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INTERRUPTION IN WOMEN'S CONVERSATIONS: THE EFFECTS OF CONTEXT IN ETHNIC MAJORITY AND MINORITY GROUP INTERACTIONS

The present study explored how the conversation dynamics of women from ethnic majority and minority groups varied in different conversational contexts. Sixty undergraduate students (mean age 19.5 years) engaged in unstructured, introductory talk in pairs and then discussed how they should rank a list of possible improvements to a university campus. Minority group women used more positive interruptions in both settings, and in introductory talk there was less positive interruption in cross ethnic than same ethnic pairs. Majority group women used a similar pattern of interruptions in introductory and task discussion. However, in task discussion, minority group women used less positive and more negative interruptions when talking with another minority group woman, and more positive and fewer negative interruptions when talking with a majority group woman. These findings suggest that minority group women modify their interaction styles depending on the type of conversation and the ethnicity of their partner.

Key words: conversation, ethnicity, interruption, minority, group, women

Recently, there has been growing research interest in how ethnicity affects conversations (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). This interest stems, at least in part, from the observation that contact between individuals from different ethnic groups is associated with improved cross ethnic relationships and fewer negative ethnic group attitudes (e.g., Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). However, surprisingly little is known about how ethnicity influences the specifics of interactions in different conversational contexts. The core aim of the present study is to understand how ethnic group status influences the use of interruption in women's conversations.

The present research extends the theoretical basis of previous research in two key ways. First, the overwhelming majority of work on social influences on conversation dynamics has looked at gender effects whereas the present study examines the conversational effects of ethnicity, another important social category. Second, the present study examines how ethnic group status influences conversations in two settings: introductory talk and task discussion.

The context or type of task is an important consideration for several reasons: early contact hypothesis research (e.g. Allport, 1954) argued that contact between ethnic groups was more beneficial when contact focussed on a task or goal. Introductory talk, which often lacks a specific focus, is important in setting the scene and pattern for future relationships and interactions. Additionally, task differences can affect the dynamics of interaction when solving problems together or collaborating (Leman, Ahmed, & Ozarow, 2005). According to the *contextual interaction model* (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Deaux & Major, 1983), gender and other status differences in conversation become less marked when an activity is more structured. This is because individuals focus their attention away from maintaining social roles and become absorbed in the task itself.

Just as there are male and female “styles” of conversation (Carli, 1989), there are also distinct styles of conversation associated with different ethnic groups (Leman & Lam, 2008). However, social psychologists frequently distinguish ethnic minority and majority groups. The distinction is important generally because it relates to social issues of inequality, social exclusion, and discrimination (e.g., Bigler & Hughes, 2009), but also specifically because it allows for a comparison of high (majority) and low (minority) status groupings. In this respect, an important theoretical question is how far individuals react to a partner’s ethnicity and how this connects with status differences in the relationship between them.

One of the most widely used measures for assessing conversation dynamics is interruption. Interruption disrupts turn-taking in conversations, and hence the use of interruption has long been related to issues of social status and dominance between individuals (Zimmerman & West, 1975). Okamoto, Rashotte, and Smith-Lovin (2002) assessed alternative methods for coding interruptions. The most widely used approach, described as the syntactic scheme (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1983), derives from the classic turn-taking model of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) and views interruptions as incursions into normal turn-taking. Interruptions are often classified as a subset of simultaneous speech acts (henceforth, SSAs) that also include noninterruptive, overlapping speech (described as “interjection” in some other schemes, e.g. Roger, Bull, & Smith, 1988). Interruptions themselves are typically further subdivided into positive or negative categories (Covelli & Murray, 1980).

The syntactic approach is the most widely used scheme for coding interruptions, and has been seen to be functionally equivalent (i.e., identified similar patterns of interruption) to schemes that emphasize context and subjective or sub-cultural

aspects of interruption (e.g., Murray, 1985). In the present study, the syntactic scheme was used because it provides an objective and reliable means of assessing interruptions across contexts and ethnic groups.

