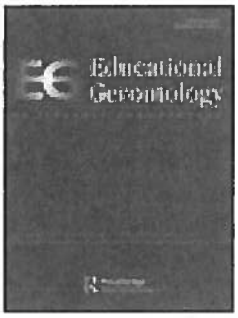

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GROUP DYNAMICS IN A DISCUSSION GROUP FOR OLDER ADULTS: DOES GENDER PLAY A ROLE?

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Lifelong learning programs continue to grow in span and scope. Few studies, however, have investigated how older adults themselves participate in group learning. The central question explored in our study was as follows: Does gender play a role in group dynamics for older adults? Two groups of volunteers (age 62 to 96 years) enrolled in a 16-week discussion group. Groups were videotaped and turns at talk were counted. Results revealed that although men were the minority, they accounted for a substantial proportion of the turns at talk for both groups. Further research on lifelong learning is needed to understand how gender dynamics may affect older learners.

Educational programs for older adults, from college-level courses to informal classes at local senior centers, continue to grow. There is a

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substantial literature on lifelong learning programs and older adults to include types of programs, positive effects of learning, and benefits of increased social activity (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Lamb & Brady, 2005; Long & Zoller-Hodges, 1995; Ostiguy, Hopp, & MacNeil, 1998; Schneider, 2003; Weinstein, 2004). While much is being done to understand who the older learners are and what motivates them to attend classes, little is known about *how* these older learners participate in the educational setting. Specifically, are older learners' patterns of participation similar to patterns of younger groups, or are group dynamics in older learner environments somehow different (Moxnes, 1999; West, Lazar, & Kramarae, 1997; Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Valenkamp, 2004)? Understanding the "how" of older adult learning is an area of inquiry that is beginning to receive increasingly more attention.

Of special interest in our investigation is the role of gender in shaping the dynamics in older learning groups. As Browne (1998) and others have suggested, older adults are often treated as a homogenous, genderless group by researchers, educators, and others (Biggs, 2004; Cruikshank, 2003; Ginn & Arber, 1995; Ray, 2000; West et al., 1997). It should be noted that many researchers have begun to address the particular needs and experiences of older women as a group (Long & Zoller-Hodges, 1995; Ray, 2000), and that focusing on women has been important for many reasons. Women currently comprise the majority of older adults, with the ratio of women age 65 to 100 to older men 65 to 100 being approximately 10 to 7 (Federal Interagency Forum, 2004). Women have also been underrepresented frequently in gerontological research (Browne, 1998; Ginn & Arber, 1995). Finally, older women tend to participate in older adult learning programs in much greater numbers than men (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Long & Zoller-Hodges, 1995; Ostiguy et al., 1998).

Although understanding older women is important, it is also essential that we do not do so at the expense of not exploring mixed gender groups. It is worth investigating questions such as the following: Does older women's majority status (or men's minority status) affect the dynamics in group learning? Are the dynamics similar to those in younger groups where men tend to dominate the speaking floor? There may be several reasons for differences in group dynamics of older adults versus younger adults participating in a learning program. Motivations for group participation may differ between younger and older learners, which may affect participation. For example, younger learners may be more driven by a desire to compete for job skills whereas older learners may be more driven by a desire for self-enrichment (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Lamb & Brady, 2005; Ostiguy et al., 1998; Schneider, 2003). Acculturation may also influence

participant behavior; Older men who may have been acculturated to be more competitive in sports and in the workforce may approach a group situation with a competitive, dominant edge that differs from women, who may have been acculturated to take on more relational, inclusive approaches in group settings (Tannen, 1986).

Our study focused on the importance of understanding gender and group dynamics in older age. We drew from several complementary literatures including group dynamics, discourse and education, and adult learning, all of which suggest an important relationship between talk and power within groups (Berdahl & Anderson, 2005; Carey & Smith, 1994; Davies, 1996; Mast, 2002; Okamoto & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Tannen, 1986; Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004). Taking a close look at who's talking within the group by counting each participant's turns at talk can provide insight into who has asserted and/or has been given power and who has not.

