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GENDER AND INTERRUPTIONS

Individual Infraction or Violation of the Social Order?

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Does gender affect reactions to violations of expected conversational behavior? This study examined ratings of interactants involved in interruptive exchanges. Audio recordings of two-person interactions that varied in gender composition but were identical in script features were rated by judges on several scales, including the degree to which participants were seen to be argumentative, rude, and assertive. Results showed that interrupter sex did not affect ratings even though interrupters were evaluated differently than those they interrupted. However, gender composition significantly affected two of three derived factors, disrespect and assertiveness, such that when a woman interrupted a man, the pair was rated significantly more disrespectful and assertive than either of the two same-sex pairs. Conversational interruptions that occur among mixed-sex pairs are often interpreted not merely as individual infractions but as an assault on the established power relations.

All's fair in love and war, but apparently, in conversations, not everything is considered fair play. Fairness in conversations entails following a number of unwritten rules such as not starting to talk when someone else is already speaking. Interruptions apparently constitute violations of both the letter and the spirit of the conversational contract. Interruptions do more, however, than break a social rule. Their occurrence not only affects our assessment of the individuals involved but also confirms or contravenes established social statuses. The purpose of the present study was to examine the validity of these suppositions.

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Conversational Interruptions

Although an interruption can be defined as happening when the talk of one person is intruded upon by the talk of another person, additional stipulations have been suggested. First, the sheer presence of speech overlap does not itself constitute sufficient grounds for calling something an interruption; active listening can lead to simultaneous talk without being interruptive (Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Murray, 1985; Tannen, 1983; West & Zimmerman, 1983). Also, overlapping talk may not be interruptive if it takes place at a likely speaker completion point or if an inappropriate amount of speech has already been taken up by the first speaker (Gallois & Markel, 1975; Murray, 1985). However, it may be regarded as interruptive if the first speaker is unable to finish making a point, the topic is cut short by the intrusion, and/or the interruption is a statement rather than a question (Covelli & Murray, 1981; LaFrance & Carmen, 1980; Murray, 1985). Consequently, intrusions by a second speaker can differ in degree of severity (Murray, 1985).

In the present study, the aim was to examine reactions to overlapping speech toward the severe end of the spectrum. Because many conversation researchers regard such violations as attempts to exercise power over other participants by controlling who has access to floor time (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1983), the aim in the present study was to determine whether interruptions in female–male pairs, where power is thought to be unevenly distributed, elicit different appraisals than do those in same-sex combinations, more typically associated with relatively equal power.

Distribution of Interruptions

Although interruptions are said to represent a breakdown of the normal turn-taking aspect of conversations (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), findings indicate that they occur frequently and that they are unevenly distributed across interpersonal contexts. For example, West and Zimmerman observed that interruptions occur more in mixed-sex encounters than in same-sex interactions and that men initiate more of the interruptions (West, 1979, 1982, 1984; West & Zimmerman, 1977, 1983; Zimmerman & West, 1975). This pattern of cross-sex asymmetry has been replicated with adults (Argyle, Lalljee, & Cook, 1968; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977; Natale, Entin, & Jaffe, 1979; Willis & Williams, 1976) and with children (Esposito, 1979), although not all studies find clear-cut gender patterns on interruption frequency (Dindia, 1987; Kennedy & Camden, 1983; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989).

Other research has focused more directly on the idea that interruptions are associated with dominance. With respect to individual differences, Roger and Schumacher (1983) found that people that scored high on the dominance scale of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule interrupted more than those that scored low, and Drass (1986) found that the more

masculine a person's gender identity (regardless of sex), the more they interrupted their interactional partner. Within ongoing relationships, findings show that the more dominant member (measured as higher decision-making influence) interrupts more than the less influential member (Kollock et al., 1985). Comparable patterns have been found in other status discrepant relationships. For example, parents interrupt their children more than the reverse in parent–child encounters (West & Zimmerman, 1977), "teachers" interrupt their "students" more than the reverse (Leffler, Gillespie, & Conaty, 1982), and physicians tend to interrupt their patients more than the reverse (West, 1984). The only exception to this last pattern occurred when the interaction involved a female doctor and a male patient, in which case the patient interrupted the physician. In sum, conversational interruptions may not only reflect unequal power but some have argued that the act may help to legitimize it (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). The higher power person is freer to interrupt a person possessing lower power and to expect that they themselves will not be interrupted by the lower power person. Thus, reactions to interruptions should vary as a function of assumed power such that persons who interrupt will receive more criticism if the person they interrupt is of higher status.

