

Playful and Aggressive Use of Irony in Adolescent Conversations with Siblings and Friends

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A stylized silhouette of a mountain range in shades of teal, located in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Acknowledgments



Verbal Irony Coding Group

SPRG, 2010



Observational Study of Verbal Irony

- ◆ Past research on irony in adolescence has focused on judgments about meaning and intent in hypothetical situations
- ◆ Less is known about how adolescents use irony in naturally occurring conversations.
- ◆ Potentially useful window into normative use of irony.

Current Study

- ◆ Exploratory, descriptive analysis of playful and aggressive use of irony.
- ◆ Roles of gender and partner (sibling vs. friend) in adolescents' use of various forms of verbal irony.

Sibling-Peer Reseach Group (SPRG) Longitudinal Study



SPRG Longitudinal Study

- ◆ Ongoing longitudinal study of sibling and friend interactions
- ◆ 108 white, middle-class participants from western New York
- ◆ Approximately half male, half female
- ◆ Home visits: early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence
- ◆ Videotaped with sibling (2 years younger or 2 years older) and with same-age, same-sex friend
- ◆ Sibling pairs half same-sex, half mixed-sex

SPRG Adolescent Follow-up

- ◆ Target children age 17
- ◆ Ongoing—to date, ~ 40 families have been visited; 28 have been coded.
- ◆ Videotaped at home making brownies with one partner (sib/friend), pizza with the other
- ◆ Videotapes transcribed and coded for instances of verbal irony.
- ◆ Ironic utterances further coded for type, form, valence, impact, intent, communicative function, partner response, and affective intensity.

Verbal Irony Definition

- ◆ Speaker intentionally says one thing but means another; underlying meaning differs from surface meaning.
- ◆ Way of conveying meaning indirectly.
- ◆ Often signaled by changes in intonation/pitch:
 - higher or lower than normal pitch
 - sing-song intonation
 - exaggerated articulation
 - slower or faster than normal speech
 - obvious imitation of another's style of speech
 - "Air quotes"

Types of Verbal Irony

- ◆ ***Sarcasm***—form of irony in which ridicule is aimed at a specific target (either the partner or a third party) and seems intended to sting
- ◆ ***Jocular***—a form of irony in which speakers tease one another in humorous ways

Forms of Ironic Utterance

- ◆ ***Hyperbole (Overstatement)***—exaggerating reality of situation or overstating the obvious.
- ◆ ***Understatement***--stating far less than is obviously the case.
- ◆ ***Rhetorical questions***--asking a question that implies either a humorous or critical assertion.

Impact (*mitigation* vs. *intensification*)

- ◆ Mitigation: use of irony decreases/softens impact of utterance on listener.
- ◆ Intensification: use of irony increases/intensifies impact of utterance on listener.
- ◆ Either way, irony can be a way for speaker to disavow intent of utterance (“Oh, I didn’t really mean that!” “I was joking!”)
- ◆ Examples

Intent (*aggressive* vs. *playful*)

- ◆ Presence/absence of overt hostility and intent to harm.
- ◆ Similar to distinction between aggression and rough-and-tumble play
- ◆ Based on affective cues (facial expression, tone of voice, etc.), response of partner, social context

Communicative function

- ◆ Distancing speaker from utterance
 - ◆ Affiliative/bonding/solidarity—often involves mocking third party
 - ◆ Dominance/one-upping
 - ◆ Covering embarrassment/awkwardness
 - ◆ Problem of multiple functions
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Coding Issues

- ◆ Difficult because intent is important in verbal irony—not always easy to discern.
- ◆ Existing definition in literature not easy to operationalize.
- ◆ Gender issues in coding—especially discerning intent and social function for opposite gender.