Theories of group dynamics and talk often focus on who's doing the talking in the group, whether one speaker is "allowed" to speak more than others, and strategies such as interruptions or humor that are used by group members to gain the conversational floor (Davies, 1996; Mast, 2002; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1999; Okamoto et al., 2002; Okamoto & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Sacks et al., 1974; Tannen, 1986; Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004). Mast (2002), for example, citing earlier work on dominance in groups by Bales (1950), argues that group dominance can be measured by the amount of group participation through talk. Higher participation would indicate higher levels of dominance. In a metaanalysis of several studies on group dominance and speaking, Mast examined whether dominance, measured by length of speaking time and perceptions by other group members, was related to gender, competitiveness of the setting, and/or group size. Results revealed that men in a gender-mixed group often talked more but were not necessarily perceived as being dominant by others in the group, especially women. Men in same-gender groups who talked more, however, were perceived as being more dominant by the other male group members.

In another study, Thomas-Hunt and Phillips (2004) investigated whether mixed gendered task-oriented teams gave more speaking time to members who were experts on a given task area or whether gender influenced who was considered "expert." They hypothesized that women would be perceived as being less expert than men, that women would have less influence on group decision making than men, and that women would have less confidence about their ability to influence the group's decision making than men. Participants, who

were undergraduate business students, were given a series of evaluations after performing group-related decision-based tasks. Results revealed that women were perceived as being less expert than men despite their knowledge in a particular subject area. However, both men and women evaluated their own confidence level of expertise negatively. Women also had less overall influence over group decision making.

Davies (2003) used a discourse analysis approach to examine talk, gender and learning in a secondary school environment. In her research, she found that girls in mixed gender classes tended to form "learning communities" and form friendships outside of the actual classroom. But, they actually talked less than the boys in their classes. According to Davies, the girls "remained the often unconscious victims of boys' language" (p. 129). In short, even though the girls in Davies' studies benefited outside the classroom, the boys dominated the discussion in the classroom. Whether the results of these and other studies would be similar in groups of older adults has yet to be thoroughly explored.

GROUP DYNAMICS AND OLDER LEARNERS

Although the overall literature on gender dynamics in groups suggests male dominance, exhibited through both talk and through the perceptions of other group members, it is unclear whether older adult learning groups follow the same patterns. There are several reasons to suggest that older adult learners would be different. As stated earlier, around 70% of older adults in learning programs are women, putting women into the overall majority (Long & Zoller-Hodges, 1995; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Ostiguy et al., 1998). Also, the older adult learning groups are not based on gaining a competitive advantage. Therefore, there doesn't appear to be a need for an "expert." Nor is there any personal advantage to dominate the talk. Yet, the literature has not adequately addressed the topic to provide a clear understanding. Ballester, Orte, March, and Lliver (2005), for example, explored "meaningful learning" and classroom talk in university programs attended by older adults. In their study, they examined interactions between older students and the instructor. They analyzed transcripts for points in the discussion in which the instructor was able to use a particular educational strategy (e.g., personal question) to elicit a certain type of response (discussion on the applicability of the current reading to the student's life experience). Ballester and colleagues did not examine gender dynamics, however, nor did they provide information on the gender of the instructor or the students. Knowing

whether older men or women within a class would respond to a particular type of educational approach (e.g., direct question versus open discussion) could be helpful in informing educators of adult learners.

