

Gender Differences in Conversation Topics, 1922–1990¹

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Gender differences in conversation topics were first systematically studied in 1922 by Henry Moore, who theorized that the gender differences in topic choice he observed in a field observation study would persist over time, as they were manifestations of men's and women's "original natures." In this paper, I report a 1990 replication of Moore's study, in which similar but smaller gender differences in topic choice are found. In order to explore further the apparent trend toward smaller gender differences, reports of quantitative observation studies conducted between 1922 and 1990 are examined. Other explanations besides change over time—such as variations in conversation setting and audience, target populations, and researcher's intentions—may account for the decline in gender differences in topic choice. Social influences are seen more clearly in the discourse about gender differences in conversation than in gender differences in conversation topics themselves.

In 1922, Henry T. Moore walked up and down Broadway in the evening for several weeks, gathering fragments of overheard conversations. His research was motivated by similarities in the psychological test scores of the sexes that he felt ran counter to both "common sense and universal experience" (1922, p. 210). Moore observed that when women conversed with women, the majority of the conversations were about persons of the opposite sex or about

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clothes, buildings, and interior decoration, while when men talked with men, most of the conversations concerned money and business or amusement. Reasoning that contemporary men and women were similar in education and recreational pursuits, Moore ruled out all but one explanation of gender differences in conversation topic: "It is hard to escape the conviction that the original nature here depicted is of two fundamentally different sorts" (1922, p. 214).

Although Haas (1979) has suggested that gender differences in topic choice may well have changed since Moore's day, a systematic examination of trends has not been reported. Despite the considerable attention that gender differences in topic choice have received since 1922, most recent studies do not provide quantitative data about conversations held in natural settings. Rather, they give ethnographic descriptions of conversation topics (Klein, 1965; Harding, 1975; Reiter, 1975), rely on self-reports of topics (Komarovsky, 1967; Haas & Sherman, 1982; Aries & Johnson, 1983; Johnson & Aries, 1983), or study conversations held by groups formed in a controlled setting (Aries, 1976). In this paper, a replication of Moore's study is presented that allows a test of the hypotheses he posed. In addition, I draw on a series of eight replications of Moore's study in order to explore possible trends over time in gender differences in conversation topics, as well as to consider differences due to setting and other factors.

The overall pattern of gender differences in conversation topics that Moore observed appears basically quite stable in subsequent studies, though Haas' (1979) prediction that conversations have changed with the times receives some support. In the studies examined here, women's share of conversations about work and money does seem to have increased since 1922, but this change is confounded with the tendency to use college-educated subjects (such as students and teachers) in recent studies. A second apparent trend—the decline in gender differences for all conversation topics between 1922 and 1948—may actually reflect changes in researchers' attitudes and beliefs about gender difference studies. Indeed, as modern reactions to Moore's "original nature" argument might suggest—and as this paper will argue—the most striking developments in this area since 1922 are found in the *discourse* about gender and conversation, rather than in conversations themselves.

METHODS

Moore's 1922 Study

Moore collected his observation data over nearly a month-long period, noting all conversation fragments that could be overheard while walk-

ing from Thirty-Third to Fifty-Fifth Street on Broadway at about seven-thirty in the evening. He later coded the conversation fragments into the categories: persons of same sex, persons of opposite sex, money and business, amusement, and clothes, buildings, and interior decoration. All but 14.5% of the conversations Moore observed among single-gender groups fit into this set of five categories.

The 1990 University of Michigan Study

Our own field research on conversations at the University of Michigan was conducted by 35 students (8 men and 27 women) in a research methods course between September 12 and September 20, 1990. Two observation times (before and after 3:00 PM) were chosen. Four public observation sites frequented by students were selected—a large classroom building, a central outdoor square, the student union, and eating places near campus. Each observer attempted to conduct eight observations of student groups, one at each of the combinations of time and observation site. Four of the observations were randomly assigned to be of men, and four of women.

The groups to be selected within the time, site, and gender quotas were to exclude acquaintances of the observer, as well as people speaking so quietly that they could not be overheard by a passerby. Within these restrictions, observers could choose any available observation group. The racial composition of the speakers was not noted, but it is expected to approximate that of the undergraduate student body at the University of Michigan, which is 7% African-American, 1% American Indian, 8% Asian or Pacific Islander, 3% Hispanic, and 81% white.