Given that gender constitutes a diffuse status characteristic (Leffler et al., 1982), we predicted that female and male interrupters would be evaluated negatively but comparably when their partner was the same sex but that they would be evaluated differently when the partner was of the other sex. The determining factor should not be the sex of the interrupter per se but rather the *gender composition* of the interacting pair. If the act of interruption is the critical element regardless of the relational context, then any transgressor should receive the same criticism as any other transgressor. By extension, female transgressors might be evaluated more negatively because their transgression, by virtue of relative infrequency and/or assumed better manners, would be more noteworthy. But if mixed-sex interactions implicate power-discrepant relationships in contrast to same-sex relationships, then there should be more criticism in mixed-sex than in same-sex situations, especially when a woman interrupts a man. Specifically, I predicted that an interaction in which a woman interrupts a man would receive harsher assessments than in any other dyadic combination.

Other studies support the idea that mixed-sex encounters precipitate concerns about power. Knowing only the sex of a person, people tend to assume that the man is of higher status (Eagly & Wood, 1982). Observers may therefore report more violations when a woman interrupts a man than when a man interrupts a woman. The former suggests a form of insubordination, but the latter suggests mere assertiveness.

The possibility that interruptions might be construed as assertiveness rather than insubordination in some contexts has been explored. For example, Bell (1985) noted that interruptions can occur when people are being active and assertive rather than disruptive, and LaFrance and Carmen (1980) noted that androgynous people of both sexes interrupt more than do

sex-typed females. Consequently, the present study included measures of rudeness and assertiveness by both participants involved in interruptive exchanges. The study was designed to address three primary hypotheses: (a) that interrupters will be judged more negatively than their noninterruptive partners; (b) that female and male interrupters will be perceived similarly in same-sex pairs but that mixed-sex pairs in which a woman interrupts a man will be perceived more negatively than other pairings; and (c) interruptions will elicit different kinds of reactions from judges depending on gender composition.

METHOD

Overview

The study consisted of an experiment in which participants were presented with an audio recording of a brief two-person interaction between acquaintances and were asked to rate both participants on several scales. The interaction was scripted so that one person interrupted the other but was not herself or himself interrupted by the partner. Female and male raters heard only one gender combination version and rated both the interrupter and the interruptee on the same set of rating scales.

Participants

The participants were 151 Caucasian college undergraduates (84 women and 67 men). Participants were recruited from undergraduate classrooms and were tested in mixed-sex groups by a female experimenter.

Stimulus Materials

Four audio-tape recordings were constructed to be the same in content and in timing of conversational turns. Student actors were recruited and instructed to rehearse the script exactly as written, including the precise onset and duration of interruptions. The context entailed two acquaintances encountering each other on campus and having a brief conversation about assignments and vacation plans. Pretesting with the script showed that the content of the conversation was as likely to occur in interactions involving women as it was in those involving men.

To assure comparability of the stimulus tapes, particularly with respect to the onset, duration, and extent of speech overlap, several taped versions of each of the four sex composition types were recorded and submitted to a panel of six coders. The coders were given typed transcripts of the interactions and were asked to listen to each tape as many times as necessary to be able to note any script deviation and to specify exactly on the accompanying transcript where each instance of overlapping speech began and ended. They were also asked to record the duration for each interaction and to rate

the voice loudness level for each member of the dyad. The coders' evaluations were used to select four identical tapes, one tape for each sex composition type.

Each tape contained two instances of speech overlap constructed to reflect relatively high interruption severity. The interruptions were timed to be "deep interruptions" according to West and Zimmerman's (1983) definition; they resulted in a topic shift; the first one occurred early in the encounter before the first speaker had much of a chance to make a point and the second occurred approximately two-thirds of the way through the 45-s interaction; and they were asymmetrical in that in the exchange only one of the interactants did the interrupting.

