# A call for ethnographic investigation of justice and care in language and gender research

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## Abstract

*This paper argues for an ethnographic approach to the study of principles of justice and care in language and gender research. My focus is on language practices in two basic human socialites: children's peer groups and the family. By examining interactions in the everyday lives of peers and in families, the creativity with which humans orchestrate their everyday activities becomes visible. I problematise two prominent ideas put forward by psychologists that have influenced studies of gender and language for some time: Jean Piaget's (1965[1932]) writings about children's games and Carol Gilligan's (1982) ideas about a 'different voice' among women.*

KEYWORDS: CARE, EMBODIED PRACTICES, ETHNOGRAPHY, GENDER, MORALITY, MULTIMODALITY

## Introduction

In my presentation at the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference, I advocated examining women's powerful rather than powerless language, taking as the unit of analysis activities or practices rather than 'single utterances, decontextualized from the endogenous scenes of the lived social

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world' (Goodwin 1992:182). Ethnography in a neighbourhood peer group conducted over time was critical to my understanding of the situated development of a story trajectory and its power to reorganise girls' local political and social structure. Within a gossip activity that Black girls call 'he-said-she-said', in response to reports of having been talked about behind her back, a recipient displays righteous indignation and promises to confront the party who offended her. He-said-she-said events are built to sanction those who position themselves above others in the group. The accusation statements and stories within the event provide a levelling mechanism, a vernacular legal system designed to deal with girls who violate group norms. These girls' adjudications of offences can occur over months and are considerably more complex and enduring than the ways boys handle violations.

My early work on girls' interaction in the neighbourhood was conducted in 1970–1971 with a Sony TC110 cassette recorder slung over my shoulder. With the development of portable video camcorders in the 1980s and '90s, I was able to document not only girls' talk, but also the embodied experience of their social worlds – the affective stances they displayed through gesture, intonation and body posture. I became interested in girls' games such as hopscotch as a form of situated activity system that illustrated their rational as well as highly embodied practices in arguing positions, and I documented this game across a number of ethnic groups. During the course of fieldwork in a progressive school, I also encountered forms of ridicule and exclusion that challenged the prevalent idea that girls were fundamentally concerned with an ethic centred on care (Goodwin 2002, 2006).

When in 2002 I started participating as a core member of the UCLA Center for Everyday Lives of Families, the portable Sony VX2000 Mini-DV camera as well as lavalier microphones made it possible to document intimate, highly emotional moments among family members inside the home. I became fascinated with the ways that parents and children, in lush moments of care, laminated touch with talk while intertwining their bodies (Goodwin 2017a). I found quite striking the ways that fathers as well as mothers performed such joyful connection. Across all of my investigations of gendered social life, fieldwork was fundamental, as it makes possible endless opportunities for exploring roads less travelled.

In this article, I argue for an ethnographic approach to the study of principles of justice and care in language and gender research. My focus is on language practices in two basic human socialities: children's peer groups and the family. By examining interactions in the everyday lives of peers and in families, the creativity with which humans orchestrate their everyday activities becomes visible. All too often, as Thorne (1993:96) states in her

critique of theorists who view gender roles in terms of binary opposites, 'the wheels of description and analysis slide into the contrastive themes and move right along'.

Here I would like to problematise two prominent ideas put forward by psychologists that have influenced studies of gender and language for some time: Piaget's (1965[1932]) writings about children's games and Gilligan's (1982) ideas about a 'different voice' among women. Piaget (1965[1932]:77) proposed that 'the legal sense is far less developed in little girls than in boys'. Child development textbooks have repeated such statements through multiple editions. Gilligan's influential book *In a Different Voice* chronicled two different moral imperatives: males are primarily concerned with justice (equality, reciprocity and fairness), while females display an orientation towards care, the idea of attachment, loving and being loved, listening and being listened to. These stereotypes are recycled in views that boys value aggressive, achievement-oriented activities, while girls value social connections (Leaper and Smith 2004:993) and nurturing roles (Adler and Adler 1998:55).

My analysis will focus on the embodied practices through which people interact with others within situated activities (Goffman 1961:96). Video-ethnographic methodology makes it possible to record mundane talk, physical gestures, action and routine activities, all within ordinary settings where people carry out their daily lives (Ochs et al. 2006).