Conversations were recorded in field notes as nearly verbatim as possible, with only a change in any personal names mentioned in order to maintain the anonymity of the speakers.

A total of 261 conversations was coded.³ Categories of conversation topics that applied to at least five observations were developed, based on the categories in Moore's (1922) study and on an earlier unpublished study and on an earlier unpublished study of University of Michigan students (Meil, 1984). The final set of categories, and the broader topic areas into which they fit, are given below:

³In total, 288 observation attempts were made: one observer attempted to observe 16 conversations, given 8 more than the expected number.

Of the 27 conversations that were not coded into the five broad topic areas, 1 was of a conversation wholly in a foreign language, 3 were not of students, 9 could not be done at the required place and time, and 14 had no codable topic according to Moore's typology (e.g., the water supply source of various cities).

Topic area	Category	Examples
People and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persons of same sex • Persons of opposite sex 	Personalities, biographies Dating, parents' anniversary
Work and money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Career plans • Jobs • Money 	Studying, professors LSAT scores, graduate schools Summer jobs, current work Borrowing money, good buys
Leisure activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports • Other leisure activities 	Football games, working out Sorority events, movies
Appearances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal appearance and clothes 	Hair style, leather jackets
Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and political issues 	Abortion, recycling, Iraq

For each observation, the first of the 10 categories that was mentioned in the conversation was coded.⁴

To increase the comparability of the coding to Moore's, the conversation fragments Moore gave to illustrate his application of the codes were used as guidelines, particularly in instances where two categories could apply. For example, Moore coded a man's comment, "He's insolvent, this is no place for him," into his "money and business" category, rather than "persons of the same sex." A woman's statement, "She was just as glad to see him as he was to see her," was coded into "persons of opposite sex," indicating that Moore's definition of this category actually included conversations about mixed gender groups.

It should be noted that the concept of "topic," as I use it, differs from recent analyses of topics as products of interaction, best studied by examining the processes by which speakers create, accept, discard, and pursue them (e.g., Fishman, 1978; West & Garcia, 1988). However, in order to replicate Moore's coding as closely as possible, I focused on the content of the conversations rather than their process. This approach proved to be quite reliable: the agreement between my coding and that of a second coder who independently categorized a subsample of 35 conversations into the five broad topic areas and the residual category was 82.9%.

RESULTS

Moore's Predictions of Gender Differences

In Table I, the distributions of topics in Moore's 1922 study and the 1990 University of Michigan study are shown for all topic categories in

⁴In several conversations, references to the observation place were made (e.g., "I'll have the chicken."). Such topics were omitted from the set of categories, since they are unrelated to our theoretical interests.

which the two studies correspond. When the distributions of topics for men and women are compared between the studies, we can see that Moore's specific prediction that women would continue to express their "original nature" by preferring men and appearances over all other topics was incorrect. Among women, the percentage of conversations about work and money changed from 3.7 in the 1922 study to 37.5 in the 1990 study—making work and money the most popular topic of both men and women in 1990, and reducing the gender difference for this topic to insignificance. Leisure activity or "amusement" was the second most discussed topic in the 1990 study for both women and men, while appearances, which had occupied that rank for women in the 1922 study, was the least popular topic of both sexes in 1990. Thus, in contrast to Moore's finding, men and women were found to rank topics very similarly in the 1990 study.

Nevertheless, Moore's more general prediction that gender differences in conversation topics would persist is borne out: significant differences were obtained for both the 1922 and the 1990 studies (using χ^2 , $p < .001$ in 1922, $p < .005$ in 1990), with women discussing the opposite sex and appearances more than men do, and men discussing work and leisure more than women do. However, the gender differences are much weaker in our 1990 study than in Moore's 1922 study (Cramer's phi = .27 in 1990, .66 in 1922). The relation of gender to conversation topic differs significantly between the two studies (using χ^2 , $p < .05$), with the work and money topic showing the greatest change in a partition of Table I.

