

Powerful/Powerless Language Use in Group Interactions: Sex Differences or Similarities?

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This paper examines sex differences in powerful/powerless language (interruptions, disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions) in the small group context by juxtaposing two competing theoretical frameworks. A test of five contrasting hypotheses revealed little support for the dominant "dual cultures" approach for investigating sex differences (i.e., men will use more powerful language while women will employ more powerless language). Instead results were much more supportive of a "gender similarities" approach to understanding sex differences, showing no significant differences between women and men in their use of interruptions, hedges, and tag questions. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed for research on sex differences, powerful/powerless language use, and small group communication.

KEY CONCEPTS Powerful/powerless language, sex differences, group interaction, interruptions, disclaimers, hedges, tag-questions

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Two decades ago, in a review of sex differences in group communication, Baird (1976) noted distinctions between men's and women's communication. He summarized his findings:

Males, encouraged to be independent, aggressive, problem-oriented, and risk-taking, generally are more task-oriented in their inter-actions, more active and aggressive verbally, . . . and more likely to assume leadership in task-oriented situations. Females, taught to be non-competitive, dependent, empathic, passive, and interpersonally oriented, typically are more willing to self-disclose, more expressive of emotions and perceptive of others' emotional states, . . . and less likely to assume leadership, although capable of providing leadership in certain situations. (p. 192)

Since Baird's (1976) early assessment, research on sex differences in group communication has become more prominent. Investigations of sex differences in leadership behaviors, distinctions between men's and women's groups, and examinations of sex differences in member interaction styles have been the dominant topics of study in this domain (Meyers & Brashers, 1994).

Interestingly enough, while the study of sex differences in interaction styles in small group communication has received attention, one prominent type of interaction style—powerful/powerless language—has received limited scrutiny from small group researchers (for exceptions, see Adkins & Brashers, 1995; Bradley, 1981). This is especially true when compared to the research attention powerful/powerless language has received in the interpersonal arena, where a growing set of research findings is accumulating (Grob & Allen, 1996). Given the strong potential for status differences, role categorization, and power emergence in the small group context, the study of powerful/powerless communication would seem to be both intuitively, and theoretically, important to researchers in this domain.

Powerless language typically has been defined as speech marked by hesitancy and tentativeness (Hosman, 1989). In comparison to powerful speech, it often contains more polite forms, hedges, hesitations, disclaimers, intensifiers, empty adjectives, tag questions, and hypercorrect grammar (Lakoff, 1975a; 1975b). Powerful speech, on the other hand, is the absence of these indicators. Hence, it is more assertive, dominant, and certain in its style. Typically, research on powerful/powerless language use and gender has linked powerful language with men and powerless language with women.

Much of the past research in this domain has drawn clear links between powerful/powerless language style and attributions of social power or competence (Bradac, 1982; Bradac, Hemphill, & Tardy, 1981; Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978; Haleta, 1996). Bradac and Mulac (1984a), for example, reported that "messages exhibiting the linguistic indicants of powerlessness have consistently produced relatively low ratings of speaker power in experimental research" (p. 307). In addition, investigations of jury and judge perceptions of witnesses' testimony have uniformly shown that powerful speech produces perceptions of greater speaker power than powerless speech (Bradac, et al., 1981; Bradac & Mulac, 1984a, 1984b; Erickson, et al., 1978; Hosman, 1989; Hosman & Wright, 1987; Lee & Ofshe, 1981; Morrill & Facciola, 1992; Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979; O'Barr, 1982; Wright & Hosman, 1983). Finally, Burrell and Koper (1994) concluded in a recent meta-analysis of powerful/powerless language use, that "powerful language is perceived as more persuasive and credible than powerless language" (p. 252).

These findings would seem to have important theoretical and practical implications for members of small groups. Theoretically, it seems important for small group communication researchers to better understand the use of powerful/powerless language use in small groups, and its association with member sex. Since the group context differs from the dyadic context in several important ways, including number of participants, availability of talk-time, immediacy of feedback, leadership emergence, subgroup formation, group cohesiveness, status and power structures, and role categorization (among other differences), it is important to investigate how powerful/powerless language might function similarly or differently in this context. Such research would add to our growing knowledge of sex differences in communication in the small group arena (Meyers & Brashers, 1994), and could provide important information about how language style is, or is not, shaped by gender. In

addition, we might begin to better understand how powerful/powerless language use affects, or is affected by, member expectations, status structures, and/or participation processes in the small group.

Practically, such research could have important implications for both the educational and workplace arenas. With the increasing use of groups and teams in education and the workplace (Harlan & Weiss, 1982; Lawler, 1991; Lublin, 1992; Magjuka & Baldwin, 1991), as well as a greater flux of women into both of these domains, such research could be vital for increasing individuals' awareness of various forms of language styles, as well as the contributions different types of discourse make to effective group interactions.