## Justice and exclusion in girls' peer groups

Piaget (1965[1932]) stated that none of the games girls played were as complex with respect to the organisation and codification of rules as boys' games. His example of a simple girls' game was hopscotch. Wanting to see if this was in fact the case, I conducted fieldwork among a number of children's groups: working-class African American children in Philadelphia and rural South Carolina, Latina children in downtown Los Angeles, ESL children in Columbia, South Carolina, and a group of children of mixed social classes and ethnicities in a progressive school in Los Angeles.

Janet Lever (1978:479) argued that 'girls' turn-taking games progress in identical order from one situation to the next. Given the structure of these games disputes are not likely to occur'. However, Lever neglected to consider the role of the judge, the person who scrutinises every move a jumper makes. Once a mistake is made, stepping on a line or jumping inappropriately through the grid, the judge in the Latina downtown LA group would call 'OUT!' with a high-pitched 'low-high-low' intonation contour, distinctive of Latina girls. Whereas normally girls' voice range is up to 250 Hz, the pitch in Example 1 jumps dramatically to nearly 700 Hz. While producing

her emphatic 'OUT!' the judge makes a very deliberate point towards the girl whose move she challenges; then, while moving through the grid, she provides a demonstration of the inappropriate move.





OUT!                    OUT!

451 ms.                 310 ms.

471 hz. 667 hrz. 506 hz.    643 hz. 677 hz. 587 hz.
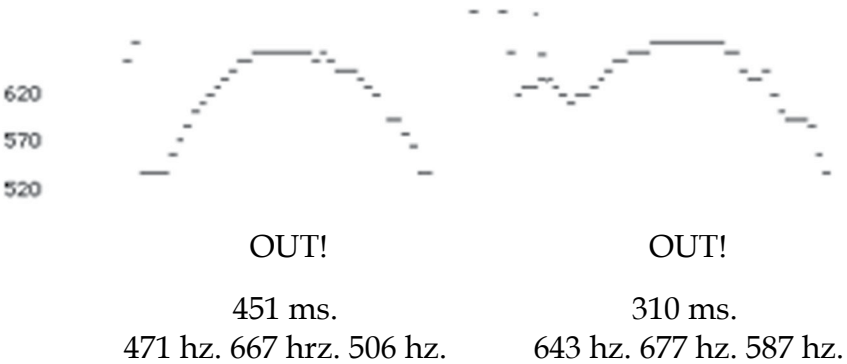
**Example 1:** Latina girl calling the jumper 'OUT!' (from Goodwin 1998:29).

Turning to a hopscotch game played by African American migrant workers' children, we find a dramatic pitch leap in the denial by the jumper who is argued to have hit the line: 'I AIN'T HIT NO LINE!' The pitch of the denial reaches nearly 700 Hz. This move is also followed by a judge's re-enactment, tapping on the line where the jumper missed.

