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Reactions to Women in Authority: The Impact of Gender on Learning in Group Relations Conferences*

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A study was made of the impact of gender on learning in group relations conferences. Questionnaires were sent to 265 adults who participated in seven group relations conferences. The conferences varied in context and design, but each included a small group event highlighting reactions to consultant authority. Three-month follow-up data were collected from 60% of the participants. When the participants' self-assessed learning in relation to consultant and participant gender was statistically analyzed, 9 of 10 significant effects favored the women consultants. Using Eagly's theoretical model of gender role differences in adults and psychodynamic group theory, the authors conclude that a complete explanation of gender's effects on learning must consider the "agentic" and communal dimensions of a group's task, the ambiguity of criteria for evaluating performance, women consultants' status, the gender composition of the group, and transference reactions.

The increasing number of women holding leadership positions has expanded the interest in understanding the ways men and women respond to the gender of the leaders of groups and organizations. Human relations training events such as those sponsored by NTL Institute and the A. K. Rice Institute (AKRI) offer opportunities to examine the impact of a leader's gender on group and organizational

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dynamics. By design, these events highlight the ways leadership and/or authority relations influence behavior. Understanding the impact of a leader's gender on learning in such groups may lead to important applications for the work place.

Few studies have specifically examined the impact of gender on the leadership of groups and organizations. Indeed, only recently has the literature on groups begun to consider gender (Dion, 1985). Most research has been conducted by male investigators whose subjects are men in groups led by men (Dion, 1985; Reed, 1981). Researchers are just beginning to test assumptions as to whether such findings can be generalized to situations with mixed-gender groups or mostly women.

Because of their emphasis on the study of authority relations, their interpretive educational methods, and the uniformity of group events, tasks, and roles, AKRI conferences provide a rich field setting for the study of people's reactions to women in authority (Greene, Morrison, & Tischler, 1979). Limiting this is the difficulty of manipulating conference variables and collecting data before and during conferences, given the dynamic issues of transference and the practical problems associated with replication across conferences.

This article presents the results of a follow-up study of the impact of consultants' gender on participants' reported learning from seven AKRI conferences. No experimental manipulation occurred. Instead, the study capitalized on the consistency of the conferences' design, tasks, and roles to identify the effects of consultants' gender on participants' reactions to conference structure, specific aspects of content, and their overall evaluation of the conferences as learning experiences.

The study's conceptual framework was based on an integration of social role theory—especially as applied to groups—and the psychodynamic theories underlying the AKRI approach to group relations training.

OVERVIEW

Social Role Theory

The issue of women in authority can be conceptualized as an interaction effect involving gender and work roles. Eagly (1987) has developed a social role theory of gender differences that holds that the adult roles enacted by men and women are the proximal causes of gender differences in adults. According to this framework, such factors as socialization pressures and biological predisposition are more distal causes of such differences. Yount (1986) notes that work-emergent traits reinforce existing gender stereotypes as a function of the largely gender-segregated labor force of the U.S.

One can describe the gender differences that emerge because of different work, family, and community roles in terms of communal and agentic dimensions (Bakan, 1966). The communal dimension consists of one's concern for the welfare of other people, as characterized by caring, nurturing, interpersonal sensitivity, and emotional expressiveness. The agentic dimension consists of one's assertive and controlling tendencies characterized by independence from others and personal efficacy (Eagly, 1987). Williams and Best (1982) found that the stereotypes of women as communal and men as agentic are held by the citizens of many countries. Eagly (1987) notes that these attributes are not dichotomous, but dimensions of human behavior for which extreme ratings on either dimension are rare (Eagly & Kite, in press).

Evidence suggests that people tend to view men as more appropriate than women for task leadership (Lorber, 1984; Martin, Harrison, & DiNitto, 1983; Porter, Geis, & Jennings, 1983). Indeed, men have disproportionately occupied positions of authority. Not surprisingly, Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz (1972) have found that people describe most leadership behaviors, in-

cluding competence, as masculine attributes. Costrich, Feinstein, Kidder, Marecek, and Pascale (1975) have found that women exhibiting assertive or aggressive behavior toward others are markedly unpopular and seen as poorly adjusted psychologically. Thus, women occupying positions of authority may face conflict between that which is expected of and attributed to them based on their gender and that based on their work roles. The contention that gender differences in adults are a function of the preponderance of communal or agentic features associated with their social roles relegates psychodynamic determinants such as socialization to a secondary role. Although examinations of individual behavior may indicate that this is the case, findings about the regressive aspects of collective life emphasize the salience of psychological determinants.