To better understand the question of gender and adult learning environments, we posed three general research questions:(a) Do women, as a majority gender in a discussion, dominate the talk? (b) Do group members perceive there to be a dominant voice within the group? (c) How do group members rate their own participation? To investigate our research questions, we examined group dynamics in two older adult discussion groups.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 36 participants (10 men and 26 women) age 62 to 96 years were recruited from the independent living apartments of a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) in the greater Baltimore area. Recruitment was accomplished through informational flyers sent to all of the CCRC's independent living residents and through notices placed on bulletin boards and closed circuit television announcements. Inclusion criteria were a Mini Mental State Exam (MMSE) (Folstein, Folstein, & McHugh, 1975) score > 23 and the ability to speak and understand English. Participants who enrolled in the study were divided into two groups based on gender to ensure an even distribution of men and women. The participants were also divided on convenience of meeting time for the subject (9 a.m. for Group 1 or 10:30 a.m. for Group 2). A total of 17 participants (5 men, 12 women) were assigned to Group 1; 19 (5 men, 14 women) were assigned to Group 2.

All subjects were provided an overview of the discussion group and study procedures. Prior to the first discussion group meeting, written informed-consent forms were completed, as approved through the University of Maryland, Baltimore County's (UMBC) Institutional Review Board.

THE ACTIVE LEARNING DISCUSSION GROUP

Participants were enrolled in the Active Learning Discussion Group, which met in a conference room at the CCRC for 60 minutes a week for 16 weeks. The Active Learning Discussion Group was developed by the Touchstones Discussion Project, a nonprofit organization founded and directed by professors (tutors) from St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. The curriculum is based on edited short

Table 1. A list of discussion group readings or paintings by week

Week#	Title of excerpt and author
Week 1	*About Revenge*, Francis Bacon
Week 2	*The Manual*, Epictetus
Week 3	*Two Paintings*, Rembrandt
Week 4	*Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes
Week 5	*Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley
Week 6	*Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant
Week 7	*The Rhetoric*, Aristotle
Week 8	*The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius
Week 9	*The Federalist Papers-#10*, James Madison
Week 10	*Love and a Question*, Robert Frost/*Waking*, Yevegeny Yevtushenko
Week 11	*The Power of Words*, Simone Weil
Week 12	*Use and Abuse of History*, Friedrich Nietzsche
Week 13	*Woman Holding a Balance* Johan Vermeer; *Diamond Painting*, Piet Mondrian
Week 14	*Illiad: Achilles and Priam*, Homer
Week 15	*Six Maxims*, La Rochefoucauld
Week 16	*The Republic: Allegory of the Cave*, Plato

readings from classic texts and paintings, which were read aloud or presented during the meeting period (Touchstones, 2004). Table 1 provides a list of the excerpts by week. All participants were assigned a notebook that included the weekly readings and four evaluation forms. Notebooks were distributed and collected at the beginning and ending of each discussion group to minimize participants' ability to "read ahead," which could give some members an advantage in discussions. At the beginning of each discussion group meeting, the Touchstones Discussion Project facilitator read aloud the day's excerpt twice. Afterwards, subjects were asked to reflect quietly on the readings for a few moments prior to the beginning of the discussion. The discussion was initiated by a question from the facilitator followed by comments and questions by participants. A list of ground rules in the notebook reminded participants to listen to others, avoid interrupting, and to speak clearly. All discussion groups' meetings were videotaped.

Assessments and Procedures

Several types of data were gathered: basic demographic background information; performance on the MMSE prior to the discussion group's onset; discussion evaluations completed at weeks 4, 8, 12, and 16; and video tapes of each discussion group meeting. Demographic data included the participant's gender, date of birth, marital status, and

description of education ("junior high school, some high school, high school, some college, college degree, or graduate or professional degree"). The MMSE (Folstein et al., 1975) is an 11-part test which assesses orientation, memory, attention, narrative verbal comprehension, and visuospatial abilities. The normal scoring range for older adults is 26 to 29 out of 30 possible points (Drebing, Van Gorp, Stuck, Mitrushina, & Beck, 1994). A score of 23 or less may be indicative of possible cognitive impairment (La Rue, 1992).