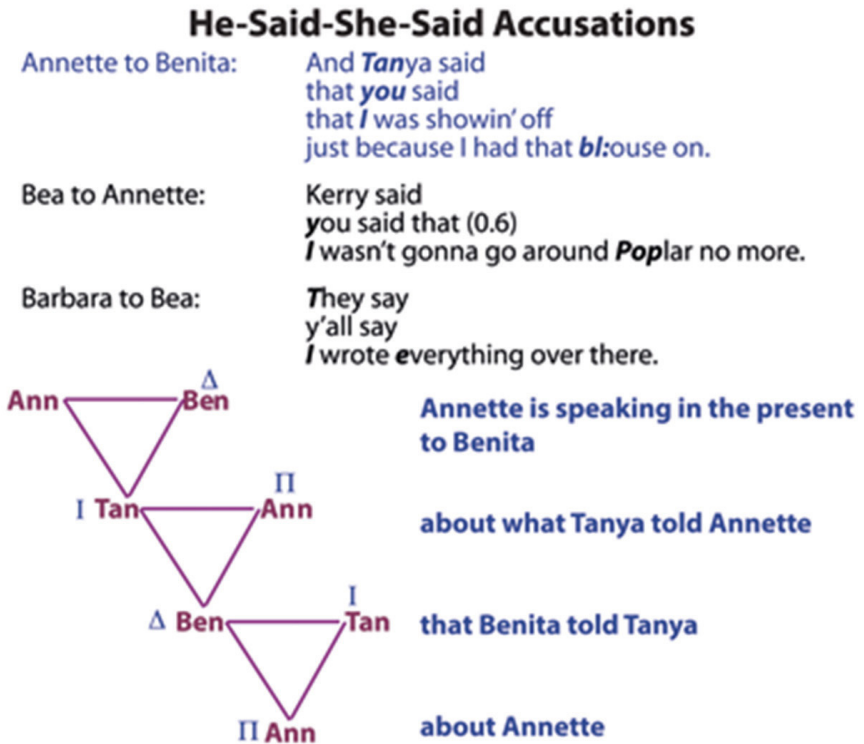| | |
|---|---|
| Tara: | You out. |
| Joy: | ⌐No I'm *not*. |
| Tara: | └You hit the line. |
| Crystal: | Yes you did.   ⌐You hit the line. |
| Tara: | └ You hit the line. |
| Joy: | *I* AIN'T HIT NO *LINE*! |
| Alisha: | *Yes* ⌐you did. |
| Crystal: | └°You did. You s- |
| Joy: | No I did⌐n't. |
| Alisha: | ⌐Yes you did. |
| Crystal: | └Didn 't she go like this. |
| Joy: | ((*does a challenge hit towards Alisha*)) |
| Alisha: | *You* hit me. |
| Crystal: | You did like this. |
| Joy: | Shut up with your *old* fashioned clothes. |
| Crystal: | You did like that. |
| Tara: | Yeah you hit that line right *there* honey. |
| Joy: | ((*Ignoring complaints against her performance Joy throws her rock and it lands outside*)) |
| Joy: | (It might be.) |
| Vanessa: | Now y- you out now! |
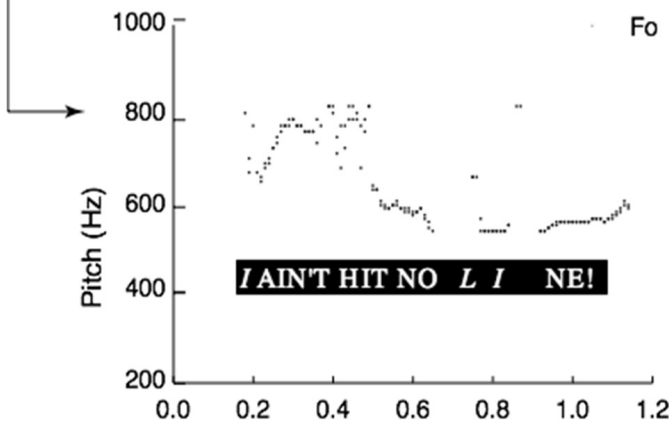


**Example 2:** Denial of 'out' call by an African American girl (from Goodwin 1998:36).

In both Latina and African American groups, girls hold one another highly accountable for their actions in the game. Further evidence of girls'

concern for justice was evident in the progressive LA school where I conducted fieldwork in the late '90s; girls of diverse ethnicities and social classes challenged male colonisation of the soccer field, argued for their rights and defined a new moral order on their own terms (Goodwin 2006:1–2).

Among the African American children in Philadelphia (ages 4–14) I studied in the early 1970s, there were striking differences in the types of accusations used by boys and girls. Boys were quite direct, as in '***You*** took the ***hang***ers that I took off your ***bed***'. Girls' accusations, by way of contrast, were more indirect. They concerned an important offence in the girls' culture: talking about someone behind her back.

## He-Said-She-Said Accusations

Annette to Benita:    And ***Tan***ya said
that ***you*** said
that ***I*** was showin' off
just because I had that ***bl:***ouse on.

Bea to Annette:    Kerry said
***y***ou said that (0.6)
***I*** wasn't gonna go around ***Pop***lar no more.

Barbara to Bea:    ***Th***ey say
y'all say
***I*** wrote ***e***verything over there.



