Popular media publicizes the common assumption that women act in ways that challenge their ability to assume authoritative positions. According to the article “Ten body language mistakes women leaders make” from the business magazine *Forbes*, women effectively exude warmth and empathy, yet the body language that they evoke prevent them from appearing authoritative (Goman, 2010). This research addresses situations where women do act in an authoritative manner. In this paper, I explore how women on a college synchronized skating team approach authority.

**The Oswego State Ice Effects Synchronized Skating Team**

Before moving to my analysis, I provide a context for synchronized skating and my study of the team. Synchronized skating permeates the international sport arena. Involving 8-20 individuals, synchronized skating consists of teamwork, speed and complicated footwork (“Synchronized Skating,” 2014). Also a college sport, synchronized skating can be played by interested student athletes who train together in an extracurricular club. One such sports team can be found in the Oswego State Ice Effects Synchronized Skating Team, a group of eleven young women studying at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego in Oswego, New York.

Practicing outside of school, without the consistent instruction of a coach, the team relies on the students on the e-board, such as the club president, to lead practices. Throughout the 2014 fall semester, I observed this team, my community of practice, which I am not a member of, during their off-ice practices and studied the relationship of authority and gender through their language usage.
Since being a member of a community of practice means talking like one, my observation of this community of practice reveals how the women talk as part of being a member of the team. From my two observations, conducted a month apart, I discerned patterns in how the women on the team understand and enact authority through language (verbal and nonverbal). In the Oswego State Ice Effects Synchronized Skating Team, the two women who assume authority on the team engage in what I call “cooperative authority.” In this paper, I describe “cooperative authority” as a set of linguistic strategies that imply dominance and the sharing of authority.

Shared Authority

On October 12, 2014, at 4:55pm, I met Bri, the Public Relations Representative for the Oswego State Ice Effects Synchronized Skating Team, at the front desk of Lee Hall on the SUNY Oswego campus. She was going to show me to the ballet studio where the Oswego State Ice Effects Synchronized Skating Team was having their off-ice practice. After signing-in at the front desk and then climbing the stairs with Bri, I opened the door to a hallway where I found women from the team sitting outside the ballet studio in a haphazard circle on the floor. They typically sit outside the room before practice while waiting for a martial arts group to finish practicing and to exit the ballet studio. The girls were wearing t-shirts and sweatpants or shorts. They had their hair down, in a hairband, or in a ponytail.

After the martial arts group left, and the team entered, the girls stood next to one of the walls of the ballet studio, which is a big room with a mirror on the wall to the left of the entrance. Eventually, they moved towards the center of the room where they sat in a circle and warmed-up. During both of my observations, the other conducted on November 9th, 2014, I watched the women stretch and converse in a circle on the floor. In each observation, two women stood out as leaders. Bri, the Public Relations Representative, and Ann, the President, led the discussions, initiated most of the conversations, asked questions of the team, and made suggestions. During the first observation, Bri provided information for the group and encouraged discussion until Ann arrived, who then took over. By observing their linguistic strategies (i.e. initiating turns at talk and leading questions), I concluded that Bri and Ann assumed places of authority on the team.

Although Bri and Ann led discussions, group input and cooperation were permitted and encouraged. During both observations, on at least eleven occasions, Ann directly asked for
suggestions and input from the team. For example, during my second observation on November 9th, 2014, looking at each team member, Ann asked if everyone understood what was going on by saying, “Same page?” For another example, during both observations, she asked multiple related questions, such as “What do you want to do?” and “Anything you want to do, guys?” She also asked if anyone had any comments or suggestions before she ended the meeting. Ann’s frequent interest in securing participation from the other team members indexes shared authority.

In her article “Cooperative competition in adolescent ‘girl talk,’ Penelope Eckert (1993) reflects on similar findings to my own with respect to how young women deal with authority. She discusses how adolescent girls cooperate in order to appear likable and thus gain status. Even though Eckert’s article addresses adolescent girls, not college women, many college women are just exiting adolescence and so the data is comparable. My data expands upon the notion of authority found in this article by showing that not only do women cooperate, but in the Oswego synchronized skating team, the women in authority encourage cooperation.

**Dominance and Authority**

While linguistic strategies of cooperation were present in my two observations, both Bri and Ann also use linguistic strategies that assert their dominance. In the article “The relativity of linguistic strategies: rethinking power and solidarity in gender and dominance” in the anthology *Gender and Conversational Interaction*, author Deborah Tannen (1993) warns individuals not to assume that women always cooperate during conversations. Although men are frequently assumed to show domination in conversations, women can also demonstrate domination.

According to my data, the synchronized skating team rarely engaged in situations where the girls seemed to be directly competing against each other. Most interaction amongst team members involved group discussions where everyone could contribute. However, Ann and Bri did subtly show their dominance through linguistic structures. One linguistic structure that Ann used was interruption. According to Tannen, interruption can mean dominance or solidarity, or both, depending on the context. In my second observation, Ann showed her dominance by interrupting. While everyone was sitting in a circle and talking, Ann started a story, which overlapped everyone else’s conversation. After noticing that she was talking, everyone gave Ann the floor, which implied her dominance. Shortly before this interaction, Bri also demonstrated her position of authority when another girl imitated her. While the girls were stretching in a
circle, Bri changed her position. Another girl subsequently changed her position, as well, thus imitating Bri. This appears to reflect upon Bri’s importance in the team; she is worth imitating. Each of these observations reveal that women are capable of showing dominance through their language and actions.

Conclusion

Through my research on a college synchronized skating team in New York, I show that women can use linguistic strategies to demonstrate their capacity to assume authority effectively. Popular assumptions about women and authority do not take into account situations such as interactions in the Oswego State Ice Effects Synchronized Skating Team where women engage in both cooperation and authority. While still remaining likable by encouraging cooperation, the two leaders of the team, Bri and Ann, demonstrated their authority through their linguistic strategies and actions. In an interview conducted via texting, Bri describes how the president holds a place of authority and everyone is encouraged to participate, “...Ann or whoever the president [is] leads on ice practices too but on the ice everyone has input to help us succeed....” She effectively summarizes what is missing from popular assumptions. Further research may continue to reveal situations where women do enact authority, not just submission.

References


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