Training Women To Be More Assertive in Mixed-Sex Task-Oriented Discussions

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This study tests the effectiveness of assertiveness training in increasing the level of women's participation in a small mixed-sex task-oriented discussion. Undergraduate women who met both self-descriptive and behavioral criteria for low activity participated with three active undergraduates in a pretest and posttest discussion, each with a different topic and with nonoverlapping group membership, as well as in either an experimental or a control intervention. Experimental subjects received behavioral training in assertiveness while functioning essentially as a fifth member of several tape-recorded discussions. Assertiveness training was successful, with experimental subjects differing from controls on dependent measures reflecting three independent sources of information: (a) the subject's own behavior, as coded by an experimental assistant; (b) pretest and posttest group members' perceptions of the subject's behavior; and (c) the subject's perceptions of her own behavior. These results are interpreted as consistent with the view that a lack of assertiveness in the presence of men—rather than any lack of substantive knowledge or conceptual skill—depresses women's participation in mixed-sex discussions.

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In the last few years, a rash of manuals and workshops on assertiveness training for women have appeared on the market (e.g., Bower & Bower, 1976; Bry, 1975; Butler, 1976; Phelps & Austin, 1975). These books and workshops attempt to remedy a problem that women's political and consciousness-raising groups have identified (e.g., Bird, 1969; Henley & Freeman, 1975; Piercy, 1973). In particular, many women feel that they are unable to say what they want to say when they want to say it, particularly in interactions with men. In response to this problem, women seek and therapists employ a barrage of techniques in order to overcome both internalized fears and interpersonal roadblocks.

Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of these techniques has lagged far behind their popular acceptance. In order to narrow the gap, this study devised and tested a training procedure that attempts to increase women's assertiveness in the context of a mixed-sex task-oriented discussion.

Previous research has found that when men and women are together in small task-oriented group discussions, men are more active in the discussion than women, and men also produce a greater number of task-oriented comments. Specifically, men have been found to make a greater number of substantive comments such as suggestions, opinions, and orientations or instructions to the group as a whole; and men have also been found to elaborate and expound more upon their ideas. In contrast, women have been found more likely to produce short incomplete sentences and to defend their ideas with a simple "uh-huh." This sex difference has been found with adults (Nemeth, Endicott, & Wachtler, 1976; Strodtbeck, James, & Hawkins, 1958; Strodtbeck & Mann, 1956; Aries, Note 1; Cooperstein, Note 2; Hall, Note 3), with adolescents (Lockheed, Note 4), and with elementary school children (Zander & Van Egmond, 1958). Moreover, it has been found even with men and women who are known to have equal levels of professional development and relevant background knowledge (Hall, Note 3). Because this sex difference in overall activity level has not emerged in the context of same-sex interaction (Borgatta & Stimson, 1963; Lockheed & Hall, 1976; Cohen, Barchas, Leavitt, & McMahon, Note 5), it appears to be the presence of men per se—rather than any lack of substantive knowledge or conceptual skill—that depresses women's participation in the context of mixed-sex interaction.

The intervention to be described and evaluated in this article represents an attempt to train women to be more assertive in the context of a mixed-sex task-oriented discussion (i.e., to take the floor when they think they have something to say and to keep the floor long enough to say it persuasively), despite any feelings of lesser status they may have and despite any attempts made to interrupt them.