Pilot Studies

In an initial study, targets were given names to assist judges in making their ratings. After hearing the tape, judges were asked to indicate how many times each interactant had interrupted the other. Analyses of these initial results indicated that among the same-sex interactions, only 40% of participants correctly identified both interactants' behavior (namely that a particular named person had interrupted the other twice but had herself or himself not been interrupted). Identification of participants' name for the mixed-sex interactions was above 90% and there were no significant differences in interruption accuracy between the two mixed-sex pairs. The actual number of interruptions was the same in all four pairs.

To clearly differentiate interactants, especially in same-sex pairs, photographs were taken to accompany the tapes. In all cases, the pictured targets were in the same postures and in the same outdoor campus setting. In addition, each audio-taped sex-composition arrangement had two different photographed pairs randomly presented to deal with the possible impact of differences in targets' physical appearance. Finally, the female and male photographed targets appeared in both the same-sex and other-sex pictures.

A second pilot study was done to check whether the addition of accompanying photographs increased the correct identification of speakers' names and conversational behaviors. With respect to the same-sex pairs, results showed that 80% of judges were accurate in enumerating the number of interruptions that occurred and which interactant was the instigator in each case. There were no significant differences as a function of dyad type.

Dependent Measures

In the main study, participants rated both parties in the conversation on eleven 7-point bipolar scales. The particular items were selected from those terms spontaneously mentioned in pretesting in response to a transcript of

the interruptive interchange. The anchor points of 11 scales were as follows: indifferent–caring, rational–irrational, strong–weak, agreeable–argumentative, irritable–pleasant, assertive–passive, rude–polite, submissive–dominant, cooperative–competitive, understanding–overbearing, concerned-with-self versus concerned-with-other.

Procedure

The participants in the main study were tested in groups of 6–8 people. Each individual was given a booklet that described the purpose of the study, namely that we were interested in the nature of everyday conversational interchanges and that we were looking for their first impressions of each of several encounters. The second page of the booklet asked them to answer a number of demographic questions, such as their sex, academic year, and major.

The third page described the fact that they were about to hear a recording of a conversation of two people who were pictured below. Participants were further instructed that the first person they would hear was the person pictured on the left and what that person's name was. They were also provided with the other's name.

Finally, participants were told that after hearing the tape they would be asked to rate both people on the same set of scales, but because the order of rating both persons might not follow the order in which they heard the people speak, they were cautioned to pay close attention to whether they were rating the first person who spoke or the second who spoke. The actual order was counterbalanced across conditions with half of the participants rating the first person first and the other half rating the second person who spoke first. In all cases, the second person who spoke did the interrupting. The target designations were included in bold type at the top of each target person's rating scales.

The 45-s tape was then played once and participants were asked first to identify each target person by name and then to rate that target person. Following the rating scales, participants were asked to indicate the number of times each of the target persons had interrupted the other and then were asked a number of open-ended questions seeking their impressions of the participants and ideas about what the study was seeking to find. Following this, participants were debriefed by the experimenter.

RESULTS

Perception of Interruption Frequency

Before analyzing judgments of participants involved in a conversational interruption, the perceived frequency of interruptions engaged in by both members of the dyad was assessed. Two issues are addressed here. First, it

was important to establish that interrupters were perceived to have interrupted their partners more than they were interrupted by them. Second, it was essential to demonstrate that the sex of the interactants did not affect the assessment of interruption frequency. The purpose of the present research was to investigate whether there was differential evaluation of the *same* behavior, not whether the behavior itself was perceived to have occurred with differential frequency.

With respect to the manipulation check, the data clearly showed that participants correctly identified the second speaker as having interrupted more times ($M = 2.38$) than the first $M = 0.42$). Secondly, three-way analyses of variance involving sex of judge, sex of interrupter, and sex of interruptee showed no effects on perceived interruption frequency.

Interruption Effects

The first hypothesis predicted that people who interrupt would be rated differently than their noninterrupting partners. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to analyze the effects of interruption, sex composition, and sex of judge on the 11 rating scales. For the main effect of conversational role, the effect was highly significant, (Wilks Criterion = .2974; $F[1, 141] = 28.14$, $p < .0001$). The effect accounted for a substantial 70% of the overall variance. Interrupters were rated differently than interruptees across the board.

