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Brief Report

Decision-Making Processes Between Friends: Speaker and Partner Gender Effects[1]

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Decision-making processes were examined in conversations between same-gender and cross-gender friends. Participants were university students (mean age = 19 years) from mostly middle-class, European-American backgrounds. Each pair of friends was asked to participate in two decision-making topics for 5 minutes each. Transcripts of the taped conversations were coded for suggestions, agreement, disagreement, and abstentions (i.e., neither agreement nor disagreement). There were no significant differences between either the women or the men friendship pairs or between the women and men partners within the mixed-gender pairs in any of the observed behaviors. However, when speaker gender and partner gender interaction effects were analyzed, it was found that women with a woman friend were more likely to receive supportive responses and less likely to receive negative responses to their suggestions than were women with a man friend. There were no partner gender effects on responses to men's suggestions. The results highlight ways in which women and men may handle joint decision-making with friends depending on both the speaker's gender and the partner's gender.

Researchers studying gender variations in communication style have often argued that men are more likely than women to dominate in decision-mak-

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ing situations, whereas women are more likely to act in a supportive manner (see Wood, 1994 for a recent review). These differences have been interpreted as reflecting corresponding differences either in women's and men's social norms (e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990) or in women's and men's relative social status and power (e.g., Henley & Kramarae, 1991; Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1991). The social norms explanation is based on the notion that separate "gender cultures" tend to result from girls' and boys' gender-segregated peer relationships. In contrast, the social status and power explanation emphasizes that men's greater assertion and women's greater support is a manifestation of sexism and male dominance.

Some researchers (e.g., Carli, 1989a; Leaper, 1994) have suggested that the social norms and the social status/power explanations are not necessarily incompatible. For example, Carli (1989) argued that differences in assertiveness may be better explained by the status and power interpretation, whereas differences in expressiveness may be better explained by the social norms interpretation. She offered evidence from a study of interactions between unacquainted pairs that gender differences in assertiveness occurred only in cross-gender interactions, whereas gender differences in expressive language occurred only when same-gender interactions were compared. It is unclear, however, if the kinds of patterns described in Carli's (1989) study based on observations of interactions between unacquainted partners generalize when close relationships are examined. For example, there is reason to believe that manifestations of male dominance are less likely between women and men in friendships given the emphasis on mutuality in this type of relationship (McWilliams & Howard, 1993; Monsour, Harris, Kurzweil, & Beard, 1994). Thus, to explore possible speaker and partner gender effects on the use of decision-making processes further, the present study investigated decision making between women-women, men-men, and men-women pairs of friends.

Forms of instrumental and supportive speech during decision making were analyzed. Of particular relevance was the extent to which partners differed in their uses of different strategies. In his developmental model of interpersonal negotiation, Selman (1989) makes a distinction between decision-making strategies that either assert one's own perspective or go along with the other's wishes. Disagreements were analyzed as a form of self-assertive speech, while agreements were coded as a form of obliging speech. Selman also characterized withdrawing as a relatively immature unilateral strategy. Therefore, abstaining responses were coded when participants did not respond with either agreement or disagreement to a suggestion. To the extent that imbalances occur between partners in the use of the previously described strategies, corresponding imbalances in power

are implied (Kollock et al., 1985). According to the power and status model, gender differences in these strategies should be greatest within the mixed-gender friendships. However, according to the social norms explanation, differences should be greatest when same-gender pairs are compared.

METHOD

Sample

Pairs of undergraduate psychology students from mostly middle-class, European-American backgrounds participated. There were 25 women pairs, 19 men pairs, and 24 mixed pairs of friends. Participants were recruited from psychology classes. The notice for the study was titled, "Issues and Opinions." Prospective participants were informed that they would need to bring a friend with them and they would be asked to discuss different issues together. Requirements for participation were as follows: Both partners were between 18-21 years of age (M = 19 years); there was no sexual or romantic interest between the friends; and that the friends had known one another for at least 2 months (M = 12 months). There was no significant difference between women-women, men-men, or women-men pairs in length of friendship.

Procedure

Each pair was seated in a university research office. There were four different 5-minute conversation sessions that followed in succession. For each topic, the pair was told they had 5 minutes to discuss the topic. After explaining each topic assignment, the researcher left the room and returned in 5 minutes to assign the next topic. Conversations were audio-tape recorded using lavaliere microphones attached to each person's shirt.

During the first session, the participants were asked to talk about whatever they wanted (see Leaper & Holliday, 1995). The order of the remaining sessions was counterbalanced across participating pairs. For one of the other sessions, participants were asked to discuss how their family relations had changed since they entered college (see Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995). The present study focuses on the conversations during the remaining two sessions. One involved assigning the participants the following decision-making task: "A person is going to be stranded on a desert island for one year. Decide together what you think the 10 most important items for that person to bring." The other task involved asking the participants to plan how they would spend a day together from morning

until night. Both tasks were designed to emphasize joint decision-making with the "desert island" topic being relatively impersonal and the "plan a day together" task being more personal.

