Dialogues of Discord: Examining Gendered Conflict Talk among Adolescents in Television Drama

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Abstract: Conflict, which is ubiquitous in social interactions, can either strengthen or undermine interpersonal relationships. This study explores the gender differences in conflict talk as depicted in the American sitcom—*Modern Family*. The findings indicate that male adolescents are more likely to engage in intense arguments. They tend to assert their viewpoints in same-sex conflict talk, with frequent use of insults, swearing, or even physical aggression. Adolescent females use more behavioral and linguistic strategies to mitigate the tension before it escalates into confrontations. On the other hand, contrary to the traditional belief that females tend to avoid conflict, the investigation of mixed-sex conflict talk reveals that they firmly defend their positions by aligning themselves with others and using directives or sarcasm. The study is expected to deepen the understanding of conflict regulation in peer interactions through the lens of gender disparities.

1. Introduction

Even the most intimate relationships may find themselves entangled in conflict talk at times. Although disputes and arguments are often perceived as disruptive and detrimental to relationships, prior studies have underscored their profound importance. Previous research has directed sustained attention to the phenomenon of conflict. Notably, in recent decades, research in conflict studies has shifted towards a crucial yet neglected dimension -- the role of gender in conflict talk. For instance, Sedgewick et al. [1] investigate gender differences in conflict management of autistic girls and boys. Rahim and Katz [2] examine the effect of gender on the use of conflict-management strategies in the workplace. Recent decades have witnessed a growth in television studies. Beyond the role in providing entertainment, Television drama serves to construct identities in communication [3]. TV dialogue has emerged as a focal point, especially in the field of linguistics. Linguistic analysis of TV dialogue provides valuable insights into the relationship between TV series and society, particularly in terms of the representation of societal norms and dominant ideologies [4]. It can also help to understand the portrayal of gender roles [5]. Hence, analyzing fictional dialogues facilitates the understanding of gender in relation to language and society.

The present study aims to delve into gendered conflict talk in television drama by adopting conversation analysis. Drawing on *Modern Family* season 6 (2014), this paper explores the way male and female adolescents differ in their language use in conflict context. *Modern Family* is a sitcom

that depicts the daily life of three American families. Since the drama premiered in 2014, it has received high ratings and positive reviews. The present study has collected 20 instances of conflict talk among the four adolescent characters from the 24-episode TV drama. The recurrent conflicts in their interactions constitute a valuable source of data.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conflict and Conflict talk

Wall Jr and Callister [6] defines conflict as "a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another". In general, conflict is mutual opposition resulting from incompatibility in desires, goals, and behaviors [7]. An argument is initiated only when two or more individuals support opposing stances and each party attempts to maintain or advance their positions by argument, persuasion, bargain, etc. [8]. Furthermore, the expression of conflict can be either verbal or non-verbal (i.e., silence) [9]. It not only involves physical aggression such as the act of shoving and fistfights, but also verbal dispute, teasing and debates [10]. Various terms have been used to refer to conflict discourse, for example, adversative episode [11], disagreement [12], oppositional argument [13] and dispute [14]. This paper adopts the term "conflict talk" proposed by Grimshaw [15] to refer to verbal communication related to different opinions such as disagreement, quarrels, disputes and so on.

Existing literature also sheds lights on sequential organization and the linguistic resources in conflict. Goodwin [16] systematically explores the basic structure and procedures of argument from two aspects: (a) the construction of opposition -- the way children use various strategies to oppose the prior speaker and legitimize their position, such as delays, hedges, repetition, replacement and intonation structure; (b) format tying -- the ways in which opposition moves are related to the specific structure of the talk that they oppose. For instance, children construct their opposition by making use of the semantic or syntactic structure of the prior utterance and generating counterviews based on the existing structure. Following this, Brenneis and Lein [17] state that repetition, escalation and inversion are common sequential measures to negate or refute the previous utterance.