Univariate analyses (Table 1) showed that the interrupter was rated significantly more indifferent, irrational, strong, argumentative, assertive, rude, dominant, competitive, overbearing, and concerned with self than was the interruptee. Although the measure irritable–pleasant was also significant, the effect was in the opposite direction; interruptees were rated more irritable than interrupters, possibly suggesting that participants might have construed the scale anchor point to mean "irritated."

Gender Effects

The more important question centered on the impact of gender on subjects' ratings. Gender was analyzed at both the individual and dyadic level of analysis. At the individual level, the question is whether female interrupters and interruptees are perceived differently than male interrupters and interruptees. To address this question, a repeated measures MANOVA was performed to analyze the effects of sex of interrupter, sex of interruptee, and sex of judge on the 11 rating scales. Results showed that none of the three factors were statistically significant. Women who interrupted were rated similar to men who interrupted (Wilks Criterion = .9453; $F[11, 141]$, $p > .75$), and women who were interrupted were rated no differently from men who were interrupted. Nevertheless, results on the interaction between interrupter sex and interruptee sex showed that gender did impact

Table 1

Ratings for behavioral attributes of interrupters and interruptees

	Interruptor		*Interruptee*		
Scale	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p*
Indifferent	5.75	1.36	5.30	1.42	.0001
Irrational	4.23	1.28	2.49	1.32	.0001
Strong	4.55	1.54	4.13	1.60	.001
Argumentative	4.14	1.25	2.67	1.36	.0001
Irritable	4.71	1.47	5.21	1.30	.0002
Assertive	5.11	1.72	4.75	1.69	.01
Rude	6.13	1.37	5.61	1.42	.0001
Dominant	5.42	1.38	2.68	1.47	.0001
Competitive	5.00	1.40	2.60	1.28	.0001
Overbearing	5.41	1.33	2.78	1.34	.0001
Concerned/Self	5.94	1.53	4.76	1.73	.0001

Note: Both parties were rated on a 7-point bipolar scale.

ratings. Univariate analyses for the two-way interaction between sex of interrupter and sex of interruptee were significant on how rude ($F[1, 141] = 5.75$, $p < .02$) and how irritable ($F[1, 141] = 4.90$, $p < .03$) the interrupter was perceived. There was also a trend on how concerned with self the interrupter was perceived ($F[1, 141] = 2.40$, $p < .10$). The interaction in all cases was due to the fact that a woman who interrupted a man was perceived to be more rude, more irritable, and more concerned with self than were the other interrupters (Table 2).

Gender was also analyzed at the dyadic level by conducting 2 × 2 × 4 MANOVAs with sex of judge, conversational role (interrupter, interruptee), and sex composition (male–male, male–female, female–female, and female–male) as the three factors (the second person listed was always the person doing the interrupting). Judges' ratings, averaged across both interrupter and interruptee, revealed a marginally significant main effect for sex composition (Wilks Criterion = .7157; $F[3, 143] = 1.43$, $p < .06$) that accounted for approximately 16% of the total variance and paralleled the Sex of Interrupter × Sex of Interruptee interaction effect described above. Interactions in which a woman interrupted a man tended to receive more "negative" ratings than any other dyad type (Table 3).

Univariate analyses were significant for five scales such that the pair made up of a male being interrupted by a female (M–Ftor) received more unfavorable ratings than any of the other pairs. Specifically, when the woman interrupted the man, there was a trend for the dyad to be rated as more indifferent ($F[3, 143] = 2.39$, $p < .07$), more irritable ($F[3, 143] = 2.39$, $p < .07$), more rude ($F[3, 143] = 2.39$, $p < .07$), and more assertive ($F[3, 143] = 2.17$, $p < .09$) than either of the two same-sex pairs. Also, when the woman interrupted the man, the dyad was rated significantly

Table 2

Ratings of interrupters and interruptees in Dyads as a function of sex

	Dyad Type[a]			
Scale	*F-Ftor*	*M-Ftor*	*M-Mtor*	*F-Mtor*
Rude				
Interrupter	5.96	6.72	5.93	6.42
Interruptee	5.29	6.12	5.34	5.89
Irritable				
Interrupter	5.04	5.52	4.67	4.58
Interruptee	4.44	5.40	4.67	4.58
Concerned/Self				
Interrupter	4.67	6.60	5.49	6.05
Interruptee	4.66	5.24	4.44	5.36

Note: Both parties were rated on 7-point bipolar scales.
[a] The first letter (either F or M) indicates the sex of the person who was interrupted and the second part (Ftor or Mtor) indicates the sex of the person who did the interrupting; e.g., M-Ftor indicates a pair made up of a male who was interrupted by a female.