Despite the great differences between the 1922 and the 1990 results, we cannot conclude that the differences are associated with the social

Table I. Distribution (Percentage) of Conversation Topics in Moore's (1922) Study and the 1990 University of Michigan Study

	Moore		U. Mich.	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Persons of opposite sex	9.0	48.1	6.4	24.2
Persons of same sex	14.9	18.5	9.6	8.6
Work & money	56.7	3.7	43.2	37.5
Leisure activity	16.4	3.7	39.2	25.8
Appearances	3.0	25.9	1.6	3.9
Total	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0
(n)	(67)	(27)	(125)	(128)
	$\chi^2 = 40.83, 4 df$		$\chi^2 = 18.34, 4 df$	
	$p < .001$		$p < .005$	
	Cramer's phi = .66		Cramer's phi = .27	
	Study \times Gender \times Topic: $\chi^2 = 12.09, 4 df, p < .05$			

changes of the intervening period, since the two studies vary along other dimensions that could be influential. In particular, Moore's use of subjects from the general population contrasts with my use of a college-student sample. By drawing on reports of observation studies conducted between 1922 and 1990, I will now introduce controls for sample difference and explore the trends more systematically. In so doing, further potential influences on studies of gender differences in conversation can be identified, including the physical setting of the conversation, the audience for the conversation, and the intentions and expectations of the researchers themselves.

Earlier Systematic Observation Studies

Between 1922 and 1990, eight systematic observation studies of gender differences in conversation were reported. Their settings, sample sizes, and other methodological details are summarized in the Appendix. The topic categories used in the studies vary somewhat, so that it is difficult to make straightforward comparisons among them. However, Moore's 1922 observation influenced the development of most subsequent sets of categories, particularly in early attempts to replicate his findings, so that five broad topic areas common to most of the studies can be identified: people and relationships, work and money, leisure activity, appearances (encompassing both personal appearance and building decor), and issues (such as current events and politics).⁵

By drawing on examples of coded conversations and interpretations of the meanings of categories given in the articles, each researcher's original categories have been collapsed into these five areas (see Appendix). On average, about 20% of the conversations in each study were about topics that did not fit into any of the five areas—such as “self,” “weather,” or the researcher's own “miscellaneous” category (see Appendix). These re-

⁵In this set of five topic areas, Moore's categories for “persons of the opposite sex” and “persons of the same sex” have been collapsed into one, “people and relationships.” The reason is that other researchers' categories do not always allow conversations about “the opposite sex,” which Moore operationalized to include conversations about groups of mixed gender, to be distinguished easily from conversations about “the same sex.” For example, Meil (1984) uses a strictly romantic definition of “the opposite sex” by contrasting it with “friends” and “family.” Several other researchers used the categories “men” and “women,” which are also not precisely comparable to Moore's. Thus, a broader category is more practical to use in comparisons and only slightly affects the strength of Moore's conclusions ($\phi = .66$ in Table I vs. $.62$ for Moore in Table II).

A second difference between these five categories and Moore's is the presence of an “issues” category: in Moore's report, it is noted that serious conversation occurred too infrequently to warrant a separate category.

sidual percentages were generally similar for men and women, and the category has been omitted here.

Standardizing Across Studies for the Effects of Setting

When the series of systematic observation studies conducted between 1922 and 1990 is considered, large fluctuations in the topic preferences of either gender are apparent, rather than consistent changes with time (see Table II). In part, this may be because the physical setting in which conversations occur are associated with their topics, as first noted by Landis and Burr (1924) when they observed very high rates of discussions of clothes near shop windows. Accordingly, fluctuations in topic popularity, such as the peak rate of conversations about leisure at concert halls in 1936, are likely to reflect variations in setting rather than the effects of the period.

In order to study trends between 1922 and 1990, therefore, it is necessary to reduce the effect that variations in setting have on conversation topics. Although the causes of *absolute* shifts in topic preferences between studies are elusive, we can more successfully investigate whether the sexes, *relative* to one another, are changing in the "share" they hold of a conversational topic. Within any setting, regardless of the overall popularity of a topic area we can ask: If 100 conversations were overheard about topic *X*, how many of them would be among women? For example, in Moore's study 66.7% of women's conversations and 23.9% of men's were about people and relationships, so we would estimate that women held $66.7 / (66.7 + 23.9)$, or 73.6% of all conversations about people and relationships.⁶

When these percentages are compared for the nine studies (Fig. 1), a clear pattern of gender differences in topic choice emerges. In all the studies, women held a majority of conversations about people and relationships (69%), while men held most of the conversations about work and money (70%). Leisure activity was also a more popular topic among men than women, though for those studies in which sports can be distinguished from other leisure activities, the overall gender difference appears to be due mainly to differences in rates of discussing sports. A large majority of

⁶If the sample sizes for women and men were equal for Moore's study in Table II, then this statistic would simply be a row percentage. The more complicated calculation is needed in order to standardize for unequal sample sizes.