**Ann**———**Ben**    Annette is speaking in the present to Benita

**I Tan**———**Ann**    about what Tanya told Annette

**Δ Ben**———**Tan**    that Benita told Tanya

**Π Ann**    about Annette

**Example 3:** The structure of he-said-she-said accusations (from Goodwin 2017b:84).

Considering the rotation of participants throughout the statement in Example 3, we find that the party who was initially talked about becomes the plaintiff in a confrontation stage. Talking about someone in her absence is considered a grave offence by the girls. The plaintiff or accuser reports what was told her by an intermediary party or instigator about what (reputedly) was said by the defendant about the plaintiff in her absence. Through reporting the offence, the girls build into the action an alliance of

'two against one'. The statement by Ruby in the midst of a he-said-she-said confrontation (Example 4) is an instance of a two-against-one argument that provides a warrant for the charge brought against the defendant. Such actions initiate processes of exclusion that can last for months.

### Two Against One

Ruby:  Well **I'm** a get it straight with the **peo**ple.
What Kerry,
It's between Kerry, and you, (1.0)
See **two-** (0.5) **two** against one.
Who wins? The one is **two**.=Right?
And **that's** Joycie and **Ker**ry.
**They** both say that you said it.
And you say that you **did**n't say it.
Who you got the **proof** that say
That you **didn**'t say it

**Example 4:** Two-against-one argument (from Goodwin 2017b:85).

Ethnography allows access to the lived experiences of children interacting with their peers. We discover that girls exhibit a heightened concern for rules in games. They put into place elaborate vernacular processes for sanctioning those who violate their local community norms. In dealing with peers, they can also practice extended processes of exclusion (Goodwin 2002), exhibiting anything but a tendency towards the 'care orientation' hypothesised by Gilligan for girls. Through ethnographic study we hear the voices of the children themselves as they articulate their social organisation for each other, on streets and in playgrounds.

## Touch and voice among intimate fathers

Much of the recent work in gender identity that assumes a performative (Butler 1990) perspective has attempted to transcend binary descriptions of men and women's 'separate worlds' to examine the 'pluralizing' (Cameron 2009:2) of femininities and masculinities (Connell 1987). Despite recent trends calling for a new masculinity, 'few theoretical accounts of masculinity have ... engaged with detailed discursive or linguistic analyses of identity' (Benwell 2014:244), and studies of male family roles are infrequent. This study makes use of data from the archive of UCLA's Center for Everyday Lives of Families, which includes over 50 hours of interaction for each of 32 dual-earner families of various ethnicities in the Los Angeles area. The dads I investigate here are African American (Example 6) and Japanese American (Example 8) straight parents, and Euro-American gay parents (Examples 5 and 7).

Acts of caring provide ways of showing affection to enhance the welfare or wellbeing of the person cared for (Noddings 2013:24). While historically care has been considered more typical of women than men (Noddings 2013:xxiv), I observed that close encounters entailing touch and grooming occur in interactions between fathers and daughters. As an act of care, grooming affords the opportunity for bodies to be in close configurations vis-à-vis one another, permitting intimate cooperative social bonds to develop (Dunbar 1996).

| 1 | Dad: | Well you *ate* your breakfast okay, | *Diagnostic Touch* |
| 2 | | (1.5) | |
| 3 | Amy: | °I don't have a fever. It just *hurts.* | |

| 4 | Dad: | An' you don't feel *wa : rm*, |
| 5 | Dad: | Hon did you go to the bathroom okay? |
| 6 | Amy: | *Mm* mm (no). *((shakes head))* |

| 7 | Dad: | ⌈You *did*n't go to the bathroom okay? |
| 8 | Amy: | ⌊*((shakes head))* |
| 9 | Dad: | What *hap*pened when you went to the *bath*room. |
| 10 | Amy: | *((produces explosive sound with gesture))* |

| 11 | Dad: | No. Mm*kay.* |
| 12 | Dad: | Well, I *think* you need to go to *scho:o: l*, |
| 13 | | There's *some*thing *blue:* on your- (1.0) |
| 14 | | There's a *bl*ue *speck* on your *eye*brow. |

| 15 | Dad: | *((caressing Amy's head))* |
| 16 | | When you go to *school*, |
| 17 | Amy: | *((nods))* |
| 18 | Dad: | And if you *aren't*- |
| 19 | | If you start to get a *fe*ver, |
| 20 | | Then you can come *home.* |
| 21 | | Remember the other day your stomach |
| 22 | | hurt a little bit? And then it got o*kay*. |
| 23 | Amy: | *O*kay. |
| 24 | Dad: | All right? *((taps Amy's shoulder as she exits))* |
| 26 | | Then it's time to go to *school.* |

