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The embodied, interactional origins of systemic inequality in conversation

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Abstract

Multi-person conversation is a crucible for social organization and human ingenuity. But not everybody gets equal access. Members of minority and marginalized groups can struggle to participate. Why? Explanations have focused on institutional factors, socialization (e.g., feminine communication styles), or ubiquitous prejudice. Here, we propose that it may be a pernicious consequence of otherwise rational processes: namely, the role of experienced-based prediction in negotiating turn-taking during communication (e.g., through gaze allocation). Using an agent-based model, we demonstrate that this mechanism suffices to explain phenomena that have been reported empirically, but without a unified treatment: members of minority or marginalized groups talk less; this is more pronounced in larger groups; despite talking less, they are perceived to talk more; they are more likely to be interrupted. Besides practical implications for increasing participation by underrepresented groups, we discuss theoretical implications for the emergence of group-level inequality from individual cognitive processes.