Table 3

Mean ratings of dyads of interrupters and interruptees as a function of sex composition

	Dyad Type[a]			
Scale	*F-Ftor*	*M-Ftor*	*F-Mtor*	*M-Mtor*
Indifferent	5.43[b]	5.94[a]	5.66[ab]	5.39[b]
Irrational	3.17	3.44	3.32	3.49
Strong	4.18	4.62	4.63	4.27
Argumentative	3.52	3.30	3.13	3.44
Irritable	4.74[b]	5.46[a]	4.82[b]	4.96[b]
Assertive	4.74[b]	5.44[a]	5.18[ab]	4.78[b]
Rude	5.62[b]	6.42[a]	6.18[a]	5.74[b]
Dominant	4.00	3.86	4.08	4.16
Competitive	3.90	3.92	3.61	3.73
Overbearing	4.08	4.18	4.13	4.06
Concern/self	5.40[b]	5.92[a]	5.71[ab]	4.97[c]

Note: Ratings were based on 7-point bipolar scales. Means with different subscripts differ significantly.
[a] The first letter (either F or M) indicates the sex of the person who was interrupted and the second part (Ftor or Mtor) indicates the sex of the person who did the interrupting; e.g., M-Ftor indicates a pair made up of a male who was interrupted by a female.

more self-concerned ($F[3, 143] = 3.39$, $p < .02$). On the rating of irritable, the male interruptee–female interrupter also had significantly more negative scores than all other pairs, including the other mixed-sex dyad.

Effect of Judges' Sex

With respect to rater sex, the MANOVA revealed no main effect. Nevertheless, judges' sex combined with conversational role to produce a significant interaction (Wilks Criterion = .8385, $F[1, 141] = 2.29$, $p < .01$), which was due to female judges making stronger distinctions between interrupters and interruptees than did male judges. Specifically, on the irritable–pleasant scale women rated the interruptee as showing more irritation.

Finally, although there was a significant three-way interaction effect among conversational role, sex composition type, and judges' sex (Wilks Criterion = .6947, $F[3, 141] = 1.54$, $p < .03$), only the caring–indifferent scale reached significance on the univariate analyses. In same-sex male pairs, male judges saw the male interruptee as the least indifferent ($M = 4.74$), whereas female judges saw him as the most indifferent ($M = 5.47$). This difference was mirrored in ratings of the male interrupter in F–M pairs, where male judges rated him as showing relatively low indifference ($M = 5.57$) and female judges rated him higher on indifference than any other interrupter ($M = 6.43$).

Meaning of Interruptions

One aim of the present study was to explore the possibility that conversational interruptions can have different social meanings, such as power or active engagement. To explore this idea, factor analysis was done on a total of 302 ratings, the result of 151 participants rating both the interrupter and interruptee on all 11 items. Although the principal components analysis revealed two factors with eigenvalues in excess of unity, two considerations suggested the wisdom of adding a third factor: the visual scree test suggested a basis for adding another factor (eigenvalue of .65) (Cattell, 1965) and there were theoretical reasons for including a third factor. The content of this factor corroborated earlier suggestions that interruptions sometimes represent inappropriate demands for the floor but they can also be the result of participants being merely actively involved in the conversation. The percentage of variance accounted for by the three factors was 57%.

Table 4 presents the factor structure after varimax orthogonal rotation. Orthogonal rotation was employed because of this technique's relative simplicity and practicality and because of the clarity of the solutions it produces (Nunnally, 1978). Three distinguishable and well-defined factors were extracted. As indicated by squared multiple correlations, the three factors are internally consistent and well-defined by the variables.