Results

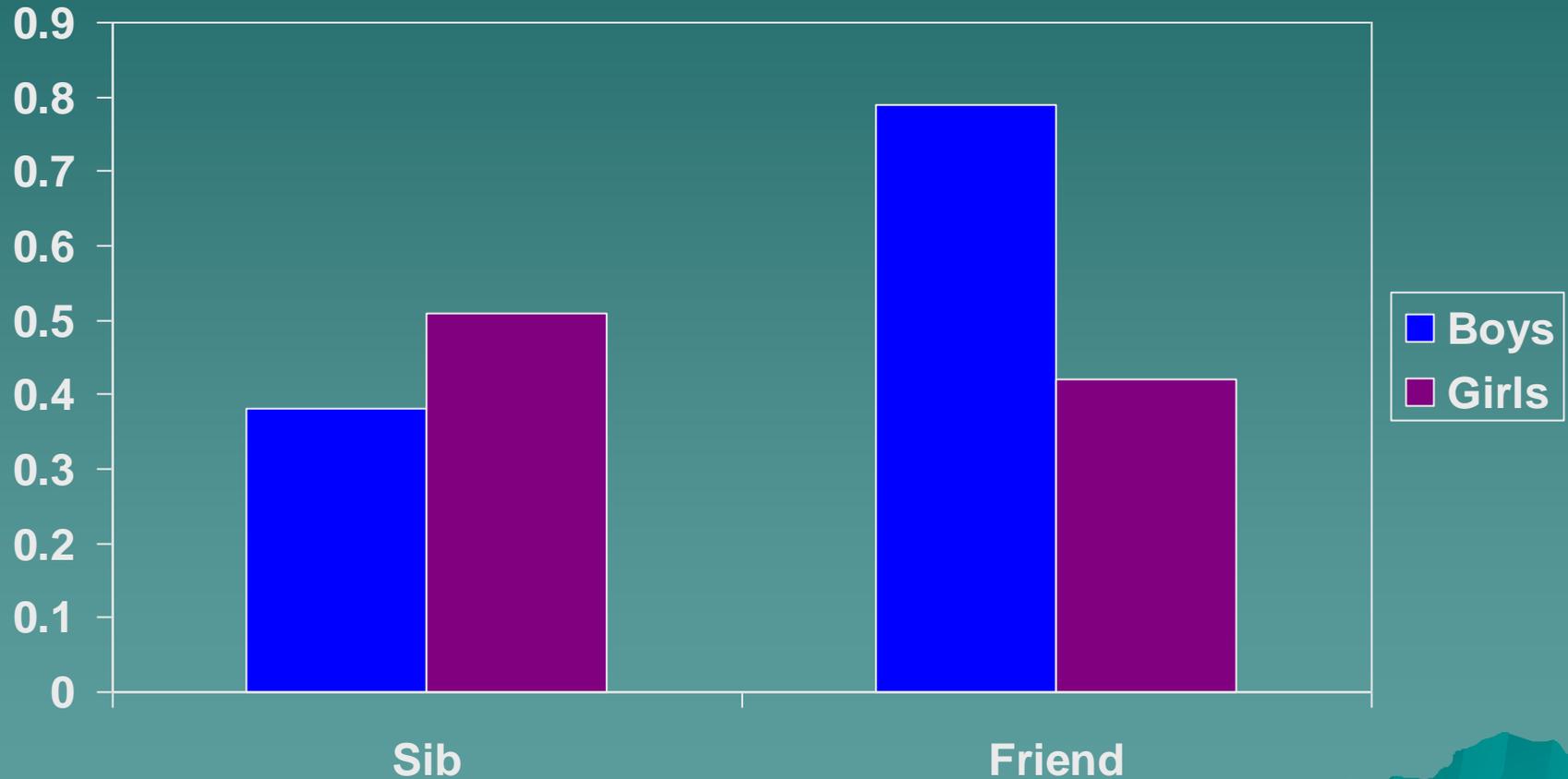
All results based on:

- ◆ Dyadic sarcasm and jocularity rates
- ◆ Partner x Target child gender x Sib gender repeated measures MANOVAs.