Overview

In this paper we examine sex differences in powerful/powerless language in the small group context by juxtaposing two competing theoretical approaches to the study of sex differences. Four tasks are undertaken here. First, the dominant "dual cultures" perspective for the study of sex differences is explicated. Much past research on sex differences in powerful/powerless language use is reviewed within this perspective since most investigators have adopted this approach. Second, because some research findings on powerful/powerless language use do not fit cleanly within a dual cultures approach, a competing theoretical perspective for investigating sex differences—the "gender similarities" approach—is introduced, and research supportive of this approach is reviewed. Third, parallel, but competing hypotheses, emanating from the dual cultures and gender similarities perspectives are proposed and are tested via thirteen small group discussions. Finally, results are reported, findings are discussed, and implications for the study of sex differences and powerful/powerless language in the small group context are noted.

DUAL CULTURES APPROACH TO STUDYING SEX DIFFERENCES

Theoretical Overview

Most of the research on sex differences has adopted a "dual cultures" framework (Coates, 1986; Coates & Cameron, 1989; Henley & Kramarae, 1991; Johnson, 1989; Kramarae, 1981; Tannen, 1987, 1990, 1994; Thorne, 1993; Wood, 1993, 1997). This view assumes that women and men grow up in gender-segregated worlds, and adopt separate behaviors, strategies, and values (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990, 1995). As Wood (1997) states:

Gender is learned. Socially endorsed views of masculinity and femininity are taught to individuals through a variety of cultural means. From infancy on, we are encouraged to conform to the gender that society prescribes for us. . . . When socialization is effective in teaching us to adopt the gender society prescribes for our sex, biological males learn to be masculine and biological females become feminine. (p. 27-28)

Johnson (1989) echoed this sentiment, stating that "men and women live their lives in dramatic separation from one another. Although often not literally separate from one another, women and men diverge in more than superficial ways, and in this sense they are separate" (p. 301). From the dual cultures view then, researchers perceive women and men to be more dissimilar than similar, more polarized than alike.

One distinction—that men are instrumental and women are affiliative—is prominent throughout much of the literature in the dual cultures perspective, and is often considered a distinctive marker of difference in men's and women's communication (Lesch, 1994; Meyers, Brashers, Winston, & Grob, 1996; Pearson, Turner, & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Wyatt, 1984, 1988). Over fifteen years ago, Kramarae (1981) pointed out the prominence of the instrumental/affiliative distinction in past research. She noted that "the 'sex role differentiation hypothesis'—that men specialize in instrumental or task behaviors and women specialize in expressive or social activities—has been influential in communication studies of the past twenty-five years" (p. 145). More recently, Baker (1991), in a review of gender and verbal communication in professional settings, concluded that much of the research in this domain is guided by the "women-as-affiliative, men-as-instrumental" distinction. Finally, Wood (1996) summarized this distinction by suggesting that men use communication to achieve instrumental goals, whereas women use communication to build connections with others. This distinction continues to be prominent in much of the research on powerful/powerless communication as is evident in the next section.

Powerful/Powerless Language Research

Lakoff's (1975a, 1975b) two papers on powerful/powerless language served as the impetus for a great deal of research on men's and women's differential use of these language forms. Consistent with a dual cultures approach, this research typically has associated powerless language with women and powerful language with men. In the past two decades, a number of empirical investigations have sought to test Lakoff's claims. Most of these studies have centered on four forms of powerful/powerless speech: (a) interruptions, (b) disclaimers, (c) hedges, and (d) tag questions. Interestingly, for purposes of this paper, very little of this empirical research has been conducted in the group context. The vast majority of literature is based either on individuals speaking to a researcher, or dyadic conversations (a few exceptions include Adkins & Brashers, 1995; Beattie, 1981; Kennedy & Camden, 1981, 1983; Kimble, Yoshikawa, & Zehr, 1981; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989; Willis & Williams, 1976). Since these dyadic investigations comprise the majority of research on this topic, they are reviewed as a foundation for the study proposed here. Included whenever available are investigations of powerful/powerless communication in the small group context as well.

Dual cultures approach and interruptions. Interruptions remain the single most researched feature of powerful/powerless language. Much of the research on interruptions supports the dual cultures approach and the instrumental/affiliative distinction (Argyle, Lalljee, & Cook, 1968; Eakins & Eakins, 1978; McCarrick, Manderscheid, & Silbergeld, 1981; McMillan, et al., 1977; Natale, Entin, & Jaffee, 1979; Octigan & Niederman, 1979; West, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1983; Willis & Williams, 1976). Zimmerman and West (1975) conducted one of the earliest studies of sex differences and interruption behavior. They found that in eleven mixed-sex pairs, men were much more likely than women to interrupt their partner, and were responsible for 98% of all interruptions. In a later investigation of this same topic, West and Zimmerman (1983) again found that in five mixed-sex dyads, men performed 75% of all interruptions. Although this latter study showed men voicing fewer interruptions, they still were much more likely than women to interrupt their partner.