**Example 5:** From diagnosis to grooming (from Goodwin and Cekaite 2018:125).

In Example 5, what begins as a form of diagnostic touch transforms into a grooming episode. Nine-year-old Amy has attempted to get out of going to school by claiming she is sick. Daddy summons Amy and, with a diagnostic touch to her neck (lines 1–3), begins checking for fever. Daddy subsequently begins to ask her more extended questions about other aspects of her being ill (lines 5–9). Positioning Amy in a configuration vis-à-vis him, Daddy is able to closely inspect other parts of her body (lines 13–14). After grooming a blue speck on her eyebrow, he begins some extended caressing of her hair and shoulders. Gentle strokes are closely timed to the low and soft rhythmic cadences of each of Daddy's phrases (lines 16–20). Daddy accounts for why he has made the decision that Amy should indeed go to school but provides a way out for her should she feel worse during the day (lines 19–20). Multiple features of wellbeing (health, grooming and education) are attended to by a loving father, who overlays his verbal expressions of care with soft caresses.

Hugs within supportive interchanges, such as greetings, provide another way of displaying intimacy (Goffman 1971:63). In Example 6, Cynthia (age 6) and her sister Michelle (age 10) knock at the door. When the younger child enters, there is ecstatic kinesic activity as Cynthia jumps up to put her arms around her father's neck, before a mutual kiss that produces a loud 'smack' sound (lines 8–9). Here there is mutual ratification of the greeting and embodied display of affection. Dad kisses and hugs his girls and asks about their day at school (lines 10 and 16). The intercorporeal alignment of participants demonstrates mutual affective regard.

```
 1  Dad:       ((looks out window, sees children))
 2  Cynthia:   ((knocks at  kitchen door))
 3  Dad:       Who is it.  ((opening door))
 4             Cynthia James,
 5             Hi Babe.
 6  Cynthia:   Da- Daddy! ((jumps, reaches
 7             up to put arms around Dad's neck))
 8             Mmm ⌈m
 9  Dad:           ⌊Mmm wah!  ((kiss))
10             How was your day.
11  Cynthia:   °Good.
12  Michelle:  Hey Daddy.
13  Dad:       Hey Shell.
14             Mmmm ⌈((kiss))
15  Michelle:       ⌊((kiss))
16  Dad:       How was your day Babe.
17  Michelle:  Good.
```