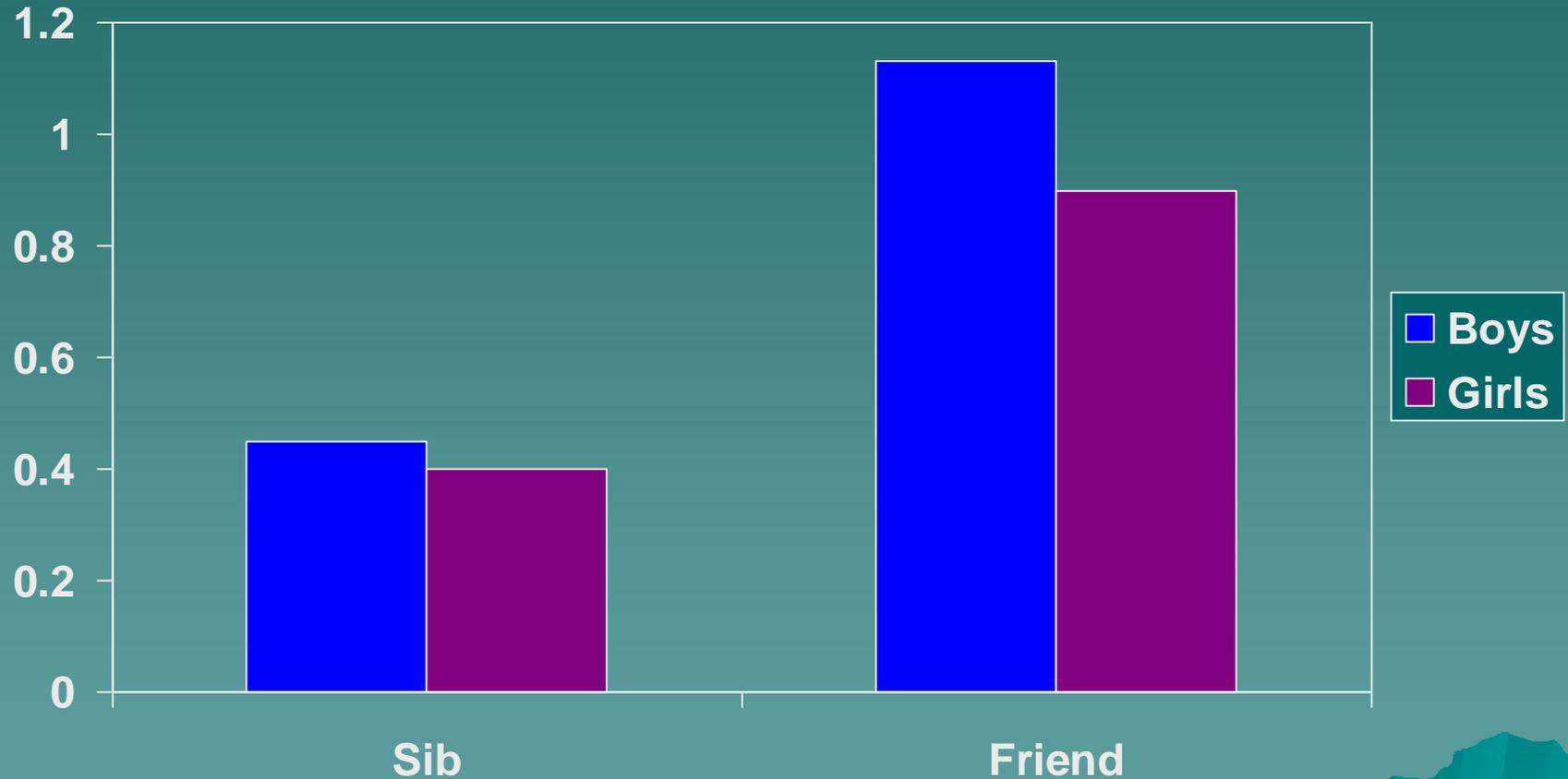
Overall Prevalence

- ◆ High variability—from no irony to wall-to-wall irony.
- ◆ Range (utterances/session):
 - Sibling sarcasm: 0-19
 - Friend sarcasm: 0-37
 - Sibling jocularility: 0-27
 - Friend jocularility: 0-37

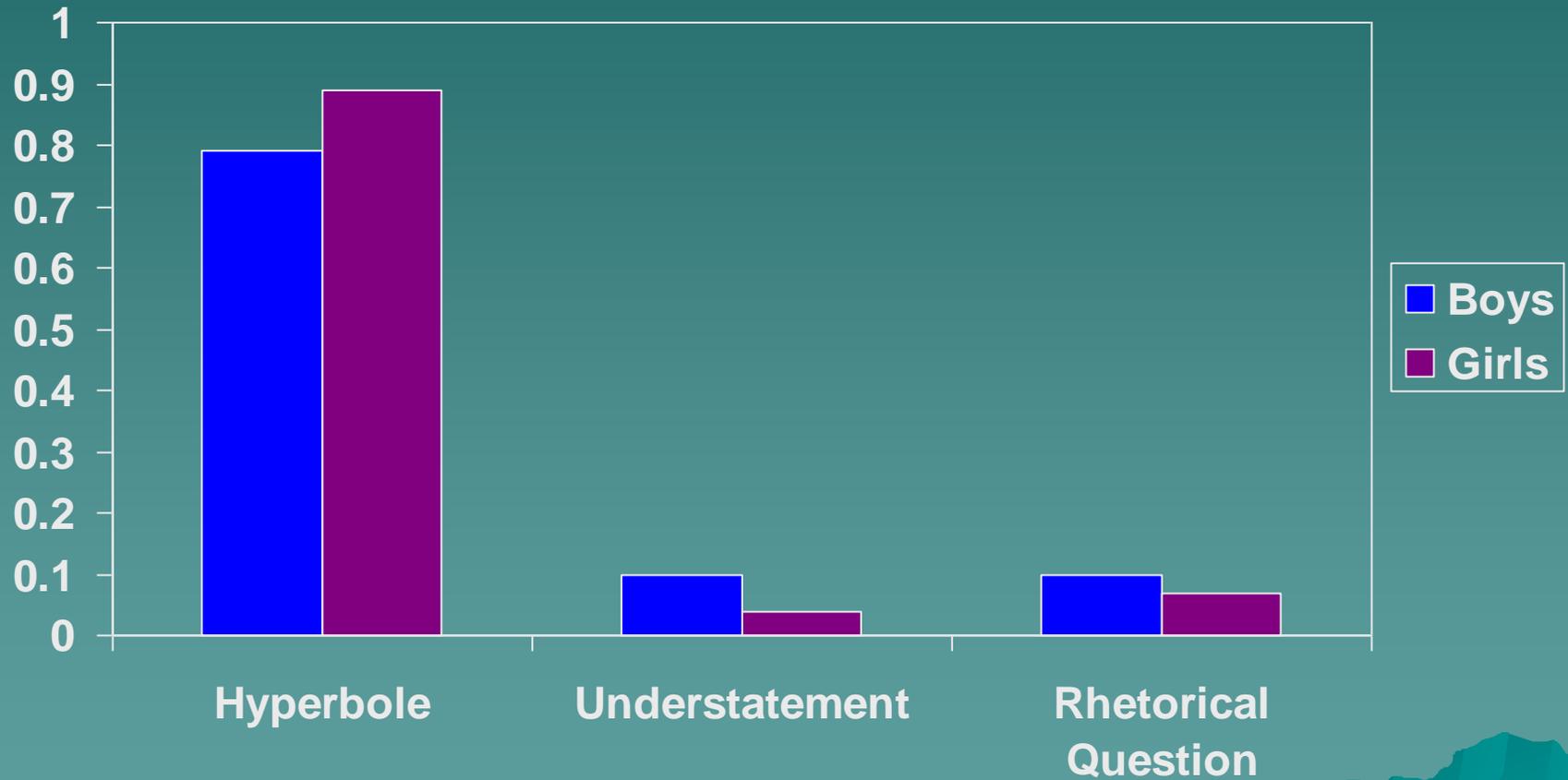
Sarcastic Utterances per Minute of Social Engagement