More recently, the conclusion that men are more likely than women to interrupt

their partners in mixed-sex dyadic conversations (and conversely, that women are more likely to be interrupted) has continued to be supported by researchers in this domain (Bilous & Krauss, 1988; Carli, 1990; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Turner, Dindia, & Pearson, 1995). Most recently, Grob and Allen (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of powerful/powerless language use (including interruption behavior). They discovered that men not only used more powerful language than women, but also that men "take the floor and/or maintain the floor more than women" (p. 16). Perhaps most pertinent to this investigation, a study of interruptions in six-person, same- and mixed-sex groups found "considerable gender inequality in the patterns of interruptions" (Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989). Men disrupted the speech of women far more frequently than the speech of men, and men were more likely to be successful in their interruptions of women's speech than in their interruptions of men's speech. Clearly, much of the research on interruption behavior supports a dual cultures approach and the general beliefs that (a) men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, and (b) women are more likely to be interrupted by their partners than are men.

Dual cultures approach and disclaimers/hedges. Both disclaimers and hedges are assumed to soften, or even discredit, the message being sent. A disclaimer, typically found at the beginning of a sentence, is thought to indicate some degree of uncertainty. For example, sentences which begin with phrases such as "I don't really know," "I could be wrong about this, but" are examples of disclaimers. In recent research on disclaimers, Carli (1990) found that women use disclaimers up to three-and-a-half times more often than men in both same- and mixed-sex pairs. Prior investigators have noted similar findings (Entwisle & Garvey, 1972; Stutman, 1987).

Hedges, on the other hand, are adverbs (or adverb phrases) which contain little or no meaning, but convey moderation. For example, in the statement, "I think we should go to, like, the seven or eight o'clock movie, or whatever," the words, "like" and "or whatever" are instances of hedges. Some research on hedges supports a dual cultures approach to the study of sex differences, with women more often associated with hedges in conversation than men (Preisler, 1986). Crosby and Nyquist (1977) coded for the use of the female register (which included hedges) in three separate contexts (a police station, an information booth, and a laboratory group setting), and found that women rated higher in the use of hedges than men in two of the three locations. Similarly, Mulac, et al. (1988) found that women use more hedges than men in mixed-sex dyads. Most recently, Carli (1990) found that, similar to disclaiming behavior, women perform more hedges than men, both in same-sex and mixed-sex dyads. Finally, in their meta-analysis on powerful/powerless language use, Grob and Allen (1996) discovered that women use less "certain" language than men, and speak more politely than men.

Although research on disclaimers and hedges is still relatively sparse, its findings are often supportive of the women-as-affiliative, men-as-instrumental distinction. In general, these investigations find that women, more often than men, use disclaimers and hedges.

Dual cultures approach and tag questions. Investigations of tag questions are least prominent among studies of the four types of powerful/powerless speech examined here. Tag questions can be defined as shortened questions added to a declarative sentence, as in the statement, "It's very cold out today, isn't it"? Again, these are considered to be forms of powerless speech because they turn a declarative statement

into a question, making the speaker appear more uncertain and less assertive. Researchers in this domain conclude that women (more affiliative) are more likely than men to use tag questions (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; McMillan et al., 1977; Preisler, 1986). Holmes (1984), in studying discussion groups, found that women leaders used more tag questions than did male leaders. In addition, whereas women used these questions to invite discussion (affiliative response), men used them to gain confirmation of their own views (instrumental response). Most recently, Carli (1990) found that women used more tag questions than men, in both same-sex and mixed-sex pairs. These research findings are reinforced by a larger set of studies that find women, in general, are more likely than men to employ questions as a form of affiliation and connection in many conversational situations (Beck, 1988; Fishman, 1978; Hall & Langelier, 1988; Lesch, 1994; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Meyers, et al., 1996; Pearson, 1981).

Most of the research just reviewed concludes that women (who are viewed as more affiliative) will, more often than men, utilize powerless forms of speech (hedges, disclaimers and tag questions) while men (viewed as more instrumental) will be associated with powerful speech (interruptions). Although this research is primarily conducted in dyadic encounters, we think that these findings can serve as a foundation for testing these same claims in the small group context. Prior to testing these claims, however, a competing perspective on sex differences—the gender similarities approach—is introduced. In the next section we outline its assumptions and then review research findings on powerful/powerless speech that fit within these assumptions.

GENDER SIMILARITIES APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SEX DIFFERENCES

In recent years, a growing number of researchers have begun to actively question the dual cultures approach for investigating the impact of member sex (Coates, 1986; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Inman, 1996; Thorne, 1986, 1993; Treichler & Kramarae, 1983). These criticisms recently have been supported by meta-analyses that suggest few differences between the sexes in communication behavior. In 1991, Wilkins and Andersen looked at differences and similarities in men's and women's management communication using meta-analytic techniques. They found no meaningful sex differences in affect behavior, influence strategies, autocratic behavior, democratic behavior, negative affect behavior, communication facilitation, or leader emergence.

Similarly, in a meta-analysis of sex differences in self-disclosure, Dindia and Allen (1992) analyzed 205 studies published between 1958 and 1989, and found that there was very little difference in self-disclosure behaviors of men and women. They suggested that "it is time to stop perpetuating the myth that there are large sex differences in men's and women's self-disclosure" (p. 118).