2.2 Gender and Conflict Talk

Within the complex landscape of conflict studies, gender emerges as a focal point within academic investigations. It is discovered that females were more concerned about maintaining interpersonal harmony during conflict [18]. Given that girls value relationships and equality, they prefer negotiation and reasoning [19]. In cross-sex arguments, women employ more compromise as solutions and are more likely to lose when disputing with men [20]. The tendency to avoid face-to-face affronts among girls is manifested in the way they criticize. Girls express their criticism behind the backs of the talked-about person, but boys make critiques directly in the presence of the person [21]. In contrast, boys dispute over power and hierarchy [22]. However, Eder [23] contends that girls are more competent at resolving conflict, as evident in their various strategies to counter opposing accusations or insults. In addition, Goodwin [16] notes that females are just as skilled at debating as boys are, and they frequently win conversations in cross-sex conflicts. In marital relationships, women are more likely to start arguments, stick with it, recall details, and prevail in conflict discussions while husbands often retreat and withdraw [24].

Meanwhile, there is a scarcity of literature that directs attention towards fictional conflict talk. For instance, Li et al. [25] examine how characters of different genders and institutional positions at the workplace use linguistic devices to negotiate power during conflict talk. The results show that both female and male characters display noticeable deviations from stereotypical gender-specific linguistic

styles. In fact, the representation of gender differences in television drama plays a crucial role in shaping the attitude and perceptions of a wide range of audience. Although prior studies have yielded valuable insights into gender differences in conflict discourses, diverged viewpoints persist, making it challenging to arrive at consensus on this issue.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection and transcription

Data comes from Modern Family Season 6, a popular American sitcom premiering in 2014. Although the data in this study are not spontaneous real-life conversations, it is a legitimate resource for the examination of language use in conflict talk. The drama portrays the daily life of three American families. There are four adolescents, two girls, Haley and Alex, and two boys, Luke and Manny. Their interactions offer a lens through which to analyze the dynamics and nuances in gendered conflict talk. The current study has collected 20 instances of conflict talk, either same-sex or mixed-sex, from the 24-episode TV drama. Table 1 provides an overview about how often conflict talk occurs in adolescent interactions. The total number of conversations pertains to the scenarios that involve these four adolescents, including exchanges among themselves as well as interactions with their peers.

Table 1: Frequency of conflict talk among male and female adolescents

Category		Conflict talk	The total number of conversations	Percent of conflict talk
Same-sex	All-female	4	12	33.33%
	All-male	4	9	44.44%
Mixed-sex		12	34	35%

The table indicates that males are more likely to provoke conflict talk with other males while mixed-sex conversation is also comparatively frequently found in television drama. The dialogues are transcribed using the transcription system developed by Jefferson [26], as illustrated in the appendix.

3.2 Conversation Analysis Approach

Conversation analysis was developed by sociologists Sacks et al. [27] and has been applied to the study of talk-in-interaction. By using the transcripts of recordings of various types of daily and institutional talk, the approach examines the turn-by-turn structure of discourse and embodied behavior in interaction [28]. According to Sacks et al. [27], a current speaker may select the next speaker using questions, address terms and eye contact, and a non-speaking participant of the talk will receive the signal and take the next turn to speak. But if the current speaker has not selected the next speaker, the non-speaking party may self-select to be the next speaker. If these two options do not apply, the current speaker has the option to continue talking. It is through this cooperative exchange that conversations proceed smoothly. Coates [29] identifies two irregular turn-taking patterns -- "overlap" and "interruption" -- as an attempt to dominate interaction. Besides, adjacency pair necessitates a two-turn sequence, with the second turn closely related to the prior turn. For instance, a summon is often followed by an answer, a greeting by a return greeting, a question by an answer, an invitation by acceptance/decline, a compliment by response, a request by grant/refusal, an accusation by denial/accept [30].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Distinctive patterns in same-sex conflict talk

The following excerpt is an argument between two females, Haley and Alex. They are taken to an old theater by their father, but they are not interested in the tour. So they both intend to leave.