DISCUSSION GROUP EVALUATIONS

Two sets of discussion evaluations, developed by the Touchstones Discussion Project, were administered at the conclusion of the discussion on weeks 4, 8, 12, & 16. The first discussion evaluation focused on the group and asked the participant to rate on a scale from 1 to 5(1 being "none" and 5 being "a great deal") 11 aspects of group dynamics. The aspects of group dynamics rated included dominance by some individuals, cooperation, silence, interruption, respect, balanced participation, active listening, lack of interest, asking others questions, building on contributions, and many people talking at once. Participants were also asked to provide an overall rating of the discussion group from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest rating. The second evaluation asked participants to rate seven aspects of their own participation in terms of frequency of participation, interrupting others, listening to others, soliciting opinions, building on others' comments, keeping focused, and encouraging others to speak. Analysis of the evaluations included overall group ratings and characteristics and changes in individual ratings over time.

Video Tape and Turns at Speaking

Discourse analytic techniques were used to evaluate turn taking during the group discussion. Each discussion group was videotaped and later analyzed for number of speaking turns (Lomax & Casy, 1998). A speaking turn was defined as the point at which a speaker enters into the conversation (Okamoto, Rashotte, & Smith-Lovin, 2002; Sacks et al., 1974.) Speaking turns for all participants and the facilitator in each group were counted for each discussion group meeting. Only speaking turns in group-wide discussions were counted. Comments made during small group work or during exercises when the facilitator "went around the room" to ask each participant for a comment were not counted because these turns were not part of the group dynamics being studied. In addition, simple one-word responses were

also not counted. To count, a response needed to consist of at least one sentence's worth of comments.

RESULTS

Participants

All participants were European American and scored within the acceptable range from the MMSE. A summary of age, education and marital status for each group are as follows:

Group 1
There were 17 participants (5 men, 12 women) in Group 1. The age range for men was 70–81 years ($M=78$; $SD=4.53$). For women, the age range was 69–92 years ($M=80.75$, $SD=7.45$). The mean years of education for men was 16.5 years ($SD=1.67$); 15.67 years ($SD=2.23$) for women. Of the men, 2 were widowed, 2 married, and 1 divorced. Of the women, 9 were widowed and 3 were married.

Group 2
Group 2 was assigned 19 participants (5 men, 14 women). The age range for men in this group was 66–92 years ($M=76.5$, $SD=11.12$). For women, age ranged from 63–96 years ($M=80.79$, $SD=7.82$). Mean years of education for men was 15.6 years ($SD=.89$), while mean years of education for women was 14.86 years ($SD=1.29$). Of the men, 3 were married and 2 were widowed. Of the women, 3 were married, 9 were widowed, and 2 were divorced.

DISCUSSION GROUP EVALUATIONS

Discussion group evaluations were analyzed at weeks 4 and 16 to determine whether personal perceptions changed over the course of meetings (See Table 2). Rating scores were similar for both groups with a few exceptions. Group 1 reported an average amount of cooperation among group members during week 4 while Group 2 reported a higher level of cooperation than Group 1. By week 16, however, both groups reported similarly high levels of cooperation. Group 1 also initially rated respect among group members lower than did Group 2 for week 4 but increased their rating by week 16. Two-tailed t tests were conducted on the mean week 4 and week 16 rating scores. None were significant.

Results of change over time were also analyzed by group and gender. In Group 1, the men reported no change over time in their view of the number of interruptions, respect among group members,