Finally, Canary and Hause (1993) reviewed and summarized fifteen representative meta-analyses of sex differences which included over 1,200 studies on sex differences. They concluded that there are few, if any, differences in the manner in which men and women communicate. Canary and Hause (1993) state:

The hundreds of studies represented in the meta-analyses indicate that sex differences in social interaction are small and inconsistent; that is, about 1% of the variance is accounted for and these effects are moderated by other variables. Given this research, we should not expect to find substantial differences in

In answer to the question, is there any reason to research sex differences in communication, Canary and Hause (1993) state that "on both empirical and conceptual levels the answer is 'no,' assuming current practices continue" (p. 141).

In sum, and in direct contrast to the dual cultures approach, the gender similarities view suggests that men and women are more similar than different. Hence, constantly searching for differences will not yield consistent results. In the next section, we review research on powerful/powerless speech that fits within a gender similarities perspective. In addition, we also review research that contradicts predictions from the dual cultures approach (i.e., men using powerless speech; women using powerful speech). We recognize that this latter set of results does not directly support a "gender similarities" approach, but we review it here as indirect evidence that alternative theoretical frameworks for investigating sex differences (such as the gender similarities approach) need to be explored and empirically tested.

Gender similarities approach and powerful/powerless speech

Clearly, the majority of research on interruptions suggests a dual cultures approach. But some research in this domain contradicts dual cultures assumptions, suggesting fewer differences and more similarities. Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985) found no differences in the frequency of interruptions between males and females in mixed-sex couples. Similarly, in a study of mixed-sex dyads, Dindia (1987) found no differences between men and women in interruption behavior (i.e., who did the interrupting and who was interrupted). Likewise, Simkins-Bullock and Wildman (1991) found no differences in the number of interruptions by women and men in mixed-sex dyads, or between male-male pairs and female-female pairs, providing strong support for Kollock et al's (1985) findings. Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989) found that in groups women and men did not differ much in their frequency of interruptions, and that women interrupted women and men equally often. Finally, in a developmental study of sex differences in interruption behavior, Marche and Peterson (1993) found no differences in interruption behavior across students in grades four, nine, and college. They concluded that "in summary, the present study provided little support for a sex-related difference in interruption behavior" (p. 404).

Interestingly, there is also support for the claim that women actually interrupt more than men. For example, Kennedy and Camden (1981) observed 35 graduate students over six one-hour, mixed-sex group sessions and found that women performed 157 of the 255 interruptions. In a subsequent study of mixed-sex groups, Kennedy and Camden (1983) again found that women interrupted others more often than men interrupted others. Finally, Bilous and Krauss (1988) found that in same-sex pairs, females interrupted each other more than did males interrupt other males, and to a large degree.

Certainly these results call into question the findings reviewed earlier on interruption behavior within the dual cultures perspective, and the affiliative/instrumental distinction. Some of these same patterns can be found in research on hedges and disclaimers as well.

Although we are not aware of any research that has concluded there are *no* differences in men's and women's use of hedges/disclaimers or tag questions, there is some research that calls into question the conclusion of the dual cultures approach

that women will employ hedges and tag questions more often than men. In an investigation of sex differences in children's language (comparing twenty children in the age groups of 4 years, 8 years, 12 years, and 16 years), Staley (1982) found that in three of the four age groups, males used more hedges than females. The only exception was in the 12 year-old age group where females were more likely to employ hedges. The largest difference was found among the 16-year-old age group, with males voicing hedges far more frequently than females. Similarly, Mulac, et al. (1988) found that among college students, men used more hedges in same-sex pairs than women. Turner, et al. (1995) also discovered that men used more hedges than women in both same-sex and mixed-sex pairs. Finally, Dubois and Crouch (1975) found that in a professional academic meeting they investigated, men used tag questions while women did not.

In sum, although research on powerful/powerless language use is still sparse within a gender similarities approach to sex differences, the findings reviewed above provide a foundation for questioning the dominant dual cultures perspective. Hence, the following hypotheses are posited. First, five hypotheses regarding powerful/powerless language use in small groups from the dual cultures perspective are posed predicting differences in men's and women's language use. Then these hypotheses are contrasted with parallel, but competing, hypotheses from the gender similarities perspective predicting no significant differences in men's and women's powerful/powerless language use.

Dual Cultures Predictions:

- H1: Male participants will perform significantly more interruptions in small group interactions than will female participants.
- H2: Female participants will be interrupted significantly more in small group interactions than will male participants.
- H3: Female participants will voice significantly more disclaimers in small group interactions than will male participants.
- H4: Female participants will voice significantly more hedges in small group interactions than will male participants.
- H5: Female participants will voice significantly more tag questions in small group interactions than will male participants.

Gender Similarities Predictions:

Hypotheses from this perspective are parallel to, but compete with H1-H5, in that the prediction is for "no significant differences" in interruption behavior (H1 and H2), disclaimers (H3), hedges (H4), and tag-questions (H5).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 64 male and female undergraduate students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) enrolled in communication classes at a large midwestern university. More women (N = 44) than men (N = 20) participated in this project, but all groups contained both male and female participants. Group members participated in this project at the end of a semester in which they had been classmates and occasional group discussion partners, so members were familiar with each other. Hence, these groups might be considered partial-history, rather than zero-history, groups. Each

participant received extra credit for their participation.

