor alive for putdowns and implicit comparisons between herself and the other girls. She asks a question that indexes her identity as an actress in commercials: 'Did you see us – that milk commercial last night?' As none of the other girls are actresses (though they aspire to be them) her question serves to make topically relevant her status vis-à-vis the younger girls. In response to Dionne's question Sarah remains silent and refuses to enter into this new topic. Several moves later Sarah delivers a bald imperative which emphatically affirms her position with respect to Dionne's moves: she states 'Now go!' (l. 27) extending her arm and pointing to a far area of the playground. Other girls evaluate Sarah's bold moves with laughter; Janis, piggybacking (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1990: 101–7) on Sarah's action, states 'GO BACK TO YOUR-' and points where Dionne should go (l. 31). Directives that instruct an interlocutor to leave are perhaps the baldest or most 'aggravated' (Labov and Fanshel, 1977: 84) of all possible directives issued among the girls. Dionne clearly treats Sarah's imperative move as oppositional; she responds to her with a bald, insulting 'SHUT UP JANIS. I don't like talking to you any more. After what you said lastertime when y- yesterday-last week.' in ll. 33–35. For her next move Sarah stands up, spreads her arms out to her side constructing with her body a roadblock. (l. 41) Her action is mimicked by Lonnie and the fourth grade girls laugh at these baldly produced actions.

Relations of power between an older girl and younger girls are negotiated in this sequence. The younger girls provide several moves which are responsive to Dionne's physical invasion of their space and personal insult: the negative person descriptor 'big bully,' the bald imperatives 'GO BACK TO YOUR-' and 'Now go!' as well as the physical actions of pointing to where Dionne should go and making

one's body into a roadblock. Such moves clearly display that the younger girls treat Dionne's actions as moves of domination.

### *Building asymmetrical relationships in the fourth grade girls' group*

While crafting their social relations through talk during play children delineate the boundaries of their group. Children can select ways of interacting that do not treat peers as co-equals. Forms of exclusion were quite evident in the clique with respect to their interactions with a 'tagalong' – a person defined in terms of her efforts to affiliate to a particular group without being accepted by the group. Across a range of different activities including games, ritual insult exchanges, and during lunchtime conversations girls construct a girl named Angela, a working class, physically developed African American girl, as deviant and marginal to the group. In ritual insult sequences which Angela initiates, girls respond with personal insults, depicting her as poor, receiving Welfare assistance, being incapable of eventually getting a job in the future, unable to afford braces for straight teeth, being overweight, having cooties, and without friends.

Angela's status as someone who is not a fully ratified member of the group is explicitly commented on by the girls in the clique as well as by Angela herself. In the following as Angela describes her position relative to others in the group the girls provide an explicit categorization of her and then ask her to ratify this categorization, eliciting from Angela a public confession that she is a 'tag-along.' The following occurs while Angela, Sarah, and Aretha are sitting together after they have been excluded from a baseball game with the boys.

- (2)
- 1 Angela: [ I mean like- you guys are like-  
 2 I don't judge anybody because you guys know,  
 3 that like I just, you know, follow you guys. ((*shoulder*  
*moves in time with words*))  
 4 wherever you guys go, but um,  
 [
- 5 Sarah: You're like a tag. You tag along. ((*left palm extended*  
*with arm bent towards Angela*))  
 6 Basically- Angela tags along.=  
 [
- 7 Angela: So,  
 8 Sarah: That's it.=right?  
 9 Angela: So li ke- Yeah. ((*shoulder shrug*))  
 [
- 10 Sarah: Right Angela? Admit it. eh heh heh!  
 11 Angela: Yeah like- whatever.  
 [
- 12 Sarah: ADMIT IT ANGELA!  
 13 Sarah: ADMIT IT! ((*extends arms palm up to Angela*))  
 [