Table 2. Mean (±*SD*) evaluation scores by group for Weeks 4 and 16*

Evaluation question	Week 4 Group 1 ($n = 14$)	Week 4 Group 2 ($n = 15$)	Week 16 Group 1 ($n = 14$)	Week 16 Group 2 ($n = 15$)
Dominance by some	2.92 (.76)	2.93 (.80) *n*	2.79 (.43)	2.29 (.91)
Cooperation	3.31 (.95)	4.07 (.88)	4.29 (.61)	4.40 (.13)
Silence	2.46 (1.20)	1.57 (.76)	2.46 (1.05)	2.13 (1.19)
Interrupting	2.15 (.80)	2.07 (.88)	2.21 (.80)	2.00 (.85)
Respect	3.85 (4.41)	4.33 (.62)	4.64 (.50)	4.67 (.50)
Balanced participation	2.85 (.38)	3.4 (.83)	3.29 (.73)	3.87 (.74)
Active listening	3.62 (1.26)	3.93 (1.41)	4.07 (.62)	4.40 (.83)
Lack of interest	2.23 (1.09)	1.92 (1.32)	2.00 (.88)	1.15 (.30)
Asking on other person questions	2.69 (.75)	2.64 (.75)	2.71 (.47)	2.60 (1.18)
Building on one other person's contributions	3.08 (.49)	3.40 (.50)	3.43 (.85)	3.87 (.83)
Many people talking at once	2.00 (.82)	1.47 (.74)	1.93 (.73)	1.67 (.82)

*1 indicates "none" and 5 indicates "great deal."

active listening, lack of interest, asking questions of others, and number of people talking at once. They reported a one-step increase in their perception of group dominance and a one-step decline in cooperation, silence, balanced participation, and building on others' thoughts and comments. The women's reported change in perception was much greater. Although they reported no change in dominance or many people talking at once, they reported a 4-point

Table 3. Means (±SD) for self evaluations for week 16 by group and gender*

	Group 1		Group 2	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
How often do you participate?	2.50 (±.71)	1.82 (±.75)	3.0 (±.00)	1.82 (±.41)
How often do you interrupt others?	2.00 (±.00)	1.40 (±.52)	2.00 (±.00)	1.18 (±.41)
How often do you listen to all the participants?	3.00 (±.00)	3.82 (±.41)	3.50 (±.71)	4.0 (±.00)
How often do you solicit other opinions?	2.00 (±.00)	1.64 (±.67)	1.50 (±.71)	1.91 (±.70)
How often do you build on what others say?	1.50 (±.70)	2.09 (±.83)	1.00 (±.00)	1.82 (±.98)
How often do you keep focused and on task?	2.50 (±.71)	3.36 (±.67)	3.00 (±.00)	3.55 (±.52)
How often do you encourage quieter participants to speak?	1.00 (±.00)	1.36 (±.67)	1.00 (±.00)	1.45 (±.69)

*1 indicates "very little" and 4 indicates "all the time."

decrease in cooperation and a 3-point decrease in respect and active listening. Table 3 provides a summary of participants' self evaluations by gender and group.

Turns Speaking

Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Speaking turns were analyzed in relation to the percentage of an individual's overall participation and by aggregate participation by gender for each group.