Procedures

Group discussion task. As part of a larger study of group argument and polarization in group decision-making interaction, each of thirteen groups (twelve five-member groups and one four-member group) was asked to discuss a decision-making task to consensus. The decision-making task was a problem scenario concerning a hypothetical actor facing a serious life dilemma (a copy of the task is available from the second author). This task was inherently argumentative in nature, and so lent itself well to group involvement and interaction.

Instructions. Participants were randomly assigned to groups prior to the research session. Upon arrival at the experimental session, each group discussed the problem task to consensus. All group discussions were videotaped. No time limits were imposed on discussion. When all groups had completed their discussions, a transcription was made of each videotaped interaction.

Unitizing discussion content. After transcriptions of each videotape were completed, discussion content was unitized by two judges working independently. Any statement that functioned as a complete thought or a change of thought was deemed a unit (Auld & White, 1956; Hatfield & Weider-Hatfield, 1978; Murray, 1956). Unit by unit intercoder reliability (Scott's pi) revealed an estimate of .90 (Krippendorff, 1980) for the unitizing task.

Coding Procedures

Interruptions. The definition used to determine interruptions was taken from Kennedy and Camden (1981), and included "only those utterances which occur prior to a possible transition place in the original speaker's turn" (p. 137). In other words, simple overlaps (a speaker entering the conversation one or two words before a natural transition point) and backchannels (i.e., yeah, right, mm-hmm) were not coded as interruptions.

Most of the interruptions had already been identified in the transcription process, but it seemed important to validate the transcriptions against the actual videotapes. To accomplish this task, two trained coders first read through the transcripts independently and circled all interruption points identified on the transcripts. Then the coders viewed the videotapes together to determine if the transcripts accurately matched the verbal discourse. All interruptions identified on the transcripts, as well as any "new" interruptions discovered on the videotapes were discussed by the two coders. If it was agreed that a "new" interruption was valid, it was added to the transcripts. In this way, all interruptions were identified and validated. Finally, for each interruption, the sex of the interrupter and the sex of the interruptee was noted.

Disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. In addition, two trained coders used the written transcripts to code independently for disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. Definitions for all of these forms of powerless speech were taken from Carli (1990) since this was one of the most recent investigations of these forms of speech, and these definitions were representative of past definitions. Disclaimers (Carli, 1990) included phrases (typically at the beginning of sentences) that indicated some degree of uncertainty, such as "I guess", "I may be wrong", "I suppose", "I mean", "I don't know", "I'm not sure". Hedges (Carli, 1990) included adverbs or adverb phrases "that convey either moderation or no particular meaning at all, as in 'like', 'kind of', 'sort of',

'you know', 'maybe', 'or whatever', and so on" (p. 945). Tag questions were coded as shortened questions added to the end of a declarative sentence (Carli, 1990; p. 945). For example, in the statement, "The exam is next week, isn't it?", the "isn't it" phrase constituted a tag-question.

A sample list of possible disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions were constructed by the authors. These were given to two coders, and they practiced coding disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions on transcripts extraneous to this investigation until an acceptable reliability was reached. Although it was relatively rare to have more than a single hedge, disclaimer, or tag-question occur in a given unit, coders were instructed to code these speech acts as often as they occurred in a given unit so as to avoid losing data. Hence, in the unit, "you know, but I think it's, like, expected behavior", the phrases 'you know' and 'like' were coded as two separate hedges.

When an acceptable level of intercoder reliability was reached in practice, each coder independently identified all disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions in each of the thirteen transcripts in three iterative coding sessions. When all coding was completed,

TABLE 1
List of All Words/Phrases coded as Powerless Languages

Disclaimers (N = 171)	Tag-Questions (N = 13)	Hedges (N = 481)
I assume	doesn't it?	a little
I don't know	don't you (agree)?	about
I haven't been in a plane before, but . . .	huh?	almost
I guess	right?	and stuff
I mean	high odds?	anything like that (or) around (there) could possibly be kind/kind of/sort of like may (not) maybe might (not) more toward most(ly) or otherwise practically pretty (much) probably (depends) or something like that that much that's the thing the thing is usually (or) what have you (or) whatever (or) wherever it may be you know (what I mean)

the coders reviewed their codes together and discussed all disagreements to consensus. Intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa) was .85. Finally, the sex of the participant who voiced each hedge, disclaimer, and tag-question was noted. A complete list of words/phrases coded in the three categories can be found in Table 1.

RESULTS

Interruptions

The first set of competing hypotheses were posited to test for sex differences/similarities in frequency of interruptions. Eighty-two interruptions were identified across all thirteen groups. Men performed 33 of the 82 interruptions (40%), while women performed 49 of the 82 interruptions (60%). These raw frequencies must be tempered by the fact that there were more women than men in the sample however, and women talked more than did men (63% to 37% of total statements, respectively). Hence all chi-square tests utilized the marginals of percent of statements produced by males (37%) and percent of statements produced by females (63%) as expected values. A chi-square test using these weighted values showed no significant differences between the number of interruptions performed by men and women in these group discussions ($X^2(1) = 0.370$; $p > .05$). Thus, results of hypothesis one supported a gender similarities approach more strongly than a dual cultures perspective. See Table 2.