Psychodynamic Group Theory

The AKRI methods are based on the psychodynamic approach developed in England as a result of the work of object relations theorist Melanie Klein. In contrast to the Oedipal focus of traditional Freudian theory underlying many early theories of groups (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Slater, 1966), Klein's (1959) work concentrated on the earliest phases of psychological development and pre-Oedipal defenses. When Bion (1959) drew an analogy between the infant's early relationship to its mother and the collective relationship of the group as a whole to its leader, he applied Klein's notions to the study of the unconscious aspects of group life.

Bion posited the simultaneous existence of two aspects of a group's collective life. One is the *work group*, by which he meant the active pursuit of the group's primary task. The task content may range from planning a political campaign to engaging in in-depth psychotherapy; what matters is that the task constitutes the group's legitimate work. The term

"work leadership" thus refers to the leader's efforts in pursuit of this task.

Bion referred to the second aspect as the *basic assumption group*, by which he meant the collective stances groups take—often unconsciously—with respect to authority and to managing their anxiety. Basic assumptions may either facilitate or impede the group's work, depending on whether synergy exists between the nature of the task and the basic assumptions. Bion identified three basic assumptions: dependency, fight/flight, and pairing. Although basic assumptions themselves are collective phenomena, individuals vary as to their vulnerability to the experiences and expression of particular assumptions.

Of central importance to the study of the impact of gender on authority relations is Bion's (1959) emphasis on the collective aspects of all groups and the potential for groups to regress to more primitive modes of functioning, both in relating to authority and in managing collective anxiety. Given the stereotypes that men should display agentic behavior and women communal behavior, and the relative novelty of women in agentic leadership roles, one should expect that women's holding positions of authority would produce anxiety and cause regressive functioning. This potential for regression, inherent in the collective life of groups and organizations, may surface those issues of early socialization, biological determinism, and the like that have been described as distal causes of gender differences in adults (Eagly, 1987). Although various social structures may buffer this effect in organizational life, a psychodynamic framework has been found useful for analytic studies of women in positions of authority (Bayes & Newton, 1978; Lerner, 1974).

We believe that the issue of whether determinants of gender differences in adults in relation to authority are proximal or distal is one of figure and ground. Both aspects are important, and situational variables may determine which has more explanatory power. This

raises the following questions: Which variables might moderate the incongruity of the communal stereotype of the feminine gender role with the agentic aspects of leadership? And what impact does this have on women's performance in positions of authority?

MODERATING VARIABLES

Three variables that may moderate the incongruity of women's holding positions of authority are the nature of the task, status characteristics, and the gender composition of the group. In her meta-analysis of group interaction, Carli (1982) found that when the interest in and expertise required for a task was congruent with their gender roles, both men and women subjects behaved in more agentic ways. Hagen and Kahn (1975) found that superior competence related to the task resulted in women's being selected as leaders, even when they were not as well liked and were more likely to be ousted from their groups at the groups' request. Such findings suggest that researchers should specify which dimensions of tasks or roles are agentic and which are communal, as simple dichotomous characterizations may obscure the relationships under investigation.

Dion (1985) argues that gender is a diffuse status characteristic. Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill (1977) extend status characteristics theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972) to include relations between men and women by proposing that expectations related to gender roles enhance men's competitive status, and require women to either act cooperatively or obtain external legitimization of heightened status if they are to contribute toward completing the task. One example of the latter is appointment to a position of authority, as often occurs in work settings. Bradley (1980) found in one case that public acknowledgment of a woman's competence increased her influence over the men in her group and apparently

shielded her from the hostility and dominance they displayed toward another woman. Tischler, Morrison, Greene, and Steward (1986) studied the effects of gender on the authority of study group consultants who used the interpretive methods characteristic of AKRI, and found that those consultants in roles designated as having higher status were treated as paternal and threatening, whereas those having lower status were treated as maternal and accessible, regardless of their gender.