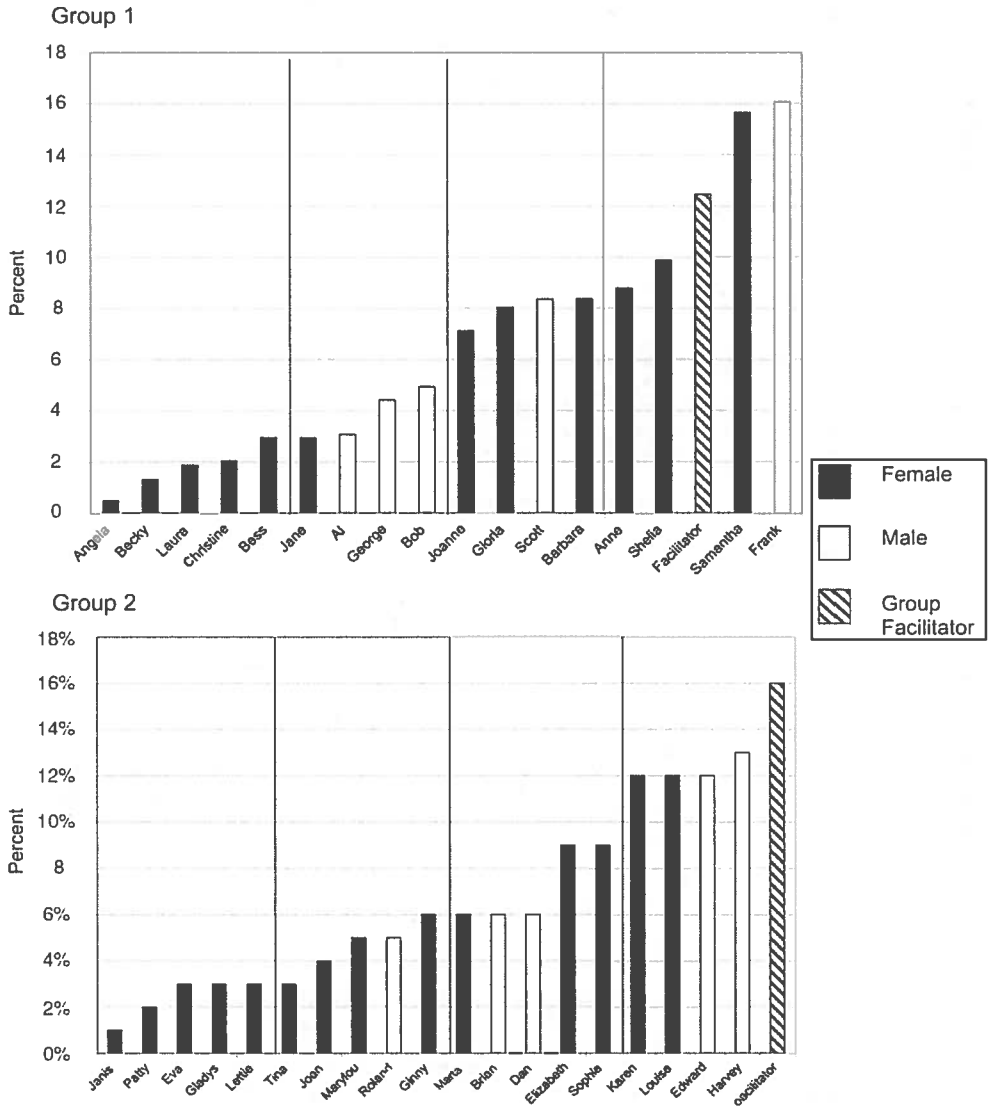
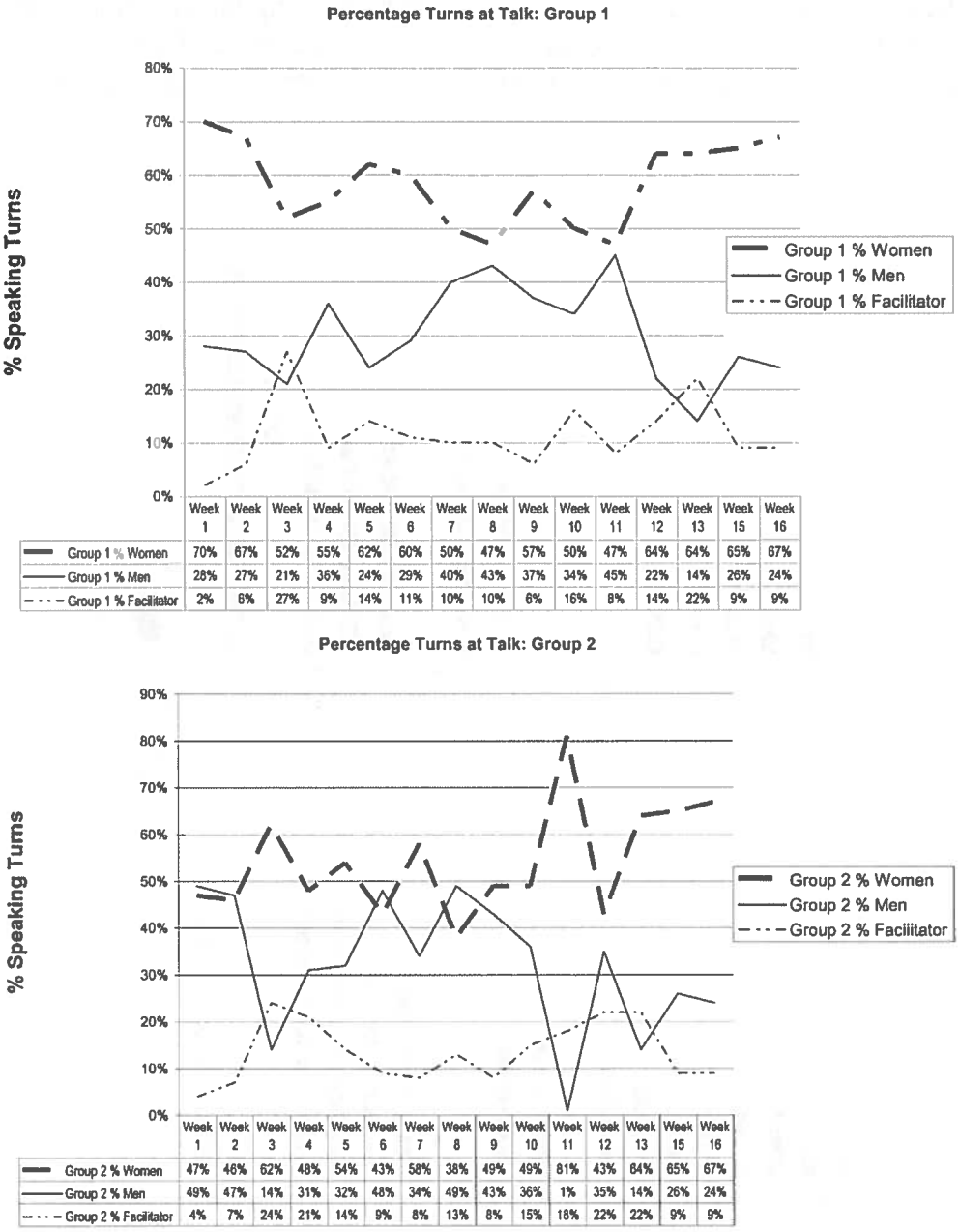