Being Interrupted

The second set of competing hypotheses asked about the frequency with which

TABLE 2
Frequencies and Percentages of Powerful/Powerless Language Use

	Males		Females		Total		Significance
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Interruptions	33	40	49	60	82	100	NS
Interrupted	44	54	38	46	82	100	($p < .05$) Males more
Disclaimers	77	45	94	55	171	100	($p < .05$) Males more
Hedge	198	41	283	59	481	100	NS
Tag-Questions	3	23	10	77	13	100	NS

Note: All chi-square tests used the marginals of .63 for women (percent of total participation by women) and .37 for men (percent of total participation for men).

males and females were interrupted. Of 82 actual interruption sequences, men were interrupted 44 times (54% of all interruptions) and women were interrupted 38 times (46% of all interruptions). A chi-square test using the marginals of .63 for women and .37 for men showed a significant difference in the frequency with which women and men were interrupted in these small group interactions ($X^2(1) = 9.762$; $p < .05$). Interestingly enough, men were interrupted significantly more than women in these groups. Thus, neither the dual cultures or gender similarities approaches were directly supported, but these results do suggest a direct contrast to the dual cultures prediction. See Table 2.

In post-hoc analyses of these results, we sought to determine more specifically "who

was interrupting whom." To do so, we identified all instances of men interrupting men, men interrupting women, women interrupting women, and women interrupting men. We conducted chi-square analyses (using the marginals of .63 for women and .37 for men) to determine whether (a) men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, (b) men interrupt women more than men interrupt men, and (c) women interrupt women more than women interrupt men.

A chi square analysis to determine whether men interrupt women more than women interrupt men showed a significant difference ($X^2(1) = 28.80$; $p < .05$), with women interrupting men significantly more than men interrupted women. This finding is opposite of what the dual cultures perspective might predict. A second chi square analysis to determine whether men interrupt each other more than they interrupt women showed no significant differences ($X^2(1) = 2.302$; $p > .05$). A final chi-square analysis to determine whether women interrupt each other more than they interrupt men showed a significant difference ($X^2(1) = 27.95$, $p < .05$), with women interrupting men significantly more than they interrupt each other. This result is in the opposite direction of what the dual cultures approach might predict. In short, these findings indicate that not only were men interrupted more in these groups, but women were the ones most likely to interrupt them, and women were more likely to interrupt the men in these groups than to interrupt the other female participants.

Finally, in a second post-hoc analysis, we sought to determine whether men or women were more successful in obtaining the floor once they had interrupted another participant. Success in "taking the floor" was measured by whether the interrupter was allowed to make his/her point and actually "take" the floor from the person (i.e., silence the interruptee) that had previously been speaking (Ferguson, 1977). Interestingly, of the men that interrupted women, the floor was successfully taken 80% of the time (20 out of 25 interruptions). Of the women that interrupted men, however, success in floor allocation only occurred 56% of the time (20 out of 36 interruptions). In same-sex interruptions (which were far fewer in number), when men interrupted other men, they were successful 88% of the time (7 out of 8 interruptions) in taking the floor. When women interrupted women, they were successful 69% of the time (9 of 13 interruptions). Overall, men were successful in taking the floor 82% of the time when they interrupted another participant, while women were successful 59% of the time. It appears that, in these groups at least, although men did not interrupt more than women, when they did interrupt others, they were more likely than women to be successful in actually taking the floor.

Disclaimers

The third set of hypotheses was concerned with sex differences/similarities in the frequency of disclaimers in small group discussions. In all, 171 disclaimers were recorded. Men voiced 77 of these disclaimers (45%), and women, the other 94 (55%). Again these results were weighted by the percent of statements produced by men and women in the groups (women = .63 of total statements; men = .37 of total statements). A chi-square test of differences in men's and women's voiced disclaimers (using these weights) revealed a significant difference ($X^2(1) = 4.730$; $p < .05$), with men voicing disclaimers significantly more than women. This finding is opposite that predicted by the dual cultures approach. Because it suggests a difference between men and women however, it does not really support a gender similarities approach either. Instead, it offers findings contrary to those predicted by the dual cultures approach. See Table 2.

Hedges

The fourth pair of hypotheses posited conflicting predictions regarding sex differences in the frequency of hedges voiced in small group interactions. Hedges were clearly the most frequent of the speech acts investigated in this study. There were 481 hedges identified across the thirteen groups, with women voicing 283 (59%) of these hedges and men voicing 198 hedges total (41%). Once weighted, however, a chi-square test revealed these differences to be nonsignificant ($X^2(1) = 3.578; p > .05$). Hence, the gender similarities perspective was supported, whereas the dual cultures approach was not. See Table 2.