Transcripts of the conversations were coded for the instance of the following: *suggestions* (e.g., "We need to bring water" or "Let's begin with breakfast at Zachary's"), *agreements* (e.g., "Okay" or "That is a good idea"), *disagreements* (e.g., "No" or "Is that necessary?"), and *abstentions* whereby there is neither agreement nor disagreement to other's suggestion (e.g., "hmm" or silence). Reliability was judged by having two researchers independently code 10 sets of transcripts. The kappa coefficients for inter-coder agreement were high for suggestions ($\kappa = .85$) and for the response categories ($\kappa = .77$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to reporting the results from the tests of statistical significance, *eta^2* scores are presented. *Eta^2* is a measure of the proportion of variance that is accounted by a variable (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984).

Conversation Topic Effects

Initially, a set of 3×2 mixed-design ANOVAs were performed to test for the effects of friendship group (women pairs, men pairs, mixed-gender pairs) and conversation task (desert island or plan a day) on each pair's number of suggestions and the proportions of suggestions receiving either agreement, disagreement, or abstention. Conversation task main effects were obtained for total suggestions, $F(1, 65) = 28.91$, $eta^2 = .31$, $p < .001$, proportion of agreements, $F(1, 65) = 9 44$, $eta^2 = .13$, $p < .01$, and proportion of abstentions, $F(1, 65) = 17.43$, $eta^2 = .21$, $p < .001$. Suggestions and agreements were more likely during the plan-a-day task than during the desert island task. In contrast, abstentions were more likely during the desert island task. By design, the plan-a-day task was more personal and relationship-oriented, whereas the desert island survival task was more impersonal. Thus, perhaps it should not be surprising that friends expressed more verbal agreement and demonstrated fewer abstentions with one another during the more personal decision-making task.

The topic effects underscore the point that not all decision-making situations are the same. To the extent that people favor particular topics for conversation, the nature of the topic may tend to lead to a corresponding style of interaction. For example, studies indicate that many men favor relatively impersonal topics of discussion whereas many women prefer rela-

tively personal conversation topics (Bischoping, 1993). Gender differences in topic preferences may thereby emphasize corresponding differences in conversational style associated with any joint decision-making that occurs.

Gender Effects

There were no significant Friendship Group × Conversation Task interactions. Therefore, subsequent analyses of gender effects were carried out by collapsing across the two conversation tasks. Additionally, the statistical procedure described by Carli (1989a) was used in order to consider the independent effects of speaker gender and partner gender. As Carli pointed out, when comparing same-gender and mixed-gender interactions, speaker gender and partner gender are not independent. To handle this situation, first, Carli compared the women pairs and the men pairs using gender as a between-group factor. Next, she compared the women and men partners within the mixed-gender pairs using gender as a within-group factor. Finally, Carli used a t-test that compared the magnitude of gender difference between the same and the mixed gender pairs (see Carli, 1989a, 1989b, for the formula for computing the t-test). By comparing the relative gender difference in same-gender versus mixed-gender interactions, it is possible to detect a way in which decision-making processes varied depending on the *combined* influences of the person's gender and the other friend's gender.

Gender Main Effects. When the women and the men in the same-gender friendship pairs were compared, there was no significant difference in the number of suggestions, $F(1, 42) = .02$, $eta^2 = .00$, ns; the proportion of agreements, $F(1, 42) = 2.37$, $eta^2 = .05$, ns; the proportion of disagreements, $F(1, 42) = .18$, $eta^2 = .00$, ns; or the proportion of abstentions, $F(1, 42) = 2.97$, $eta^2 = .07$, $p < .10$. The latter trend indicated a somewhat higher proportion of abstentions among men pairs than women pairs. The comparison of women and men partners within the mixed-gender pairs similarly did not indicate any significant gender effects for suggestions, $F(1, 23) = .49$, $eta^2 = .01$, ns; agreements, $F(1, 23) = 1.88$, $eta^2 = .04$, ns; disagreements, $F(1, 23) = 2.01$, $eta^2 = .05$, ns; or abstentions, $F(1, 23) = .82$, $eta^2 = .02$, ns. Thus, there were no differences between women and men either in same- or mixed-gender friendships in their use of task-directed speech (i.e., suggestions) or in their likelihood of influencing the outcome of the decision making (i.e., proportion of suggestions receiving agreement, disagreement, or abstention).

The absences of significant gender main effects when comparing either the two same gender groups or the women and men partners within the mixed-gender pairs may be partly due to the present study's focus on inter-

actions between actual friends. Most prior studies on gender and social interaction have been based on observations of unacquainted strangers. There is some evidence that gender is more apt to act as a status characteristic when little is known about the other person (Wood & Karten, 1986). Conversely, recent research suggests that issues of dominance and power may be less salient between women and men in friendships given that this type of relationship is typically based on mutuality (McWilliams & Howard, 1993). Indeed, cross-gender friendships may well serve as an important context for fostering gender equality (Leaper, 1994; Leaper & Anderson, 1997).