This statistic is useful in that it controls, not only for setting effects, but for certain inconsistencies in coding across the studies: the topic area of issues is represented only in the five latest studies, reducing the proportions of conversations in other topic areas, and the sizes of the residual categories that were omitted in calculating the topic distributions also vary.

Table II. Distribution of Conversation Topics in Systematic Observation Studies, by Gender

	Moore (1992)		Landis & Burt (1924)		C. Landis (1927)		Sleeper (1930)		Stoke & West (1930)	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
People & relationships	23.9	66.7	17.9	44.5	26.3	66.0	— ^a	— ^a	20.2	29.6
Work & money	56.7	3.7	59.0	19.5	45.6	8.5	45.0 ^d	9.0	23.1	19.7
Leisure activity	16.4	3.7	17.3	13.3	21.1	0.0	25.0	3.0	41.6	38.2
Appearances	3.0	25.9	5.8	22.7	7.0	25.5	— ^e	— ^e	4.9	5.7
Issues	— ^b	— ^b	— ^b	— ^b	— ^c	— ^c	— ^e	— ^e	10.2	6.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	70.0	12.0	100.0	100.0
(n)	(67)	(27)	(195)	(155)	(57)	(47)	(56)	(70)	(754)	(1114)
Topic × Gender	$\chi^2 = 35.79$ $df = 3$ $p < .001$ Phi = .62		$\chi^2 = 61.87$ $df = 3$ $p < .001$ Phi = .45		$\chi^2 = 37.08$ $df = 3$ $p < .001$ Phi = .60		$\chi^2 = 45.28^d$ $df = 2$ $p < .001$ Phi = .60		$\chi^2 = 26.38$ $df = 4$ $p < .001$ Phi = .12	

^aMurphy and Murphy (1931) report quantitative data for only two of Sleeper's categories. The 45.0 value for men's conversations about work and money is an estimate; the test gives "nearly 50 percent (503)" as the figure. For the remaining categories, they note that women show "a great preference for discussion of clothing and decoration, and a good deal of discussion also of their homes... [and talk] more about men and also about women than the men do" (p. 503).

conversations about appearances, averaging 80% across studies, were held among women. Finally, in all studies but Kipers' (1987), men held the majority of conversations about social and political issues.

Possible Trends in Gender Differences in Conversation Topics

Overall Trends. The results in Fig. 1 are generally more striking for the consistency found across studies than for any apparent trends over time. The clearest exception is for conversations about work and money: as noted above, this topic was discussed predominantly by men, but their share was largest in the 1920s studies (averaging 84%), varied in size in the 1930s studies, and was closest to women's in the 1948 and later studies (averaging 44%).

Although this suggests a decrease over time in gender differences in discussions of work and money, the timing of studies is somewhat confounded with their sampling. All four studies of college-educated samples show relatively small gender differences, with an average Cramer's phi of .27 and were conducted fairly late in the series of studies. The remaining

Carlson et al. (1936)		Watson et al. (1948)		Meil (1984)		Kipers (1987)		U. Mich., 1990	
M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
28.8	52.0	23.0	28.8	8.6	32.4	3.9	18.5	15.4	32.1
20.5	2.3	31.1	24.0	42.0	39.2	50.4	31.8	41.5	36.6
44.9	27.6	17.7	18.2	40.7	21.6	37.2	15.9	37.7	25.2
4.5	17.2	11.1	21.4	0.0	4.1	0.0	4.6	1.5	3.8
1.3	0.9	17.2	7.6	8.6	2.7	8.5	29.1	3.8	2.3
100.0	100.0	100.1	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0	99.9	99.9	100.0
(156)	(221)	(379)	(462)	(81)	(74)	(129)	(151)	(131)	(130)
$\chi^2 = 62.97$		$\chi^2 = 35.95$		$\chi^2 = 21.12$		$\chi^2 = 51.98$		$\chi^2 = 13.06$	
df = 4		df = 4		df = 4		df = 4		df = 4	
p < .001		p < .001		p < .001		p < .001		p = .01	
Phi = .41		Phi = .21		Phi = .37		Phi = .43		Phi = .22	