The present study tested four hypotheses. First, it was predicted that the use of SSAs would vary according to the ethnicity; in other words, there would be differences in the use of interruption by majority and minority group women. Second, following *status characteristics theory* (Balkwell & Berger, 1996), it was anticipated that the intergroup dynamics of cross ethnic (intergroup, majority-minority) interaction would lead to more negative interruption and less positive interruption, compared with same ethnic (intragroup, all-majority or all-minority) interaction. The third hypothesis predicted that there would be more negative interruption in task discussion than in introductory talk, because negative interruption is a marker of conflict in interaction. Finally, the contextual interaction model predicts that ethnic differences would be more marked in introductory talk than in task discussion; this was the fourth hypothesis.

Method

Participants

Sixty women were recruited by responses to advertisements posted around a university campus in London, England. All participants were students at the university, whose first language was English, aged between 18 and 22 years (mean age, 20 years 2 months). Half were European or Caucasian (established through a free response, self-description) which is the racial majority group. The other half were from British racial minority groups: 22 were South Asian (including Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi), 6 were African Caribbean, and 2 were other Asian (Chinese).

Materials and procedure

The study was conducted in a small room containing a flip chart and pen, attached to a vertical stand, along with a written list of ten possible campus improvements. A camera and microphone were used to record conversations.

Pairs comprised women who had not previously met. Once in the room the interviewer said she would return in two minutes and immediately left. Participants' conversations during this stage of the study were classed as *introductory talk*. After exactly two minutes the interviewer returned and asked the pair to rank the three most desirable improvements to campus from a list of ten items. Participants were informed that they would have five minutes in which to complete the task. The interviewer then left the room and returned exactly five minutes later.

Conversation measures: Simultaneous Speech Acts (SSAs)

Overlaps were defined as noninterruptive simultaneous speech, and were identified as instances when one person speaks before a conversation partner has finished

a phrase or sentence. Overlaps include expressions of agreement, simultaneously saying the same thing, or stepping in to complete a sentence. Thus overlaps are not intrusions into turns but the inevitable consequence of turn-taking (see again West & Zimmerman, 1983). Operationally, an overlap is coded when a new speaker begins to speak during the last syllable of another speaker's utterance. The example below illustrates use of overlapping speech, where speakers A and E speak the words "library" together over lines 14 and 15:

- 14 A: Of all of those, I think the / library.
 15 E: Library/ yeah.//
 16 A: //Although later bus services are important too.

In contrast to noninterruptive, overlapping speech, interruptions are operationally defined as incursions into another speaker's turn that occur more than two syllables away from the end of a turn. *Positive interruptions* were defined as any bid to take the conversational floor that did not challenge the speaker's argument. This included signals of agreement and clarifications or requests for information. *Negative interruptions* were defined as simultaneous utterances that constituted bids to take the floor in a negative or hostile manner, raised an objection, or constituted a change of topic. For more details on coding positive and negative interruptions, see Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989).

Reliability of conversation measures

The second author (a British, African-Caribbean woman) identified each SSA used by each participant. Reliability of conversation measures was established by independent coding of a random sample of 20% (12 conversations) by the first author (a British, European man). There was excellent agreement between judges for overlaps ($\kappa = 0.89$), positive interruptions ($\kappa = 0.95$), and negative interruptions ($\kappa = 0.96$).

Results

Nonindependence of conversational measures

In order to reduce the risk of Type I errors, a statistical technique that corrects for nonindependence of conversational data was used (see Carli, 1989). This technique gives, for each conversation measure (SSA), three values of the *t* statistic for effects of speaker ethnicity, partner ethnicity, and an interaction effect (which compares ethnic differences between same-ethnic majority and minority pairs with differences between individuals in majority-minority pairs). The proportionate use of each SSA was calculated and analysed, because task discussions and introductory talk were not the same length. Findings are reported for 28 of the 30 pairs because data from two, same-ethnic majority pairs could not be used due to poor quality recording.