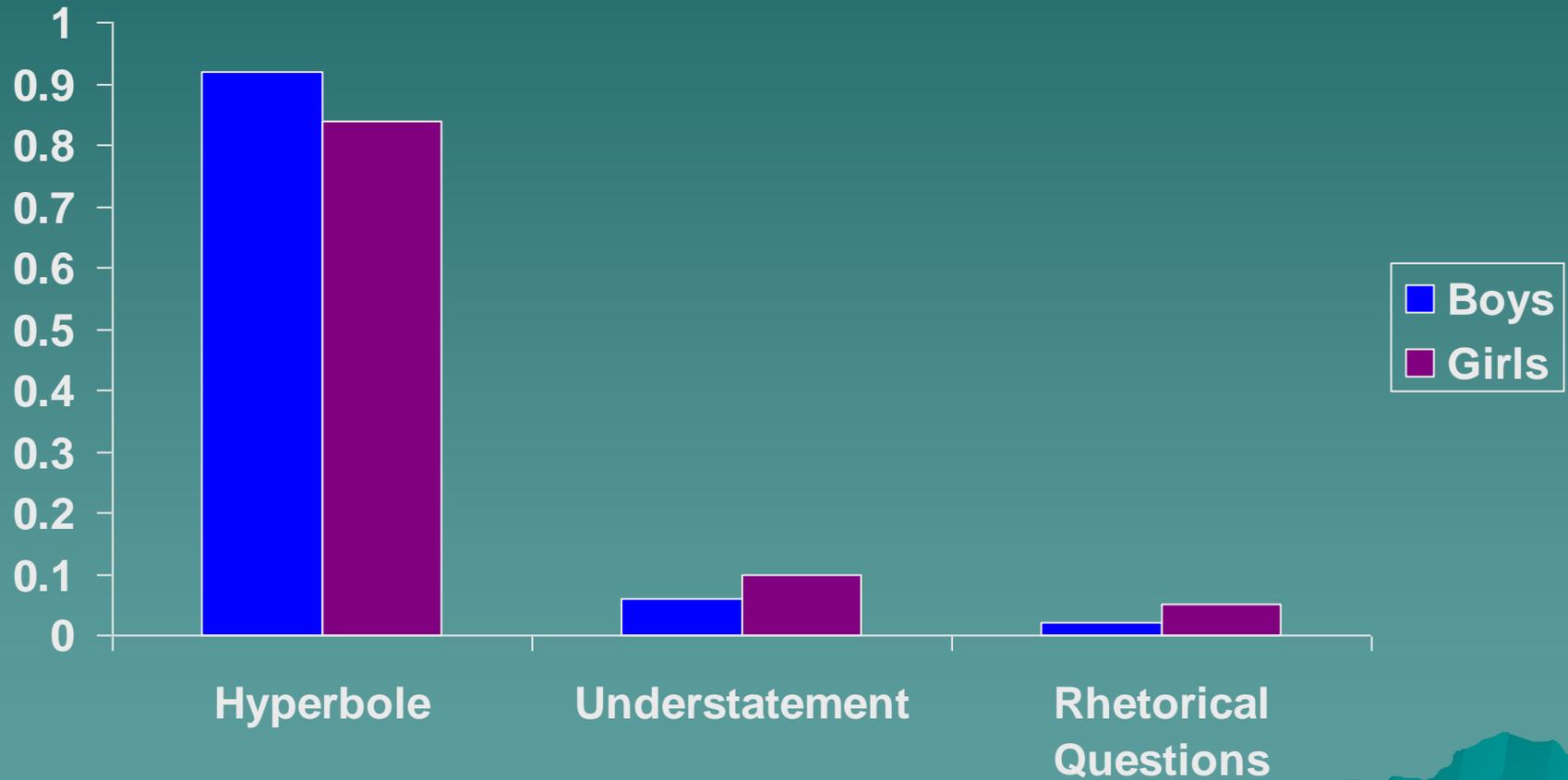
Jocular Utterances per Minute of Social Engagement