Figure 1. Percent of speaking turns by individual based on number of discussion sessions attended.

Turns were not included for week 14, however, due to a malfunction in the video camera during that week. Figure 1 shows the average percentage of speaking turns for each individual on days when he or she was present, not as a total percentage over the 16 weeks. For example, when Frank was present, he took an average of 16% of



	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13	Week 15	Week 16
Group 1 % Women	70%	67%	52%	55%	62%	60%	50%	47%	57%	50%	47%	64%	64%	65%	67%
Group 1 % Men	28%	27%	21%	36%	24%	29%	40%	43%	37%	34%	45%	22%	14%	26%	24%
Group 1 % Facilitator	2%	6%	27%	9%	14%	11%	10%	10%	6%	16%	8%	14%	22%	9%	9%

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13	Week 15	Week 16
Group 2 % Women	47%	46%	62%	48%	54%	43%	58%	38%	49%	49%	81%	43%	64%	65%	67%
Group 2 % Men	49%	47%	14%	31%	32%	48%	34%	49%	43%	36%	1%	35%	14%	26%	24%
Group 2 % Facilitator	4%	7%	24%	21%	14%	9%	8%	13%	8%	15%	18%	22%	22%	9%	9%

Figure 2. Percent of speaking turns by week for women, men, and facilitator for groups 1 and 2.

the speaking turns. In both groups, the percentage of speaking turns of the male participants is spread across the upper three quadrants.