Table 1. Proportionate use of simultaneous speech acts for women in majority-majority, minority-minority, and majority-minority pairs by conversation type

	Majority-majority (n = 28)		Minority-minority (n = 30)		Majority-minority pairs			
	M	SD	M	SD	Majority member (n = 30)		Minority member (n = 30)	
Introductory talk								
Overlaps	0.55	0.47	0.45	0.42	0.77	0.34	0.70	0.41
Positive interruptions	0.20	0.36	0.44	0.42	0.13	0.22	0.20	0.34
Negative interruptions	0	0	.06	.23	0	0	0	0
Task discussion								
Overlaps	0.68	0.38	0.52	0.37	0.64	0.36	0.54	0.36
Positive interruptions	0.30	0.39	0.23	0.28	0.19	0.29	0.35	0.33
Negative interruptions	0.02	0.05	0.15	0.32	0.07	0.12	0.01	0.02

Note: Mean proportions for SSAs do not sum to 1.00 for each column for introductory talk and task discussion respectively because some children did not use any SSAs.

Differences in the use of SSAs

Table 1 displays the mean proportions of SSAs used in introductory talk and task discussion by majority and minority women in different pair types. Table 2 gives values of the *t* statistic associated with these means, using the correction for nonindependence outlined above.

The first hypothesis predicted that there would be differences in the use of simultaneous speech acts between women from majority and minority groups.

Table 2. Speaker ethnicity, partner ethnicity and interaction effects relating to proportions of simultaneous speech acts by conversation type

	Speaker gender <i>t</i> (54)	Partner gender <i>t</i> (54)	Interaction <i>t</i> (54)
Introductory talk			
Overlaps	2.28*	0.43	3.34**
Positive interruptions	-4.55**	-2.49*	8.37**
Negative interruptions	-0.88	-0.88	0.88
Task discussion			
Overlaps	3.64**	0.84	0.28
Positive interruptions	-0.94	2.41*	-4.71***
Negative interruptions	-1.49	-4.04**	1.91

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: A positive value of *t* indicates a greater use for majority group speakers or with majority group partners, and for the interaction effect that ethnic differences are greater comparing majority-majority and minority-minority pairs, than comparing majority and minority members in the majority-minority pairs.

Figure 1. Positive and negative interruptions in (a) introductory talk and (b) task discussion by majority and minority group women in same ethnic and cross ethnic pairs

(a) Introductory talk

(b) Task discussion

Tables 1 and 2 indicate that minority group women used proportionately more positive interruptions in introductory talk than majority women. However, there were no differences in the task discussion. Additionally, majority women used more overlapping speech in both types of talk.

Same ethnic versus cross ethnic pairs

The second hypothesis was that there would be more negative and less positive interruption in cross ethnic pairs than in same ethnic pairs. Independent t tests comparing use of interruption in cross and same ethnic pairs revealed no significant differences overall or for task discussion. The prediction was, however, borne out for introductory talk, $t(38) = 2.39$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.78$.

Introductory talk and task discussion

In respect of the third hypothesis predicting more negative interruption in task discussion than in introductory talk, a series of related t tests for each participant's use of each SSA revealed a significant effect only for the use of negative interruptions between the two tasks, $t(55) = 2.63$, $p < 0.01$, Cohen's $d = 0.71$. As predicted, in introductory talk women used proportionately fewer negative interruptions than in the task discussion ($M_{\text{introductory}} = 0.02$; $M_{\text{task}} = 0.07$).

Ethnic group status in introductory talk and task discussion

The fourth hypothesis predicted that ethnic group effects on use of SSAs would be less marked in task discussion than in introductory talk. In introductory talk, all women used more positive interruptions when speaking with a minority group woman. Differences (i.e. majority versus minority group comparisons) in use of overlaps and positive interruptions were greater between same ethnic pairs than between partners in cross ethnic pairs (see Figure 1).