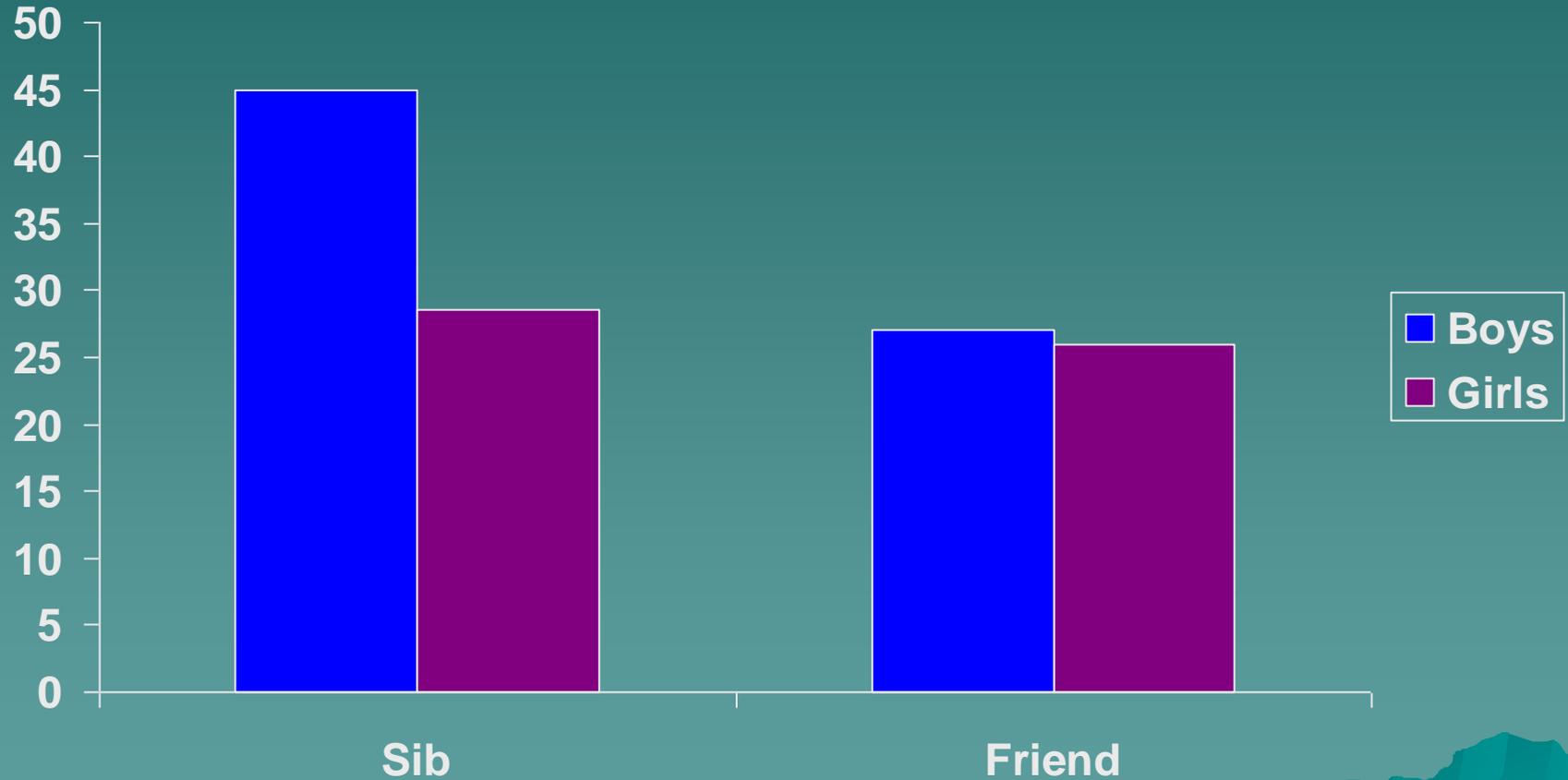
Utterance Form--Sarcasm



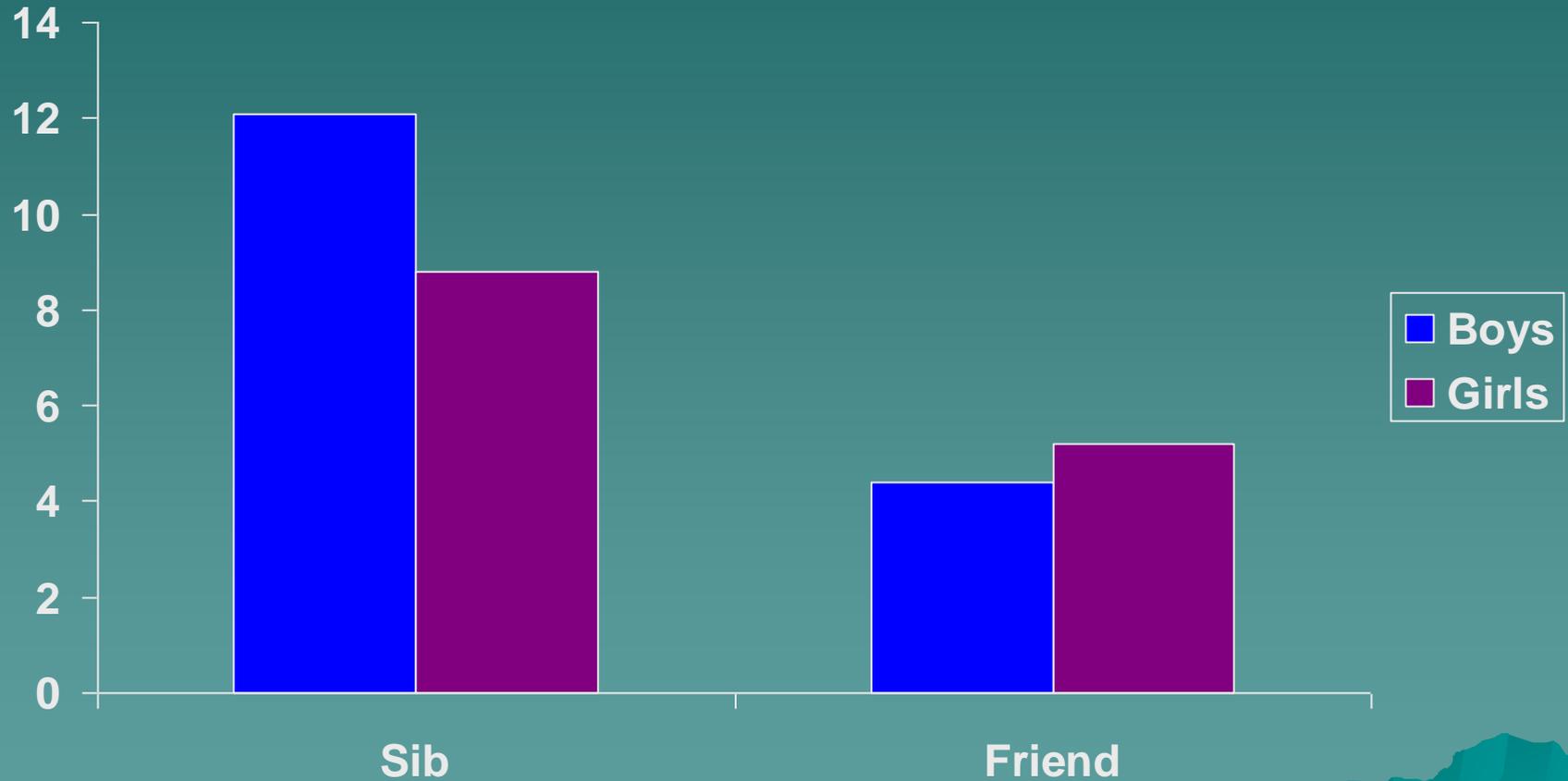
Utterance Form--Jocularity



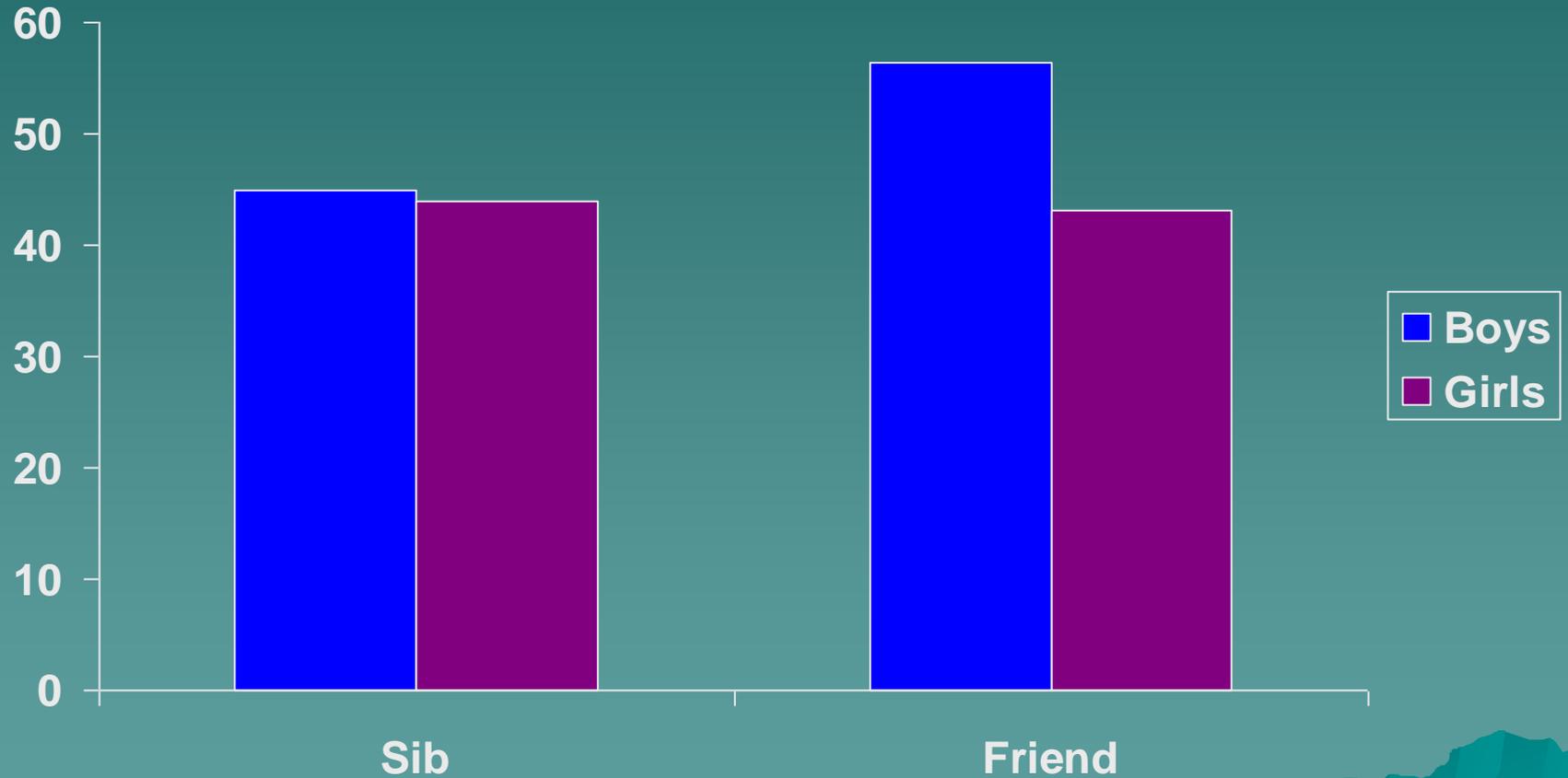
% Aggressive Intent--Sarcasm



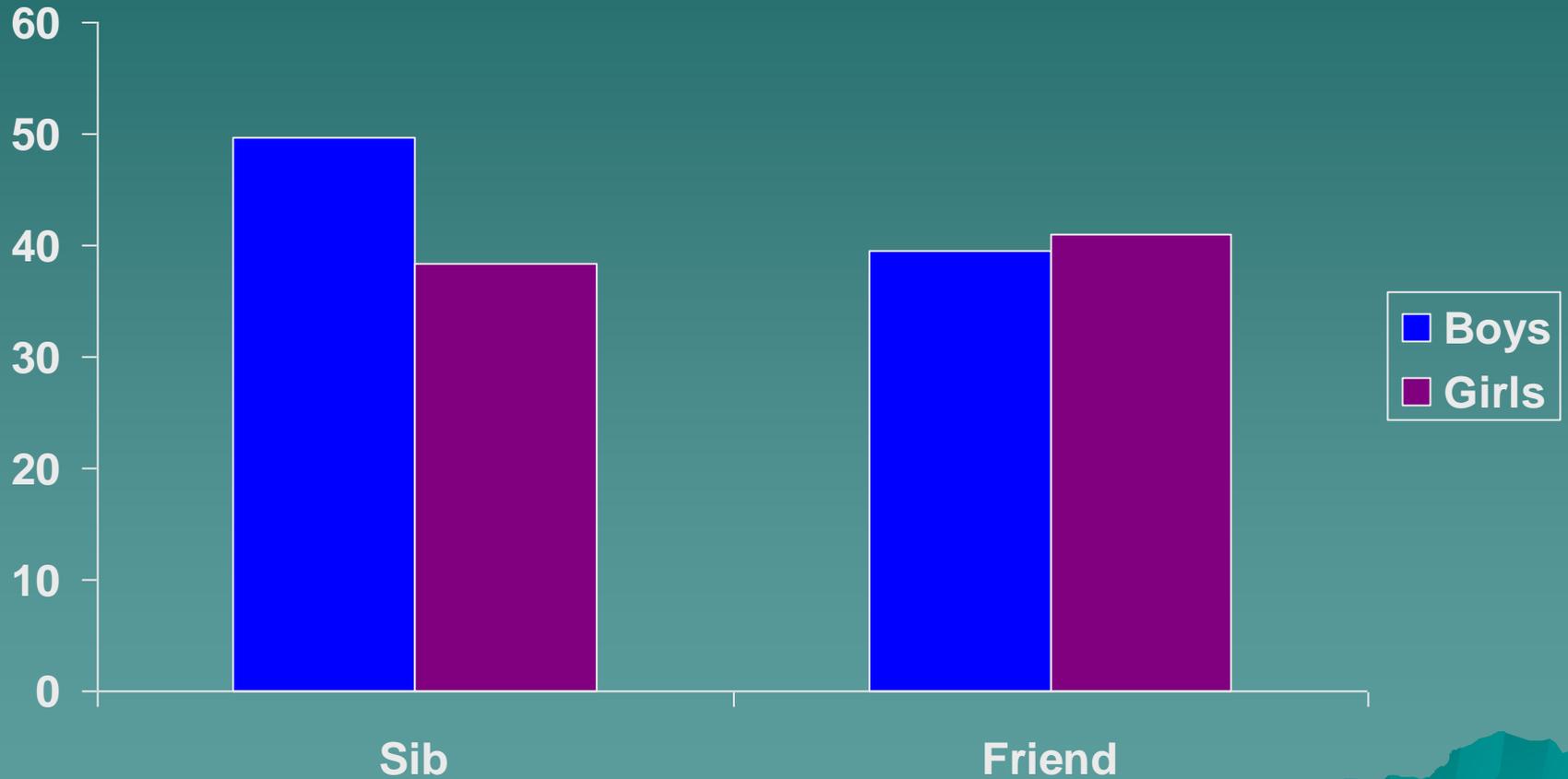
% Aggressive Intent--Jocularity