Figure 2 shows the aggregate percentage of participation for men, women, and the group facilitator by week over the 16-week period for both groups. Actual percentages are listed in the data table before each graph. Of special note is the change in percents for women, men, and the facilitator during week 12 for Group 1 and week 11 for Group 2. In Group 1, Bob announced his withdrawal at the beginning of week 12's discussion because of comments made during week 11 with which he disagreed. In Group 2, Harvey also withdrew in week 12 after being asked by the facilitator to refrain from providing background during the week 11 meeting. In both groups, the loss of a male participant led to a more pronounced dominance by female participants for the remaining weeks. There was also an increase in facilitator comments in Group 2.

DISCUSSION

In examining the gender/talk dynamics in the two groups, several interesting aspects emerged. The most dramatic was the withdrawal of prominent male members, which occurred in both groups at approximately the same time (week 11). As previously stated, Bob formally withdrew from Group 1 at the beginning of week 12, following the discussion of Simone Weil's *The Power of Words*. Bob had not been a dominant participant (he spoke around 5% of the time when he attended). However, he was one of only five men, and his withdrawal from the group had a notable impact on the other members, including the facilitator. As Figure 2 illustrates, the percentage of speaking time for women ($n=12$) was only slightly higher than for men ($n=5$) in Group 1 prior to week 12. After week 12, not only did the women account for a greater percent of turns at talk, but the facilitator's contributions to the discussion also increased—at least during weeks 12 and 13—to 22% before decreasing to 9% in weeks 15 and 16. This suggests that the facilitator took more of an active role in the discussion group during these two weeks, perhaps to keep the discussion moving along. By the final two weeks, Group 1 appears to have been able to recover from the loss of Bob and begin working again as a cohesive group.

In Group 2, Harvey was asked by the facilitator to refrain from spending discussion time on a critical review of the author's work. Given that the purpose of the discussion group was to have participants begin from a similar starting point, outside preparation was discouraged. Harvey attended the week 11 session but did not

contribute to the discussion. He subsequently decided to withdraw from the group since he felt that outside preparation was necessary. Harvey's silence in week 11 is very noticeable in Figure 2. On the day of the discussion, women ($n=14$) took 81% of the conversational turns while men took only 1% ($n=5$). As in Group 1, the facilitator's participation increased slightly, from 14% the prior week to 18% in week 11. After Harvey's withdrawal, the women's overall turns at talk increased slightly. However, the facilitator's speaking time increased a lot, suggesting that the group began to rely more on the facilitator to keep the discussions going.

It is unclear from the data, however, whether the loss of Bob and Harvey enabled silent members to participate more frequently or whether those present simply talked more often to compensate for the loss. The data from the personal evaluations, therefore, become helpful in shedding light on members' perceptions from within the group. Over the course of the 16 weeks, both men and women in both groups reported only a slight decrease in dominance by other group members despite each group losing a member. Perceived levels of dominance remained around the midpoint between "none" and "a great deal." This result was somewhat surprising because we expected to see dominance sharply decrease from week 4 to week 16, especially with the increase of participation by women. This could indicate that the perceived dominant speakers were women, and that the speakers who were dominant (regardless of gender) continued to be so throughout the course of the discussion group.

Another interesting finding from the self-evaluations was the difference in men and women's perceived participation levels during the final week. Comparing the responses in Table 3 with the data in Figure 1, men did seem to participate overall more than women, with men's speaking turns appearing in the top 75% of all turns for both groups. Women rated their own levels of participation lower. Given the number of low contributors in both groups (i.e., women who talked less than 4% of the time), this seems to be an accurate assessment.

It is important to note that the data in this study are meant as a first-step inquiry into group dynamics in learning groups of older adults. The experiences of group members of this study are certainly not generalizable to other groups or other older adult learners. However, it does raise some interesting questions worthy of further investigation: How do women and men view the gendered participation of other members (e.g., do men feel that women talk more or vice versa)? Is there a way of better balancing turns at talk within a group, or will there always necessarily be low participators? Are there

strategies that could minimize dominance by some group members in a way that would encourage continued talk without alienating other group members? Investigating these and other similar issues will hopefully provide additional opportunities to improve the lifelong learning experience for elders.

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