**Example 6:** Joyful homecoming greeting (from Goodwin and Cekaite 2018:164).

In a second example of a homecoming reunion, we again examine how intense reciprocal forms of affect are displayed by both parent and child. After the doorbell rings, Amy (age 9) runs immediately to Poppy (the partner of Daddy, Example 5), smiling, with an excited directive to '*READ! READ*!' (line 2) the paper she has in her hand. Answering her, Poppy provides a loud excited, 'YOU GOT AN A*WARD*!' followed by an enthusiastic response cry: 'YA *HOO::::::*!' (line 4). Poppy enthusiastically responds to his daughter's announcement with an assessment that applauds the specialness of Amy's achievement: 'The *Prin*cipal's Award, *That's* no small a*ward*!' (line 9) and 'Congratula*tio::ns*!' (line 12). This talk is produced with dynamic pitch excursions that match the intensity of the tactile dimension of celebration which Amy and Poppy produce in a mutual, sustained, full-bodied hug (Example 7).

```
1              ((doorbell rings and Amy runs in holding letter ))
2   Amy:       READ! READ! ((smiling, jumping)) ((claps hands))
3   Poppy:  Wha(hh)t.              ⌊((reads letter))
4              YOU GOT AN A  WARD! YA HOO::::::!
5   Amy:                         ⌊((jumps up and down excitedly))
6   Poppy:  For what! For what!
7              For wha:t! ((hugs Amy with  left arm))
8   Amy:     It's um, the Principal's Award.
```



```
F: the:: prinCipal's awa::rd.          tha t's  no  s small award
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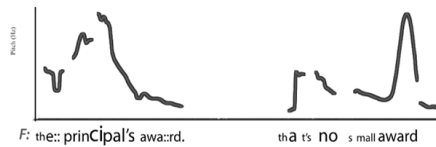
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9   Poppy:  The Principal's Award.      That's no small award!
10  Amy:    Hm,
11  Dad:    Wo::::::w, That's this- Oh it's next Friday.
             . . . .
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12  Dad:    Congratulatio::ns! ((Amy and Dad embrace))
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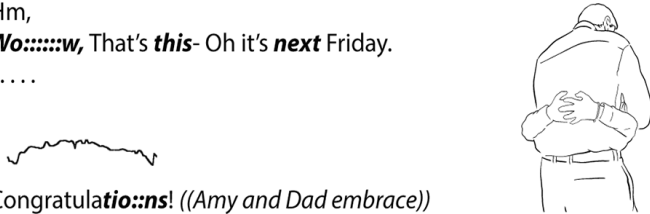
**Example 7:** Enthusiastic homecoming and hug (from Goodwin and Cekaite 2018:166).

In the context of putting children to bed, fathers display forms of intimacy through overlaying their talk with distinctive voice qualities (either whispered or creaky voice). In a bedtime closing with Kei (Example 8), Dad first says 'Good *night*, Sweet *dreams*' (line 2). Then in a creaky voice (indicated with '~'), he says '~love you~' (line 3). While creaky voice is generally considered a distinctively female voice quality (Freed 2014:630–633),

I found that both men and women made use of creaky voice. Dad's talk in creaky voice occurs right at the moment of highest affect, when Dad is caressing his daughter's cheek. Dad's final move, "°O*kay*. Good *night*', is whispered (as indicated by the degree sign '°' in line 4). This softened voice quality, like creaky voice and the caress, engenders a special framework of intimacy. Across a range of routine activities, forms of intimacy among dads and children occur during moments of care, homecoming greetings and while saying good night at the close of the day.

*((Dad folds sheet, blanket, & coverlet over Kei's body, except for her head))*

1   Dad:   [ I'm **tuck**ing you in. Good **night**.
           [ *((while arranging covers))*

2          Good **night**, Sweet **dreams**, *((kiss))*
           *((as kisses Kei, his body surrounds her))*

3          ~**Love** you.~ *((caresses Kei's forehead with left hand))*

4          °O**kay**. Good **night**. ° *((right hand on bed))*
5   Kei:   Good night.

**Example 8:** Dad's goodnight routine (from Goodwin and Cekaite 2018:173–174).

## Conclusion

Through ethnographic investigation, I document the in-situ lived practices through which individuals build their social relations. My studies reveal that African American and Latina girls are highly litigious in their conduct, whether building opposition moves in hopscotch or constructing accusations. Girls have a strong sense of a moral code of justice and fairness, countering many stereotypical notions. In addition, they can provide hurtful talk that excludes other girls and is anything but caring. With respect to men's roles in the family, we find that men of various ethnicities – both

straight (Examples 7 and 9) and gay (Examples 6 and 8) – maintain and nourish deeply caring relationships with their children through talk and touch. More ethnographic studies of situated multisensorial and multi-modal practices in everyday life will allow us to better examine the full intersectionality of ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation throughout the lifespan.

## About the author

Marjorie Harness Goodwin is Distinguished Research Professor of Anthropology of at UCLA. With a focus on video analysis and multi-modality, her research deals with the embodied practices and affective stances through which members of peer groups, families and workplaces construct their social relations with one another. She is the author of *He Said She Said: Talk as Social Organization among Black Children* (Indiana University Press, 1990), *The Hidden Life of Girls* (Blackwell 2006) and *Embodied Family Choreography, Practices of Control, Care and Mundane Creativity* (with Asta Cekaite, Routledge, 2018).

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