Excerpt 1:

1	Haley:	Okay, so that's at least an hour (.) There's a mall across the street=
2	Alex:	=I'm calling a car and going to school (.) Caltech needs my roommate selection by
3		((Haley takes her phone away)) (1.0)
4	Alex:	hhh. What's your problem?
5	Haley:	What's yours hhh? You're just gonna leave without telling Da::d?
6	Alex:	You were just about to take me to a mall.
7	Haley:	okay, >if you< can't see the difference... ((Haley leaves to find a seat))
8		(1.0)
9	Alex:	Look, ↑I'm sorry I've got better things to do hhh than go sho::p or sit in some creepy
10		old movie theater >where we used to< watch carto::ons. =
11	Haley:	=I get it. You're beyond all of us now(.) Go pick out your playmates at nerd academy.
12		(1.0)
13		((Walk off to sit down))
14		hhh. Fine. I'll just pick out my roommate here then. Sorry I'm so ex:cited about
15	Alex:	college.
16		hhh. Apology not accepted.
17	Haley:	I wasn't actually apologizing, so... ((shrug))
18	Alex:	

Conflict arises when Haley invites Alex to go shopping, but Alex declines, causing a deviation from the expected sequence. Haley takes Alex's phone, leading to an argument where Alex defends her actions, implying superiority. Haley aligns with their dad, isolating Alex. Despite attempts to compromise, the standoff continues. Alex apologizes, emphasizing her college admission, but Haley remains resistant, and both maintain their views. Female adolescents in arguments tend to align with others to isolate the opposing side. This conforms to Goodwin's [21] discovery, which suggests that girls develop their argument in terms of group needs and situational requirements instead of personal power or desire when an argument arises. One tries to gain the upper hand in the argument by displaying her superiority over the other, which is an offensive behavior in the girls' world for it violates the solidarity and equality among peers.

The following excerpt is an argument between two males, Luke and Manny. The argument begins as Manny prevents Luke from telling a little girl where babies come from.

Excerpt 2:

1	Manny:	Luke, stop. (0.7) She's not hearing this from you.
2	Luke:	Why not?
3	Manny:	You're too immature.
4		((Luke stands up))
5	Luke:	I'm not immature.=butt face. (0.6) And how would you say it?
6	Manny:	Well, I would say they meet through friends, and after dating for an appropriate
7		amount of time, he takes her to a romantic French bistro. Then maybe, [if the mood
8		is right.]
9	Luke:	[may be? I just bought] you a big French dinner.=
10	Manny:	=That was your choice. I owe you nothing.
11	Luke:	Your hand was on my knee the whole time. What was I supposed to think?=
12	Manny:	=I was expressing affection, not signing a contract. This date is over.
13	Luke:	Come on, sexy. (0.4) ((Manny shakes his head)) Don't be like that. (0.5) Make a
14		baby with me.
15	Alex:	What is going on here?

The dialogue unfolds when Manny interrupts Luke as he attempts to explain a sensitive topic to a little girl. Luke finds it humiliating when Manny says Luke is too immature for the task. Luke refutes the claim and retaliates by hurling the insult at Manny and asks Manny to present his viewpoints. They justify their views in each turn and attempt to persuade the other. In addition, they take turns the moment or before the prior speaker finishes talking to win the floor to express their own opinions. For example, in line 6 as Manny is depicting an ideal dating procedure in his mind, Luke interrupts and points out the problems in Manny's statement to challenge him. The dispute ends with a third party showing up.

4.2 Mixed-sex conflict talk by adolescents

The following discussions of mixed-sex conflict aim to uncover whether adolescents behave and speak differently compared with their performance in same-sex interaction. The following except is a multi-party argument involving two females and one male.

The conversation begins with Luke flattering Haley and Alex with an intention to take a ride to meet a girl. Haley refuses at once and mocks at his hypocritical compliment. Alex takes the next turn with the consent to drive him, which surprises Haley. At this time, Alex aligns with Luke. However, the alignment is broken when Luke tells them he stops dating Rose. In line 7, Haley selects Luke as the next speaker to her question "what do you mean crazy", but Alex self-selects and speak outs about the discrimination towards women. This immediately wins recognition from Haley. The shared viewpoints bring the females together during the dispute. The alignment is again solidified when Luke says he hasn't broke up with Rose. After justifying why he didn't tell the girl he is with another girl, Luke tries to walk away to end the talk. However, at this moment, Haley expresses her contempt towards Luke. Two females advise him to end the relationship officially by texting her and complimenting the girl, which is rejected by Luke who says that this compliment is hypocritical. In this excerpt, we can find that the alignment among Luke, Alex and Haley undergoes constant changes as the conversation unfolds.