Table 4

Varimax-rotated factor analysis of rating scales across interrupters and interruptees

	Factor		
Scale	*Confrontation*	*Disrespect*	*Assertiveness*
Competitive	.89*	.09	.06
Overbearing	.88*	.05	.17
Dominant	.82*	.09	−.01
Argumentative	.67*	−.04	−.03
Irrational	.64*	−.02	.05
Indifferent	.06	.82*	.04
Rude	.06	.81*	.19
Concern/Self	.20	.74*	.09
Irritable	−.19	.51*	.11
Assertive	.04	.30	.62*
Strong	.06	.04	.60*
Variance accounted for	29%	20%	8%

The first factor, Confrontation, includes five items: competitive, overbearing, dominant, argumentative, and irrational. The second factor, Disrespect, consists of four items: indifferent, rude, concerned with self, and irritable. In contrast to confrontation, these disrespect items attest to another quality possessed by interruptions, namely that of disregard for the other speaker. The essential difference between confrontation and disrespect lies in how judges perceive interrupters to be treating the person they interrupted. In the first case, overt confrontation is the key dynamic—the interrupter is in a contest of sorts and conversationally overpowers the other. In the second case, covert dismissal is the watchword—the partner's contribution is given little significance and is dismissed as unimportant. The final factor, Assertiveness, consists of two items: assertive and strong. This factor shows that interrupters can be seen as actively involved in the conversation.

This factor matrix supports the idea that reactions to conversational interruptions are potentially multidimensional. The confrontational factor highlights the combative aspect of some interruptions. In argumentative or competitive situations, top priority goes to shutting down the other so that one can make one's own point. The second factor, termed disrespect, actually is closer to the notion of a power display. By interrupting one's partner, one is, in effect, saying that the partner's presence or input is not equal to one's own and hence can be overlooked and overridden. In the interpersonal realm, power is manifest more often as a subtle reminder of the other's lesser worth than in the form of conspicuous dominance over the other (Henley, 1977). Thus in the present data, dominance has more in

Table 5

Means on each factor for dyads of interruptors and interruptees as a function of sex composition

	Dyad Type[a]			
Factor	*F-F*	*F-M*	*M-F*	*M-M*
Confrontation	3.73	3.65	3.74	3.77
Disrespect	5.30[b]	5.59[ab]	5.94[a]	5.27[b]
Assertiveness	4.46[b]	4.91[ab]	5.03[a]	4.52[b]

Note: Means with different subscripts differ significantly.
[a] F = female; M = male.

common with aggressiveness than with disdain, accounting for its loading on the confrontation factor rather than on the disrespect factor. The third factor of assertiveness describes people who let their presence be known in whatever conversation they happen to be engaged.

Next, the three factors were used as dependent measures that resulted in the expected main effect for conversational role; interrupters received higher scores than did interruptees on all three factor scores. Interrupters were seen as more confrontational (M = 4.84 vs. 2.64), more disrespectful (M = 5.63 vs. 5.02), and more assertive (M = 4.83 vs. 4.44) than interruptees. With regard to the main effect of sex composition, results yielded significance for both disrespect ($F[3, 143] = 16.62$, $p < .0001$) and assertiveness ($F[3, 143] = 15.00$, $p < .001$). The dyad made up of a female interrupting a male scored higher on disrespect and assertiveness than did either of the two same-sex pairs (Table 5).

DISCUSSION

The results from this study demonstrate that people who interrupt others in casual conversation evoke scrutiny from observers. As hypothesized, interrupters were rated differently from the people they interrupted. Specifically, they were seen to be more confrontational, more disrespectful, and more assertive than the people they interrupted. Although this result was expected on the basis of previous theorizing, there have been few previous attempts to directly test the effects of interruptions in an experimental context (Robinson & Reis, 1989).

The comparison in the present study involved contrasting judgments of interrupters with those of the people they interrupted. Another possible contrast would be between interrupters and people who did not interrupt nor were interrupted by others. Nonetheless, the results on this particular comparison are informative and relevant. The *asymmetrical* distribution of interruptions within an interaction, such as was created here, has social significance. Future research should include comparisons with interactions

in which no interruptions occurred and with interactions in which both parties interrupted each other about the same number of times, resulting in a symmetrical pattern of interruptions.

