women's prenoting date is not individualists, has a grow abgarrance "a sum session unevances are corresponding date" is not individualists, has a grown abgarrance "a sum session Oughtapping bads : not conjuntation, but suppose in Outproposed for the competitive and was aumonstroved as where filmed on agreences fluorotaring - use of the filmed on agreences fluorotaring - use of the filmed on agreences fluorotaring - use of the filmed on agreences fluorotaring in the constant of the state of the fluorotaring of the state of the filmed of the constant of the filmed of the constant of the cons are jointly constructed and speakers make overlap-

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aving friends is something most of us take for granted. This means that the things we do in order to make friends and to sustain friendship are so much part of our everyy social practice that they are pretty much invisi to us. But doing friendship is a significant complishment. Some people find it difficult, or tit wrong; others never grasp what it means to be

Being a friend involves talking, and the centrality talk in women's friendships has been widely doc nented by researchers. The women I have inter wed are very clear about the importance of talk th friends. When I asked them what they did with e emphatically, "we talk, primarily we talk,"

ile, and eventually said: "For me just what I nember about the relationship is . . . just you ow, the amount of time we just spent sitting ound and talking."

🦊 Women discuss highly

personal issues, such as

chila abuse, periods,

relationships. Men, by

But we know very litabout friendly talk —(3) nat are its chief characistics? How does it ffer from other kinds talk? How does it susn friendship? Is the k of women friends fferent from the talk of en friends? Certainly, nen the friends are

omen, the talk is often given derogatory names ch as gossip, chit-chat, natter, names which monstrate society's low evaluation of women's (5 Itural practices. Over the past 12 years I have corded women and girls (and also men and boys) king with their friends, with the aim of finding out w such talk works and how it constructs and aintains friendship. What is most striking about "Ik of women friends is that the construction of

a joint effort. The group takes priority over e individual and the women's voices combine to instruct a shared text. A good metaphor for talking out this is a musical one - the talk of women ends is a kind of jam session. Women friends rive at each others' homes and, after a brief warm over a glass of wine or a cup of tea, start playing lo passages alternate with all-in-together ensem e passages. Friends improvise on each others emes, share painful and funny experiences, laugh themselves and with each other.

Utterances are often jointly constructed; in other ords, speakers often co-operate to produce a unk of talk. For example, in one of the conversa-

All-male and all-female groups converse differently. While women's voices combine and overlap, men take it in turns to hold court. Jennifer Coates explains (see ou 748

sure he's not/peeping" (about a neighbour), was produced by two friends, the second speaker adding the last word to complete the chunk. Jointly constructed utterances may involve more than just the final word, as in the following example: "They said they kept bumping into all sorts of people/that they knew", where it's the second speaker who adds the clause "that they knew". It is possible for several

speakers to be involved in this kind of shared construction. The next example comes from a conversation where three friends are trying to define Schadenfreude. "It's sort of pleasure/a perverse pleasure in/in their downfall/yeah/yeah." The contrast, prefer politics 7 three speakers work as one to express an idea, with the addition of "yeah" from two

of them at the end, to accept what they have jointly

Another feature of conversational jam sessions is overlapping talk, and it is a feature that strikes any one who listens to a recording of women friends' conversation. Women friends often combine as speakers so that two or more voices may contribute to talk at the same time. This kind of overlapping speech is not seen as competitive, as a way of grabbing a turn, because the various contributions to talk are on the same theme. For example, in a conversation about looking after elderly parents, one woman said, "all of a sudden the roles are all reversed", while at the same time her friend said, "you become a parent, yeah". In a conversation about an eccentric mother, one woman said, "she cooks really invehtively" at exactly the same time as her friend said "she's a really good cook". Sometimes, two friends will say the same words at the same time, as in this example (about a school play), where the second part of the utterance was produced by both women simultaneously: "Every line they played for a laugh/got a laugh."

ns I have collected, the following utterance, "I'm (6) This kind of collaborative talk where utterances

ping contributions, involves great skill. Participants have to monitor each other very carefully in terms of grammar and meaning and intonation. This is something all speakers learn to do, but the conversational jam session involves a more sophisticated use of the skills we employ in everyday conversation. The conversational jam session symbolises what friendship means to us: as we say parallel things on the same theme at the same time, we are demonstrating in a concrete way the value we place on collabora tion. Our individual voices merge and blend in a joint performance. Women's friendly talk is also characterised by the sensitive use of hedges (words and phrases like "maybe", "sort of", "I mean", which damp down the force of controversial utterances and help preserve open discussion), and by the frequent use of questions whose main function is interactive rather than information-seeking (ie, the question, "there are limits aren't there?", checks that a shared perspective obtains and does not expect an aswer except perhaps for "yeah" or "mhm").

The recordings I have made of conversations between male friends reveal that men's friendly talk follows different patterns: male friends prefer a oneat-a-time pattern of talking, with one speaker holding the floor at any one time; overlapping speech is avoided. Men also hedge less, and they use questions to seek information from each other, taking it in turns to play the expert. These differences are closely related to the topics characteristic of allmale and all-female talk. The women's talk I have recorded involves discussion of highly personal issues, such as child abuse, periods, relationships, as well as talk about more general topics. The sharing of personal experience is matched by the sharing of the conversational floor. Men, by contrast, seem to prefer more impersonal topics (politics, beer-making, sound systems, for example), topics that allow participants to take turns at being the expert.

It seems then that the talk we do with our friends is important not only in terms of creating and sustaining friendship but also in terms of constructing ourselves as gendered beings, as women or men. Far from being trivial, the talk we do with our friends performs essential work in terms of our sense of who we are, and is crucial to our sense of wellbeing. Friendship, and the talk that accomplishes friendship, has been undervalued for too long. As one of the interviewees said: "It (friendly conversation) is absolutely like the blood of life."

Jennifer Coates is professor of English language and linguistics at Roehampton Institute, London. Women Talk. Conversations between Women Friends will be published by Blackwell in July.

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