^bThe proportion of conversations about issues in these studies is probably very near zero for both genders: Moore remarks on the "scarcity of anything resembling serious discussion of general topics" (p. 214), and Landis and Burt note that fewer than a half-dozen conversations about issues were overheard.

^cC. Landis (1927) does not mention an issues or "serious conversation" category.

^dThe test was done by comparing work and money, leisure activity, and the combination of all other categories.

studies show relatively large gender differences, with an average Cramer's phi of .54, and tended to be conducted earlier with samples from more general populations. I will now consider these two sets of studies separately.

Trends Among College-Educated Samples. In studies of college educated samples, the usual pattern of gender differences is less marked in the 1930 Stoke and West college-student sample (Cramer's phi = .12) than in the 1984 and 1990 college samples (Cramer's phi = .37 and .22, respectively). Gender differences are also quite large in Kipers' 1987 study of middle-school teachers (Cramer's phi = .43). However, we cannot interpret this as evidence of an overall trend toward a stronger adherence to the typical gender difference pattern, for in Kipers' study, women held the majority (77%) of conversations about social and political issues (compared to 35% in all other studies).

Although we are again left without clear evidence of a trend over time, it is interesting to speculate that both the small gender differences Stoke and West observed and the reversal of the gender pattern for issues discussions that Kipers observed might result from the fact that their speakers addressed potential audiences of acquaintances, either in a dormitory room or in a teachers' common room. As Gardner's (1980) analysis of con-

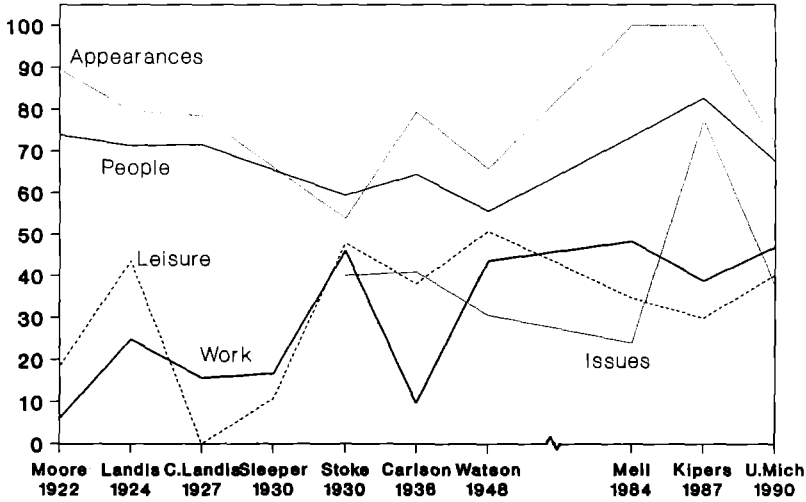


Fig. 1. Women's percentage of all conversations about a topic, by topic. Note: Sleeper (1930) data are available only for work and leisure. Data on issues are not available until Stoke (1930).

straints on women's behavior in public places suggests, gender norms may be more carefully observed in public settings than in private ones.

Trends in Gender Differences in Other Samples. Excluding the studies with college-educated samples, most topic areas show a decrease in gender differences between 1922 and 1948, produced mainly by the contrast between the earlier and the 1948 studies.⁷ This sudden decline in differences in the conversation of the sexes may have its basis in the social changes during World War II, such as women's increased employment outside the home. However, a second explanation of the apparent trend in gender differences between 1922 and 1948 can be developed by comparing the intentions of the researchers at work in this period. Moore intended to prove that an "unyielding innate divergence" (1922, p. 211) existed between men's and women's interests. As studies of researcher effects (e.g., Rosenthal, 1976) indicate, it is conceivable that the topic categories Moore developed were chosen—whether consciously or not—to accentuate the gender differences he had observed.