The group's composition can have complex effects. Dion (1985) aptly concludes that studies of interaction (e.g., Aries, 1976) suggest that same-gender and mixed-gender groups differ as to the types of gender role pressures they exert. More recently, Aries, Gold, and Weigel (1983) found that a personality measure of dominance strongly predicted behavior observed in homogeneous groups, but failed to predict either individual or overall patterns of behavior in mixed-gender groups. Eskilson and Wiley (1976) examined gender role pressures on leaders of dyads and triads, and found that both men and women assumed leadership more easily and effectively when their followers were of the same gender as the leader. The women had the most difficulty leading men, for these followers would not allow the leader to exercise her authority. In contrast, the men had the most difficulty leading mixed-gender triads, as the other men would compete by challenging the leader's suggestions.

Such results are consistent with Dion's (1985) review of findings related to gender in studies of leadership. Using Fiedler's (1964) contingency model, Dion (1985) suggests that the relationship between leadership style and group effectiveness differs fundamentally between groups of men and groups of women. Furthermore, he concludes that gender role expectations make the situations women leaders confront less favorable.

Several descriptive field studies support this

conclusion. Wright (1976), Beauvais (1976), and Eisman (1975) have found that the leader's gender affects people's perceptions of those in authority, with both men and women viewing men in positions of authority more positively. Beauvais (1976) studied a group relations conference similar to those of AKRI, in which consultants in positions of authority are typically more distant and less reciprocal than the leaders and trainers of small groups. She found that the women in the consultant role were perceived as contemptuous by both men and women participants.

Reed (1981) observed that groups having women leaders are considered more stressful and confusing. She hypothesized that this stems from the relative rarity of women leaders and the disruption of members' gender role expectations. Moreover, women trainers and therapists more frequently become targets of negative transference than do their male counterparts (Wright & Gould, 1977).

Although one should be cautious about generalizing the findings of the studies cited above, they do suggest the need to consider both the agentic and communal aspects of tasks, the potential status enhancement factors of the situation, and the gender composition of groups as moderators of the interaction of gender and social roles occurring when women hold positions of authority.

PERFORMANCE

Most relevant studies have focused primarily on differences in performance as a function of a group's gender composition. Bartol and Martin (1986) reviewed evaluative studies of group leaders, and found a slight trend toward more negative evaluations of agentic behaviors (i.e., initiating structure) when the leaders were women. The empirical results, however, are inconsistent, which suggests that gender bias in performance evaluations of leaders may be more situationally determined. Jac-

obsen and Effertz (1974) found that women leaders' performance was rated more highly than men leaders' and the groups themselves deemed more successful when the criteria for success or failure on the group task were ambiguous. These authors suggest that higher expectations for men leaders may account for these findings.

Reed's (1979) investigation also examined a task for which the criteria for success were ambiguous, that of experiential training groups. She found that, although groups led by women were considered more stressful than those led by men, participants of both genders felt they learned more in self-study groups led by women.

Much of the literature comparing men and women leaders bases its findings on subordinates' perceptions. Therefore, the consistency of "no-difference" findings in subordinates' descriptions of men and women leaders is worth noting. This suggests that reliance on perceptual data may not constitute a serious problem (Bartol & Martin, 1986). Bartol and Martin argue, however, for more field studies and direct comparisons of the outcomes produced by men and women leaders.

Unfortunately, methodological weakness limits the confidence one can place in previous work. Several of the studies cited above offer richly descriptive case histories (Beauvais, 1976; Eisman, 1975; Wright, 1976), which generate—rather than test—hypotheses. The main weaknesses of those studies that did test hypotheses stem from their sampling procedures and methods. Most were cross-sectional, laboratory designs in which college students were asked to participate in short-term group events. Consequently, findings about gender and authority may have been influenced by several issues, including the salience of intimacy issues for populations of college students in late adolescence, the subjects' ongoing ties to the institution in which the research took place, student-teacher

dynamics, and the possibility of significant peer relationships among subjects.

Another problem of much of the social psychology literature is researchers' tendency to use dyads and triads as economical substitutes for larger groups. Both configurations, however, have unique dynamics (Miller & Rice, 1969). Researchers should thus examine groups of five or more members each to avoid the problem of two dyads and ensure that the phenomena investigated are indeed occurring at the group level.