Excerpt 3:

1	Luke:	Hey. One of you pretty ladies wants to take me to meet a girl later?
2	Haley:	You think calling us pretty is gonna get you a ri:de?
3		((Haley frowns and looks at Alex))
4	Alex:	I'll take it. >Let me know when you want to leave.< Besides, I like Rose. I think she's
5		good for you.
6	Luke:	This is a <u>new</u> girl--Sarah. I'm <u>done</u> with Rose. She <u>crazy</u>.
7	Haley:	Ea::sy, >Macklemore.< What do you mean, "crazy" ?
8	Alex:	I'll tell you what he means. <u>Any</u> time a woman challenges a man IN ANY WAY,
9		suddenly, she's crazy. =So, what did she do that was so <u>crazy</u>, Luke, Give you her
10		<u>opinion</u>? =
11	Haley:	=Yeah, or what did she <u>dare</u> to talk about her <u>feelings</u>?
12	Luke:	The <u>wo::rds</u> <u>sound</u> like you get it, but (.) your <u>tone</u> is throwing me.
13	Alex:	Just tell me you said something nice when you broke up with her.
14	Luke:	I haven't broken up with her.
15	H&A:	What?*
16	Luke:	It just seems <u>weird</u> to call someone up and give them <u>bad</u> news. She'll find out
17		somehow.
18		((Luke walks away))
19	Haley:	Ugh. Ugh, when did you become a <u>guy</u>? It's <u>gross</u>.
20	Alex:	You need to <u>stand</u> up and <u>face</u> her.
21	Luke:	In person?
22	Haley:	What are we, 30? Send her a <u>text</u>.
23	Alex:	You need to break it to her gently. <u>First</u>, tell her she's awe::some.=
24	Haley:	=And pretty.
25	Luke:	If she was awesome and pretty, I <u>wouldn't</u> be dumping her.
26	Haley:	Just do it, you pig.
27		((Haley and Alex walk away))

5. Conclusion

The present paper situates the analysis in the gender role in fictional conflict talk. Conflict among male adolescents is more likely to be instigated as viewpoints diverge on issues. Male adolescents desire to win hierarchy and respect by way of competition, either through verbal expression of viewpoint or physical strength. In contrast, conflict among females is more likely to occur once the solidarity and equality are broken. The argument among them is easily instigated if one side speaks or does something that threatens the relationship. Moreover, female adolescents employ more tactics to mitigate or terminate the conflict than male adolescents. In cross-sex interaction, girls tenaciously uphold their opinions when they argue with boys and employ diverse methods to persuade boys to align with their expectations. Unlike most claims that women often avoid conflict, the data in this sitcom show that girls defend their values or beliefs with linguistic strategies of irony, persuasion and alignment.

Although the present paper has facilitated our understanding of gendered differences in adolescents' linguistic behavior in peer interactions, more data can be analyzed to support the generalizations. In addition, both male and female adolescents employ a variety of non-verbal resources to display or defend their position. Hence, future research can undertake a more thorough analysis of paralinguistic features, including volume, speed, facial expressions or gestures, for a more comprehensive understanding.

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Appendix

Transcription system used in this article.

=: equal sign represents immediate latching of successive talk

(0.8): Time in parentheses represents the length of a pause or gap, in tenths of a second

(.): period in parentheses represents a pause or gap that is discernible but less than a tenth of a second.

[overlap]: square brackets marks the onset and end of overlapping talk

//: double obliques mark the onset of overlapping talk in older transcripts

LOUD: Capitals indicate increased volume.

Rea::lly: Colons indicate that the sound just before the colon has been noticeably lengthened

hhh; an or series of h's indicates an out-breath(number of h indicates length)

(()): Double parentheses enclose material that is not part of the talk being transcribed, for example a comment by the transcriber if the talk was spoken in some special way.

>faster<: 'less than' and 'greater than' signs enclose speeded up or compressed talk.

↑: Upward arrow is placed precedes a marked rise in pitch.