For example, without giving any theoretical rationale, Moore divided conversations about people and relationships into conversations about "per-

⁷The trend for social and political issues cannot be evaluated reliably because only two noncollege studies included this category (Carlson, Cook, & Stromberg, 1936; Watson, Breed, & Posman, 1948).

sons of the same sex” as the speaker and “persons of opposite sex.” As noted earlier, the latter category actually includes conversations about groups of mixed gender. On the basis of this categorization, Moore starkly contrasted women’s and men’s interest in the topic of the opposite sex, concluding that “the theme of nearly one half of woman’s conversation finds its place in less than one twelfth of male discussion (1922, p. 212). Had Moore instead examined an equally arbitrary category—conversations about “men”—the contrast would have been rather weaker, since the women he observed discussed “men” in less than one half of their conversations, while the men he observed talked about men in about one-seventh of their conversations. In light of Moore’s intentions, it is perhaps not surprising that, of all studies, his produced the strongest evidence of gender differences.

Most of the researchers who followed Moore in studying noncollege populations during 1922–1948 sought to replicate his findings in varied settings, without disputing Moore’s hypotheses or coding framework. In fact, C. Landis (1927) hailed Moore for advancing the study of sex differences by obtaining “logical” results. Only Watson et al. (1948) were critical of Moore’s coding scheme, describing it as lacking objectivity and noting that “it means very little to study sex differences in number of references to ‘Money and Business’ in a society where the men are expected to take care of all money and business while women run the home” (p. 122). Unlike the earlier investigators, Watson et al. appear skeptical of the gender difference hypothesis, and indeed, the data they report show relatively small gender differences. Therefore, the apparent trend of diminishing gender differences between the early and the 1948 studies may reflect not only actual changes in men’s and women’s conversations, but also changes in the beliefs and expectations of researchers who study them.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

These comparisons of conversation studies show that Moore’s specific hypothesis—that women would continue to prefer to converse about men, clothing, and decoration, while men would continue to prefer conversations about money, business, and amusement—is not confirmed. However, Moore’s more general hypothesis—that gender differences of some kind would persist—is supported. When controls for conversation setting and coding inconsistencies are introduced, a remarkably consistent pattern can be seen in the gender differences for most topic areas, with women holding the majority of conversations about people and relationships and appearances, and men typically (though not always) holding the majority of conversations about work and money and issues. Once men’s tendency to

discuss sports more often than women do is controlled for, men and women discuss leisure activity at similar rates.

The pattern of gender similarities and differences for the five topic areas resembles those observed in ethnographic, survey, and experimental research conducted with a variety of samples, including college students and their parents (Aries, 1976; Aries & Johnson, 1983; Johnson & Aries, 1983), the general population (Haas & Sherman, 1982), blue-collar workers' families (Komarovsky, 1962), British miners' families (Klein, 1965), and villagers in France and Spain (Harding, 1975; Reiter, 1975).

Apparent trends in the strengths of gender differences include diminishing gender differences for the work and money topic between 1922 and 1990 and decreasing gender differences for all topics between 1922 and 1948. However, plausible alternative explanations, based on differences in the target populations and shifts in researchers' expectations, can also be offered for the apparent trends in gender differences in topic choice. Until an early study is replicated more closely, therefore, we are left with more conclusive evidence of a stable pattern of gender differences than of trends within that pattern.

How is this pattern of gender differences in conversation topics to be interpreted? As an alternative to offering an explanation of the details of gender differences in topic preferences, I will discuss the variety of interpretations that have been given since 1922. The discourse on gender and conversation topics reveals that interpretations are not isolated efforts to describe the underlying "true" reasons for gender differences. Instead, the interpretations are themselves subject to social influences, such as the prevailing models of explanation in the social sciences and attitudes about the appropriate position of women in society. The interpretations and their implications have taken three general forms since 1922: biological, functional, and feminist.