Tag Questions

The fifth hypotheses offered contradictory predictions regarding sex differences in the frequency of tag questions voiced in group interactions. Tag questions, in contrast to hedges, were very infrequent across these thirteen group discussions. Only 13 tag questions were recorded in all, 10 (77%) performed by women and 3 (23%) by men. A chi-square test found this difference to be nonsignificant when weighted by percent of statements produced overall by males and females ($X^2(1) = 1.081; p > .05$). Again, the dual cultures perspective was not supported, whereas a gender similarities approach was supported.

DISCUSSION

Findings

In this investigation, we sought to test two competing perspectives on sex differences in powerful/powerless language use in the small group context. Specifically, we found no significant differences in the frequency of interruptions between females and males; no differences in the frequency of hedges, and no differences in the frequency of tag questions between men and women. There were significant differences in the frequency with which men and women were interrupted by others, and in the frequency of disclaimers voiced by women and men, but these differences were in a direction opposite that posited by the dual cultures perspective. In both cases, men were interrupted more than women, and men voiced significantly more disclaimers than women. In effect, results supported the no differences approach for three of the five hypotheses. None of the findings directly supported the dominant dual cultures approach (save perhaps the finding that when men interrupt others they are more likely to be successful in those attempts than are women interruptors). The implications of these findings are discussed next.

Implications

At least two implications seem to accrue from these results. First, theoretically, these results more strongly support a gender similarities approach to the study of sex differences than the dominant dual cultures perspective. Second, from a small group communication viewpoint, because these results run contrary to much research on powerless/powerful language use in the dyadic arena, we think group dynamics may be playing a moderating role. Each of these implications are discussed in more detail next.

Support for gender similarities perspective. Researchers have recently begun to question the necessity and/or relevance of studying sex differences in communication (Canary & Hause, 1993; Dindia & Allen, 1992), as many investigations (much like this

one) turn up very small, if any, sex differences--or findings that run counter to dual cultures predictions. These findings serve to fuel recent critiques of the dual cultures perspective which suggest that our view of sex differences is overshadowed by stereotypes regarding men's and women's behaviors (Canary & Hause, 1993; Ragan, 1989). The result of this overshadowing is two-pronged. First, if we find differences between the sexes in our research, we are quick to attribute those differences to sex role stereotypes over other possible explanations. Conversely, if we discover findings contrary to sex role stereotypes, we are still quick to explain those differences within a stereotypical framework.

In addition, recent critics of the dual cultures approach have argued that the polarization that occurs in this perspective engenders value-laden conclusions (Canary & Hause, 1993; Putnam, 1982). That is, establishing dichotomous distinctions between men's and women's communication (i.e., women use powerless communication while men use powerful language) often leads to claims of superiority/inferiority (it is better to employ powerful than powerless communication). What is forgotten with this approach however, is that all types of communication can be valuable in various situations, and that gradations of communication behaviors are necessary. By studying communication from a dual cultures approach however, researchers are more likely to accept the extremes and to overlook the variety of functions communication behaviors might serve regardless of "who" makes the statement. For example, hedges, disclaimers and tag-questions may well signify polite rather than powerless communication (Fishman, 1978). Similarly, some interruptions are "supportive rather than obstructive, evidence not of domination but of participation, not power, but the paradoxically, related dimension, solidarity" (Tannen, 1994, p. 62). By continuing to link these communication behaviors to powerful/powerless labels, we perpetuate polarized thinking and inappropriate sex role stereotypes.

In short, our research findings, and a growing body of other studies, are generating more and more questions about the validity and representativeness of the dominant dual cultures perspective. It may be time for researchers to change their mode of investigation and focus more on the similarities between women's and men's communication than the differences. Or perhaps it is time to begin to think about other possible explanations beyond gender that may play a role in determining a small group's participative patterns.

Small group dynamics. Prominent theories of status and gender, including Status Characteristics Theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1973; Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Wagner, 1985; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980; Bradley, 1980; Propp, 1995) and the Dual Cultures perspective explicated here, suggest that sex of participant is a stable and powerful status marker. It is influential in affecting how others perceive a person, how others expect a person to act, and how others communicate with a person. While we also believe that sex of participant plays an important role in members' expectations of communicative behavior, we speculate that other factors might mediate this relationship. For example, upon completing our analyses of these groups, we returned to the data to determine the actual make-up of males and females in each group. We found that in all but one group, women were in a majority position. Is it possible that being in the majority (in terms of sex of participants) in a group can moderate stereotypic expectations typically associated with gender? Some research on all-female groups, for instance, suggests that women

communicate in a much less stereotypical way in these groups than they do in mixed-sex groups (Coates, 1986; Coates & Cameron, 1989). Perhaps when women are the majority faction, they are empowered to communicate differently--in this case, in a more powerful fashion.

Similarly, men in these groups may have taken on more powerless communicative roles as they found themselves in the minority or as a token member (Kanter, 1977). This interpretation only holds true however, if one status structure (majority/minority) moderates an intuitively more powerful status structure (sex of participant). Some researchers have argued that such an interpretation is far-fetched. Case studies of male nurses and male elementary school teachers indicate that men, while in the minority in these occupational groups, still fare better than the women (Williams, 1989; Zimmer, 1988). Likewise, in our study, men in a minority position succeeded more than women in successfully taking the floor when interrupting others. In this way, they may have maintained a level of dominance and status. Clearly more research is needed on this issue.