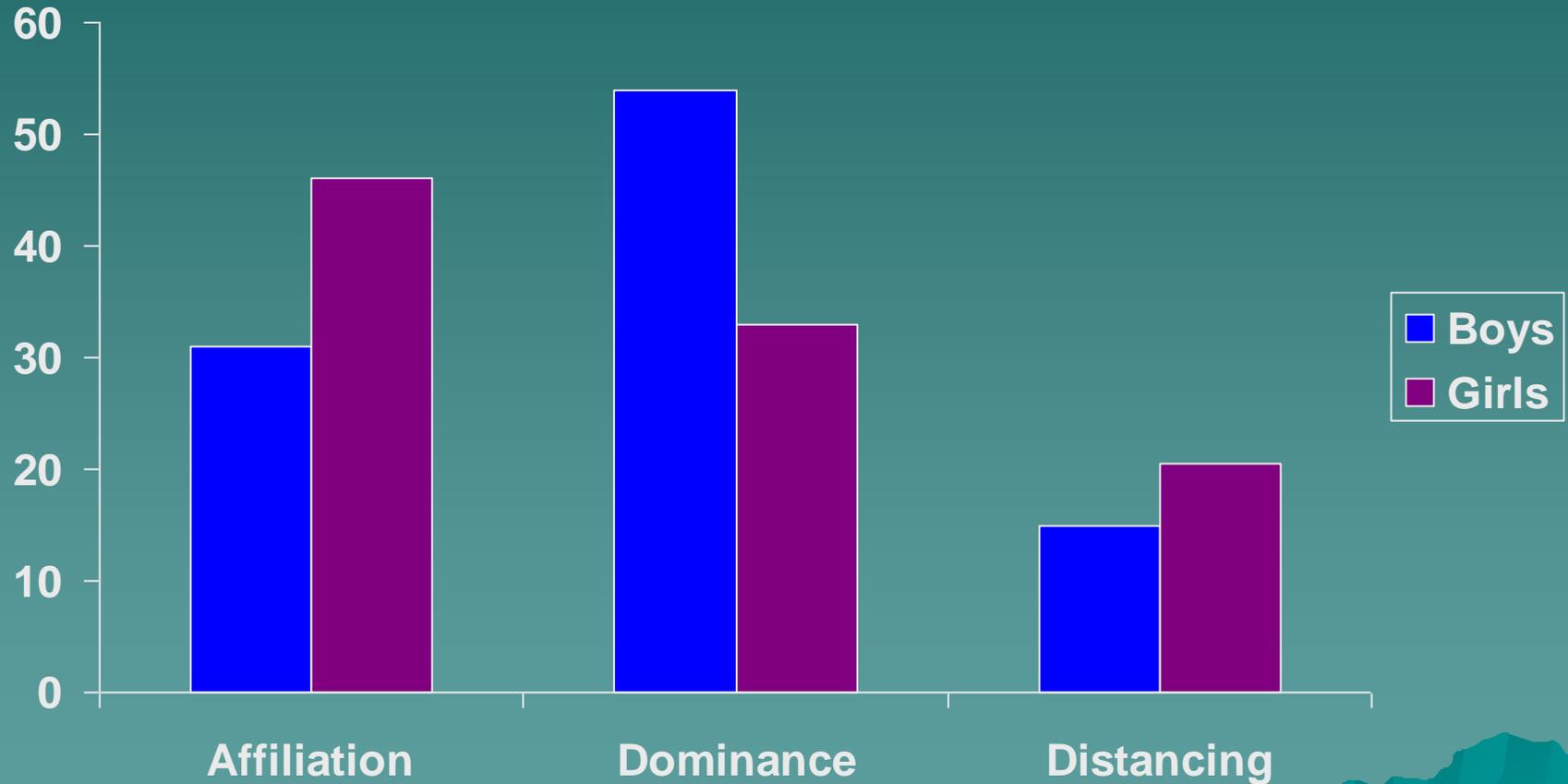
% Mitigation--Sarcasm



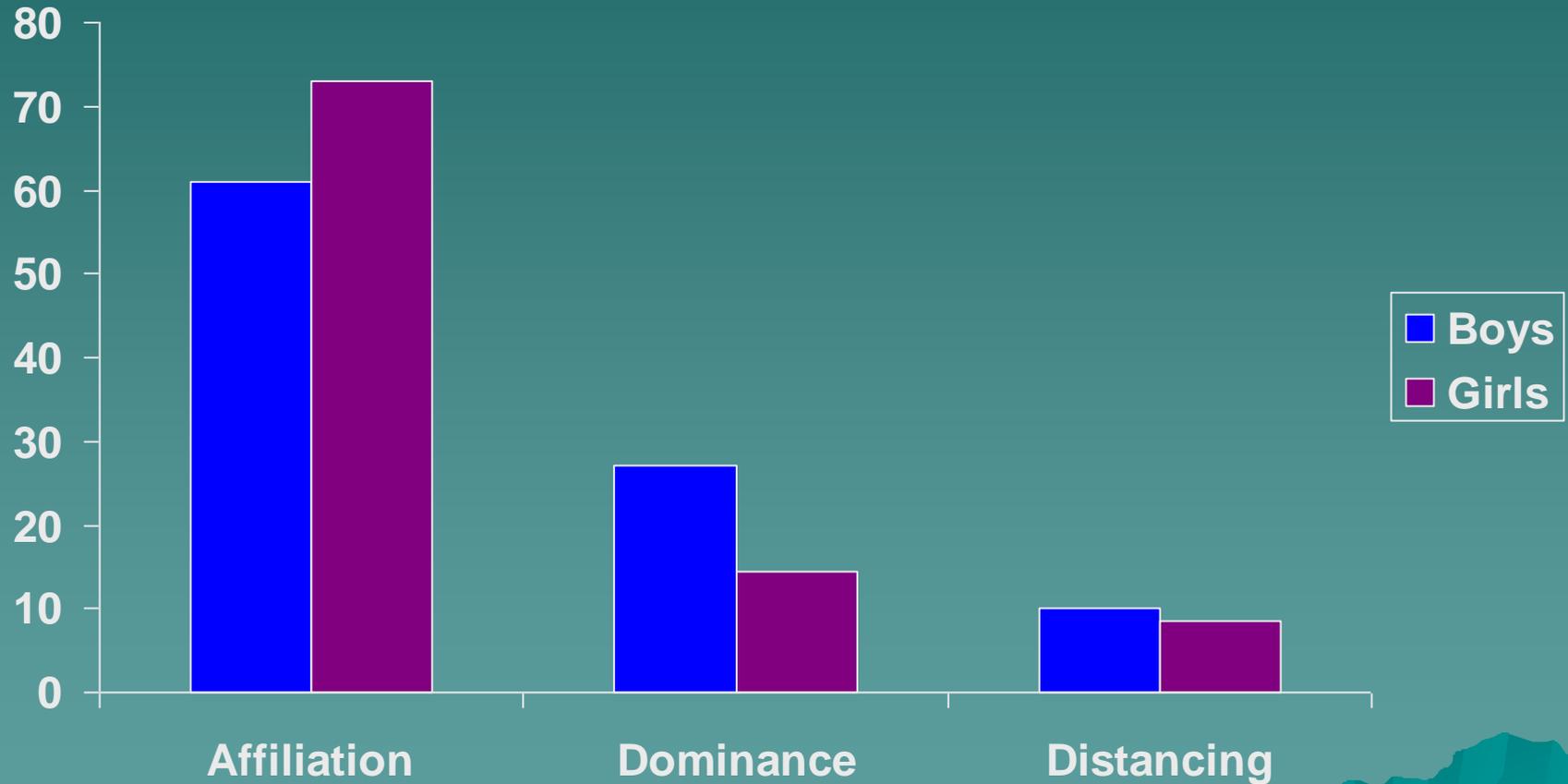
% Mitigation--Jocularity



Communicative Function--Sarcasm



Communicative Function-- Jocularity



Discussion/Implications

- ◆ It does seem to be possible (though not easy) to code verbal irony observationally.
- ◆ Both partner and gender matter in adolescents' use of irony.
- ◆ Patterns somewhat complex and not always exactly as expected.
- ◆ Results concord well with previous research on related topics (e.g., relational aggression, assertive and affiliative use of language).

Future Research/Analyses

- ◆ Additions to sample.
- ◆ Further refinement of coding scheme.
- ◆ More fine-grained analyses of how categories interact.
- ◆ Analysis of connections between use of various forms of verbal irony and other aspects of sibling and friend relationships.