The first researchers in gender differences in conversation topics believed that the differences revealed essential biological qualities of the sexes, variously termed "drives," "original nature," or "fundamental interests." The drives thought to produce differences were rarely specified. However, several analysts noted that people were discussed more often by women than by men and interpreted this as further evidence of the general belief that women were more interested in people than things (e.g., Landis & Burr, 1924; Stoke & West, 1930; Murphy & Murphy, 1931). This division of the topic domain can be traced back to Thorndike (1914), who attributed the gender difference to the male instinct for combat and mastery and the female instinct for nurturing behavior.⁸

⁸This conclusion is drawn as part of an enumeration of evidence for gender differences in attitudes and interests. Despite the initial warning that the data he draws on for secondary analyses are subject to "whatever errors of prejudice or custom teachers, physicians, and German women of intellectual interests make in rating individuals" (1914, p. 196), Thorndike

In seeming contradiction to the inference that men were markedly more interested than women in “things,” women who were observed in the early studies frequently discussed clothing and decor. However, Moore interpreted this tendency as evidence that women were of an especially artistic nature that was ill-suited to the pursuit of “only the ultimate reward of a Phi Beta Kappa key of a sterile business position” (1930, p. 284). As president of a women’s college, Moore addressed the popular concern that educated women’s marriage rates were falling by proposing that women would be made most attractive to men by educational programs fostering their creativity, for “there is nothing more endearing to the mate of the opposite sex than personal devotion to creative pursuits” (1930, p. 284). Thus, early researchers saw the female potential for childbearing and motherhood as the source of various gender differences in conversation and viewed the realization of these potentials as desirable social ends.

Nonbiological influences on conversation topics came gradually to be recognized, with Stoke and West (1931) first suggesting that observed gender differences might be either “native or acquired” (p. 125). Watson et al. (1948) completed the transition from biological to societal terminology, using only “culturally assigned sex roles” (p. 126) as a causal factor. For nearly two decades, the few studies using conversation data continued to rely on the conceptual framework of functionalist role theory, referring to “strictness of role definition” (Klein, 1965, p. 109) or norms of “culturally demanded reticence” (Komarovsky, 1962, p. 156) as influences. In this period, the division of the topic domain into work-related and home-related areas reflects Parsons’ (1951) contrast of the public and private spheres, respectively inhabited by instrumentally oriented men and socioemotionally oriented women (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

However, as Connell (1987) points out, functional role theory implies that roles are reproduced voluntarily, meaning that role theory explanations of gender differences are reducible to the older arguments for innate differences. Thus, despite the apparent shift from biological to social explanations of gender differences in conversation topics, the new “public vs. private” division of topics in the functionalist period appears simply to be a translation of the older “thing vs. person.”

Renewed interest in conversation topics came in the 1970s, as part of a broader surge of interest in gender differences in language use, attributed by Thorne and Henley (1975) to the influence of the women’s liberation movement. Some researchers continued to use Parsons’ framework but referred to the roles he described as “conventional” or “tradi-

concluded from the German studies that “only 15 percent of men are as much interested in persons than in things as the median woman is” (1914, p. 201).

tional" (e.g., Aries, 1976). Others were more critical, drawing on the sociological conflict theory that challenged Parsons and emphasizing men's dominance as the underlying structural factor producing both distinctive gender roles and differences in conversation (Sattel, 1983). For example, the division of topics between men and women is interpreted as a product of differential control of information (Reiter, 1975). Women's discussions of people and relationships can, on one hand, be viewed as a sign of concern about female oppression and subordination (Bruner & Kelso, 1980) or, on the other, as a reproduction of social control of female morality (Harding, 1975; Jones, 1980). While structural and functionalist theories both attribute gender differences to social factors, feminists using a structural perspective often analyze gender differences critically and with an eye toward social change (e.g., Connell, 1987).

Much as feminist researchers of the late 19th century sought to debunk stereotypes about women's nature (see Rosenberg, 1982), contemporary feminists have challenged popular beliefs about women's conversational preferences. For example, Jespersen's (1922) view that women discuss trivial topics more often than men is contested by Kipers (1987), who found that a greater proportion of women's topics than men's was judged to be important by members of the conversation groups she observed and later surveyed. Moreover, contemporary feminists have given newly positive evaluations to women's topic choices. Thus, although Moore (1930) believed that women's preference for conversations about art and decor ill suited them for a professional career, Aries (1982) concluded that women's listening style would promote harmonious interactions in previously all-male workplaces. Finally, Penny's (1958) finding that girls talk about themselves more than boys do is accompanied by the suggestion that girls display a "narcissistic 'contamination'" of boys' "informational orientation"—a conclusion that stands in sharp contrast to recent positive evaluations of women's conversations about themselves as a form of social support (e.g., Jones, 1980; Johnson & Aries, 1983).