If this interpretation does hold any promise however, then it is not sex of participant alone that affects one's use of powerful/ powerless language, but it is perhaps a more complex equation involving the interplay of context, roles, status, and other group interaction factors. Such a complex explanation seems necessary to explain our seemingly incongruous findings that while women feel free to interrupt men in these groups, they are still more willing to yield when they are interrupted, or when they are doing the interrupting. So women appear to use powerful speech, while simultaneously reacting to that speech in a powerless manner. These findings suggest that while sex of participant may play a role in interruption behavior, it may not be capable of explaining the overall complexity of this participative act. Additional research on how other status markers, participative roles, or group norms might affect this communicative behavior are necessary to fully explain these findings.

Additionally, it seems possible that interruptions, disclaimers/hedges, and tag-questions may function differently in the group context than the interpersonal arena. For example, since there are more people in a group setting, interruptions may be more common place, and function more as an indication that one wants a turn-at-talk than as a form of dominance. That is, it is sometimes difficult for group members to determine who is going to talk next, and members may begin talking before another person is finished. While this is a form of interruption, it may well be a turn-taking, communicative move rather than a form of dominance. Similarly, interruptions in the group context may function more cooperatively than competitively (Bate, 1988; LaFrance & Carmen, 1980; Shaw & Sadler, 1965; Spender, 1984; Vrugt & Kerkstra, 1984; Wood & Lenze, 1991). That is, members may talk-over one another as they attempt to help each other make an argument. Some research on tag-team argument (Brashers & Meyers, 1989; Canary, Brossmann, & Seibold, 1987) suggests that group members sometimes work together to jointly construct arguments and decision proposals. In this arena, tag-questions may function more as convergence markers than as powerless speech (Wood, 1997).

Finally, it is possible that these findings reflect a type of "patterned" interaction resulting from participants' contact with one another over time. Although these participants did not meet together in groups every week, they did work together in a group context at various times over a four-month period. This may have been enough contact for them to develop a type of mutual influence where the men became less

powerful in their speech forms, and the women became more assertive (Aries, 1987). Some past research suggests that the more intimate a relationship becomes, the more women initiate task contributions, for example (Heiss, 1962; Leik, 1963). Similarly, the mixed-sex composition of these groups may have helped sustain these patterns. Research indicates that men display less stereotypic behavior in mixed-sex than in same-sex groups/dyads (Aries, 1976, 1982; Bohn & Stutman, 1983; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; Marlatt, 1970; Piliavin & Martin, 1978). "In conversation content, as in interaction style, men adopt a more personal orientation in interaction with women" (Aries, 1987; p. 164).

Such mutual influence may be indicative of many groups where members work together over sustained periods of time on team projects or decision-making tasks. If so, and if these findings are representative of the forms this mutual influence takes, then we might expect that as men and women experience sustained contact in group settings, the stereotypical boundaries of powerful/powerless language will blur, and both men and women will be motivated to use less stereotyped forms of communication.

Clearly, at this point, we still know little about the role of powerful/powerless language in the group context, and whether it functions differently than in the interpersonal/dyadic context. Our data suggest that, at least in these groups, differences do exist. Certainly, additional research on more groups, other types of groups, and groups in other contexts (Frey, 1994) is important if we are to understand the complexities of powerful/powerless language in groups more fully.

Finally, as with all empirical research, we recognize that these results must be considered within a set of limitations. Two potential limitations, group task and group participants, are discussed next.

Limitations

Group task. Although the student participants in this study seemed to be quite involved in the task discussions (many of them relating it to their own lives), it must be remembered that the decision task was a hypothetical scenario, and had no direct implications for the participants. Hence, the findings from this study, while providing important information about this group of participants, may not be completely generalizable to groups outside the classroom.

Participants. The group sample size in this study was fairly small ($N = 13$), and all participants in this study were college sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Hence there were no prescribed status or power differences in these groups. It seems possible that in groups where prescribed status and power differences are greater, there will be greater distinctions in speech patterns as well.

CONCLUSION

In this study we examined sex differences in powerful/powerless language use in small group decision-making interactions by juxtaposing two competing theoretical approaches to the study of sex differences. Our results showed more support for a "gender similarities" approach to the study of sex differences than for the dominant "dual cultures" perspective, and also produced some findings contrary to what the dual cultures approach posits. We think these findings are noteworthy because they create additional questions about the validity of the dominant dual cultures approach (Canary & Hause, 1993), while also suggesting there may be differences between the

interpersonal and small group contexts for the study of powerful/powerless language use. Clearly, we do not count these findings as definitive regarding powerful/powerless language use in the small group context. Additional research on larger samples, and different kinds of groups, are needed. But these results provide a first step in better understanding how men and women use powerful/powerless language in small groups, and set the stage for additional work in this domain.

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