In task discussion majority women used more overlaps. All women used a higher proportion of positive interruptions with a minority partner. The effect of ethnicity on use of positive interruptions was greater in the cross ethnic pairs. All women used more negative interruptions with a minority group partner (see again Figure 1). The present findings do not, therefore, provide support for the fourth hypothesis. Rather, they suggest that the different types of interaction (i.e., introductory talk versus task discussion) trigger different dynamics which are reflected in the differential use of SSAs.

Discussion

Variations in the use of simultaneous speech reflect and contribute to the underlying dynamics of social relationships. These results indicate that ethnic group status influences women's use of interruption and overlapping speech, and that this influence varies according to the context (topic) of conversation.

The first hypothesis predicted that there would be differences in the use of simultaneous speech acts between ethnic majority and minority group women. The hypothesis was supported. The high levels of positive interruption from minority women, particularly when speaking with another minority woman, resonate with similar findings from 7 year old minority girls' conversations about possible friends (Leman & Lam, 2008). This may signal greater affiliation among minority women, which may be a consequence of negative social experiences associated with racial minority status.

The second hypothesis, that predicted more negative interruption and less positive interruption in cross ethnic (intergroup, majority-minority) pairs, was not confirmed. While women used more positive interruptions in intragroup interaction in introductory talk, in task discussion women used more in intergroup discussion. Negative interruptions were rarely used in introductory talk, but their use increased in task discussion, especially in all minority pairs.

The third hypothesis predicted greater negative interruption in the task discussion due to discussion or conflict arising from differences in opinion. This prediction was confirmed. These findings support the suggestion that negative interruption is greater when task demands are greater, or when there is a need for a joint decision (Berger, Rosenholtz & Zelditch, 1980).

Finally, the fourth hypothesis predicted, from the contextual-interactive model (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Deaux & Major, 1987), that ethnic influences on conversation dynamics would be more marked in introductory talk than in task discussion. Introductory talk is important because it is through such talk that friendships and acquaintances are formed (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Subtle differences in introductory talk may create patterns of conversation that act as barriers to the formation of cross-ethnic friendships (Mackie & Ahn, 1998) or reduce the likelihood of positive outcomes from intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

In introductory talk, majority women used proportionately more overlaps, and the significant interaction effect indicates that this difference was most marked comparing women in same ethnic pairs. The pattern of use of overlaps and positive interruptions by majority and minority women points to subtle differences in the use of these positive aspects of simultaneous speech. The key difference between the two is that overlaps do not constitute attempts to take the conversational floor or a lead in discussion, and may therefore be perceived as less dominating than interruption.

In the task discussion, majority group women used proportionately fewer positive interruption and more negative interruption in majority-minority pairs than they did in all-majority pairs. This suggests majority women were less inclined to facilitate the discussion with a minority (outgroup) partner than with a majority (ingroup) partner. The use of interruptions by minority women shows the opposite pattern; minority women used more positive and fewer negative interruptions in intergroup, compared with intragroup, interaction.

Taken together the present findings do not support the prediction that ethnicity effects would be less marked in task discussion compared with introductory talk. Rather, the different conversational contexts appear to trigger qualitatively different conversation dynamics. Although not consistent with the fourth hypothesis which predicted less marked gender effects in task discussion, the current findings underscore the importance of the influence conversational context in adults' conversations (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). The key contribution of the present results is to indicate that activity context does not merely change the magnitude of ethnicity effects, but changes the way in which ethnicity is instituted in interaction by conversation participants.

Focussing on a task does not appear to reduce the negative aspects of conversation dynamics in cross ethnic interaction. The present findings are intriguing because they suggest that positive effects of contact during task interaction may stem from a decidedly one-sided process. However, the present study explored only women's conversations, only two types of discussion, and only use of simultaneous speech acts. Further studies assessing links to attitude change can help to identify how the specifics of interaction they may contribute to more positive ethnic group attitudes and relationships.

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