Results from the factor analysis help to clarify the meaning of interruptions; they can be variously interpreted as confrontational or disrespectful or assertive. In confrontational situations, the interrupter is perceived to be engaged in conversational battle of a sort with the cointeractant. In assertive situations, the interrupter is seen to be merely actively involved in the conversation. In both cases, the interactants appear to be on equal footing. In contrast, interruptions can also indicate that the interrupter regards the partner as less worthy. Thus, disrespect rather than confrontation manifests the workings of power in interpersonal encounters. When interactants are equal, the interrupter is seen as confrontational or conversationally absorbed (Aries, 1987); when the partners are unequal, the interrupter is viewed as showing disrespect. Interruptions by the higher status person confirm the power differential; those by the lower power person connote insult.

Conversational interruptions have the potential to reflect several dimensions, the choice of which is likely influenced by such factors as the status of the people involved, the severity of the interruption, the context for the interaction, and the cultural affiliations of the participants. These results suggest that assessments of rudeness (a component of disrespect) are more likely to occur when infractions are committed by participants who possess less power.

Gender composition clearly affects which assessment accrues to interruptive behavior. Specifically, when encounters involved interactions between women and men, it appears that judges implicitly construe them as status-marked encounters. Although the interrupter in the same-sex pairs is castigated, these pairs do not differ from each other on any dimension, which suggests that it is the act of interrupting that is salient in these contexts rather than the participants' gender. Moreover, the mixed-sex pairs do not differ from the same-sex pairs on a measure of confrontation, indicating that the critical element is what the interrupter did, not to whom they did it. However, when an interruption occurs in a mixed-sex encounter, then the relationship between the interactants becomes salient, and a crucial feature is the power differential between the participants. When a woman interrupts a man, she has broken more than a conversational rule; she has impugned an accepted social prescript concerning appropriate behavior by those possessing less power. Interruptions in this context connote impertinence rather than contentiousness.

Interruptive conversations have been described as a laboratory in which to study the uneven application of normative standards (Orcutt & Harvey, 1985). The present results indicate that different standards for interruptions are based less on individual actions than on partner status. Female interrupters were not evaluated differently than male interrupters. Rather, judges considered which sex was interrupting which other sex in making

their judgments. Dyads made up of a female interrupting a male were rated as showing significantly more disrespect than both same-sex pairs. Although this dyad type did not differ significantly from the other mixed-sex dyad on disrespect, a power explanation appears tenable. If the focus was on the perpetuator regardless of partner status, then female interrupters should have been rated differently than male interrupters (which they were not). These data are compatible with another study that also found no significant differences between male and female interrupters on sociability, traditionality, and attractiveness (Robinson & Reis, 1989). Moreover, if power were not implicated but standards regarding rules for civil conversations were, sex composition should have also affected scores on confrontation (which it did not).

Judges may bring different benchmarks to bear in evaluating mixed-sex encounters as opposed to same-sex exchanges, regardless of who is doing the interrupting. Infractions are possibly more noticeable in interactions between women and men. On both disrespect and assertiveness, the two mixed-sex pairs got higher ratings than both same-sex pairs but did not differ significantly from each other. Nevertheless, the individual ratings within the pairs show that the female interrupter was rated as showing more disrespect ($M = 6.27$) than the male interrupter ($M = 5.43$) when each interrupted the cross-sex partner. However on assertiveness, the male partner ($M = 5.24$) was rated somewhat higher than his female counterpart ($M = 5.20$). Thus, power differences seem to account for the gender-composition results. Because interruptions are a privilege granted to those with legitimate power (Kollock et al., 1985), their use by someone without that acknowledged power signals inappropriate action.

Observer ratings did not themselves vary by sex. Female and male raters concurred in judging the parties involved in an interruptive exchange and in their assessments of the role of gender at the individual and dyadic level. Neither sex criticized female interrupters more than male interrupters, but both sexes agreed that there is something amiss about a situation in which a woman interrupts a man. What is amiss is that in so doing she has not only violated a conversational rule but, more importantly, she has contradicted a more basic social rule about what lower power people should and should not do in the company of the more powerful.

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