As Scott maintains, our attention should be drawn "to the variable and contradictory meanings attributed to sexual difference, [and] to the political processes by which those meanings are developed and contested" (1988, pp. 6). In this survey of the discourse about conversation topics—a microcosm of gender studies discourse—dramatic changes in the meanings assigned to topic variation by gender can be seen to reflect changes in social scientific discourse and the emergence of the 1960s feminist movement. Ironically, the effects of social change on gender differences in conversation have yet to be demonstrated to be as strong as the influences of social change on discourse about gender differences.

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Table A1: Summary of Methods in Systematic Observation Studies of Gender Differences in Conversation, 1924–1987

	Landis & Burr (1924)	C. Landis (1927)	Sleeper (1930)	Stoke & West (1930)	Carlson et al. (1936)	Watson et al. (1948)	Meil (1984)	Kipers (1987)
Setting	Columbus, OH, for 2 months. Sites include parties, shops, street cars, churches, and restaurants	Oxford and Regent Sts., London, in evenings, outdoors	Grand Central Station, New York, in evenings	Ohio Univ. student residence for 11 months	Minneapolis, MN, series of 13 concerts, during intermission on the expensive main floor	Manhattan, NY. Sites include hotel lobbies, parks, subways, and restaurants, and exclude college campus	University of Michigan gym, student union, library, classroom building	New Jersey middle-school faculty room during lunch and breaks
Number of conversations ^a	350 ^b	150	126 ^c	2230 topics discussed by 26 groups of at least 3 speakers	393	1001	189	297
Researchers' categories in the five topic areas People & Men, women relationships	Men, women	Men, women	Men, women	Women, dates; study stories, sex problems, necking and kissing, the ideal man, what men like a girl to be love, personalities, home and relatives, gossip	Men, women, groups of people	Comparisons and evaluations, family, love and marriage	Opposite sex, friends, family	Children, child care arrange-ments, pets, quitting smoking
Work & money business: college work	Money and business	Money and business	Money and business	Studies, teachers, grades, exams, comparing universities, vocations, summer jobs, chain stores, money	Money and business	Jobs, earnings, prices and shopping	Money/jobs/ career, school	Yardwork, housework, car, grocery shopping, coupons, tax deductions, cost of living, dishwasher

Leisure activity	Sports, other amusements	Amusement and sports	Amusement	Literature, art, music, drama, shows, culture, movie actors and actresses, serenades, weekend trips, travel, nature appreciation	Sports, travel, artists, other amusements	Movies and theater, dancing and drinking, sports, travel, other recreation	Entertainment and leisure	New boat sailing, fishing, Olympics, spectator sport, vacation, gambling, books read, cooking/eating
Appearances	Clothes and decoration	Clothes and decoration, home	Clothes and decoration	Clothes	Clothes, immediate surroundings	Housing, gifts and possessions, clothes	Fashion/shopping/ personal appearance	Buying clothes
Issues	—	—	—	Campus politics, other politics, world peace, war, evolution, socialism, government ownership of utilities, death, religion	Current events	Economic public affairs, social political	Social issues, politics	Child abuse, women's rights, divorce, drugs, TV violence, juvenile suicide, politics, criminal justice, WWII, scientific discovery
% residual topics	14.0	30.7	62.7 ^a	16.2	3.8	16.0	18.0	5.7

^aOnly conversations in single-gender groups are included here. Several studies also report topics in mixed groups (Moore, 1922; Landis & Burt, 1924; C. Landis, 1927; Sleeper, 1930; Carlson et al., 1936; Kipers, 1987).

^bThree hundred fifty is the number of topics Landis and Burt coded for single-gender groups. Two topics were coded for 19 of the 481 conversations that were observed, so the sample of conversations in the single-gender groups may actually be slightly fewer than 350.

^cSleeper omitted conversations about the setting from this total.

^dMurphy and Murphy (1931), who report Sleeper's results, give quantitative information for only two of Sleeper's categories (money and business, and amusement). The remainder are described qualitatively, accounting for the high percentage of residual topics.