Speaker Gender and Partner Gender Interaction Effects. The last type of statistical test compared the same- and mixed-gender pairs as a way to disentangle speaker gender and partner gender effects (see Carli, 1989a). No difference occurred regarding the number of suggestions used, $t(66) = .47$, $eta^2 = .00$, *ns*. However, there were significant effects for agreements, $t(66) = 3.03$, $eta^2 = .12$, $p < .01$; disagreements, $t(66) = -2.13$, $eta^2 = .06$, $p < .05$; and abstentions, $t(66) = -2.88$, $eta^2 = .11$, $p < .05$. An inspection of the mean proportions revealed that women−but not men−received different responses to their suggestions depending on their friend's gender. Women were more likely to receive agreements in same-gender pairs ($M = 75\%$) than in mixed-gender pairs ($M = 67\%$). Conversely, women were more likely to receive disagreements in mixed-gender friendships ($M = 13\%$) than in same-gender friendships ($M = 9\%$). Similarly, women were more apt to receive abstentions in mixed-gender pairs ($M = 20\%$) than in same-gender pairs ($M = 15\%$). In contrast, for the men, there were no differences between same- and mixed-gender friendships in receiving agreements ($M = 71\%$ vs. $M = 72\%$, respectively), disagreements ($M = 10\%$ vs. $M = 10\%$, respectively), or abstentions ($M = 19\%$ vs. $M = 18\%$, respectively).

The latter set of results suggest that men received basically the same type of treatment following their suggestions from either a man or a woman friend. Women, however, were more apt to receive relatively positive responses (i.e., agreements) from a woman friend and relatively negative responses (i.e., disagreements or abstentions) from a man friend. Thus, for women, being with a woman friend compared to being with a man friend was associated with an increased likelihood of having one's ideas accepted and a decreased likelihood of having one's suggestions either negated or ignored. It is difficult to infer to what extent either social norms or social power may have influenced the observed gender-related variations in decision-making processes. According to Carli's (1989a) argument, the social norms interpretation would apply best if gender differences were seen between women pairs and men pairs whereas the social power and status explanation would apply if differences were seen *within* the cross-gender pairs. However, neither pattern occurred. Instead, what we see is a more

complex interaction between speaker gender and partner gender. Therefore, perhaps to some degree both explanations are relevant.

The social norms explanation may partly account for why women were more positive than were men in response to women friends' suggestions. At the same time, the social dominance explanation may help explain why men were more self-assertive and unresponsive than women when with women friends. The complex interaction between speaker gender and partner gender in the foregoing results highlights the subtleties inherent in many gender-related variations in behavior. The results associated with the partner gender effects—in addition to the previously mentioned conversation topic main effects—underscore the importance of contextual factors when studying gender and behavior (Deaux & Major, 1987; Huston, 1985).

The results suggest that gendered power dynamics may play a role in some cross-gender friendships. This interpretation is consistent with O'Meara's (1989) suggestion that overcoming traditional gender-role patterns associated with power and dominance may act as a special challenge in cross-gender friendships. In contrast, other investigators (McWilliams & Howard, 1993; Monsour et al., 1994) have argued that the typical friendship norm of mutuality makes open displays of dominance less likely between women and men. Thus, there appears to be support for both of these perspectives, as is the case with the social norms and the power/status explanations.

In closing, some of the limitations of the present study are worth noting. First, several individual characteristics about the participants may have moderated the likelihood of gender effects. Factors such as sexual orientation (e.g., Kurdek & Schmitt 1986), gender-role self concept (Kelly, Wildman, & Urey, 1982), and friendship qualities (e.g., Veniegas & Peplau, 1997) may be better predictors of social behavior than an individual's gender *per se*. Second, the analyses focused on only the verbal component of social interaction during decision making. Nonverbal aspects of communication such as head nods, eye contact, and voice tone are also important channels to investigate (e.g., Henley, 1995). Third, the use of an experimental procedure with assigned topics may not generalize to everyday decision making between friends. Although more difficult to carry out, more naturalistic or semi-naturalistic conversations between friends are needed to complement laboratory studies. Fourth, our coding scheme did not differentiate between different types of suggestions, agreements, or disagreements. We made a broad distinction between unilateral self-assertive strategies (e.g., disagreement) and unilateral other-emphasizing strategies (e.g., agreement). However, Selman's (1989) model of interpersonal negotiation also allows for collaborative strategies that coordinate both self and other perspectives. Finally, the ten-minute length of interaction that was analyzed in the present study may not accurately reflect the more complex

dynamics that occur over longer stretches of time. For example, Wheelan and Verdi (1992) presented evidence that gender differences in verbal interaction decreased over time in groups interacting together several hours. Despite these limitations, the present study suggests that gender may partly influence decision making processes in some friendships. Moreover, it is one of the few empirical studies that has looked at interactions between actual friends.

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