THE STUDY

Design

The study reported in this article improved upon the designs described above by combining a field study using an adult sample with the laboratory-type setting of AKRI group relations conferences. Data were collected on seven group relations conferences held in different locations throughout the U.S. from 1982–1983. The subjects were adult men and women ranging in age from 22 to 59 years who had chosen to participate in the group relations conferences.

Although they vary along many dimensions, the use of conferences as a field setting for a study of the impact of gender on learning provides some control regarding the nature of the institutional context, contract with the participants, theoretical framework, consultant's role, and methods employed in providing group relations training. A thorough description and discussion of the theoretical framework, methods, and applications of this approach appears elsewhere (Colman & Bexton, 1976). We will describe the aspects relevant to the control of extraneous variables and the interpretation of gender effects.

Group relations conferences are temporary educational institutions formed for the sole purpose of conducting training events. Thus,

participants cannot have ongoing ties to the conferences themselves.

All the applicants to the conferences had received a written brochure describing the conference's history, theory, and primary task and the roles of participants and consultants. The conference task is to provide opportunities to learn about the collective, largely unconscious aspects of group and organizational life. An effort is made to integrate the experiential aspects of learning with the more cognitive aspects. Rather than espousing organizational theory in a didactic fashion, the conference provides opportunities to examine theories in action. This requires attention both to the behavioral data as it occurs in the course of working together and to the meaning of this behavior at the collective level. To achieve this ambitious goal, the conference offers at least two types of experiential activities: small group and intergroup events. The former usually takes place first and calls for participants to examine the relations among 8–12 members of a small group, focusing primarily on internal dynamics and authority issues, as understood from a group-as-a-whole perspective (Wells, 1985). In contrast, the intergroup event focuses on forming groups and developing political mechanisms to facilitate relations among groups. During these events, participants pay attention to relations between and among participant groups and/or between participants and the staff as a managerial group.

Learning in the conference involves both communal and agentic dimensions. The former is reflected in the need for interpersonal interaction—both in intragroup and intergroup relations—and in the need to attend to emotional reactions, an important source of data. The agentic dimension is reflected in the high level of initiative and risk taking required to function within the relatively unstructured, self-analytic small group event and to deal with the inevitable struggles with leadership, power, and authority that the conference di-

rectly addresses. Moreover, forming groups and developing political mechanisms to influence other groups during the intergroup event are highly agentic activities.

The description of the participant's role is quite broad: It is to use the opportunities provided by the events to pursue one's own learning. Both the ambiguity of the role and the focus on unconscious dynamics can provoke stress. Participants are required to sign a statement indicating they have read the brochure, provide references confirming their fitness for such training, and pay a fee. These procedures require some minimal level of commitment to the conference task and tend to screen out potential participants for whom such training would be inappropriate.

The consultant's role entails a managerial and an educational function. Specifically, the consultant holds a position of authority in managing the conference. This authority stems from the sponsoring institution and the conference staff's appointment by the director. Full authority to manage the specific conference events assigned to them is delegated to all consultants.

In the experiential event, the consultant takes an interpretive stance, attempting to engage the participants in the difficult task of examining their own behavior at the collective level as it occurs. Consequently, both the unconscious group dynamics and psychological defenses that emerge, as well as any resistance to this work or the consultant symbolizing it, are interpreted.

The consultant's refusal to teach or lead in conventional ways during the early phases of the small group event causes participants to focus on the agentic aspects of the consultant's role. In contrast, during the intergroup event the consultant displays both the collaborative aspects of the role in developing a working alliance with groups struggling to form and relate to other groups, and the interpretive aspects in relation to group and organi-

zational dynamics. This contrast between the consultant's behavior in the small group and intergroup events, or the opportunity to observe the consultants working as a group in the intergroup event, may highlight the more communal aspects of the consultant's role.

Because of individual differences, the configurations of particular staffs, and the organizational context in which they are embedded, consultants fill their role in various ways. They do, however, share a common theoretical framework and method of working.

Thus, the group relations conferences provide a setting combining some of the advantages of field studies with some of the controls more typical of a laboratory (Greene et al., 1979). Moreover, significant communal and agentic dimensions of the consultant's role have been identified, and these have gender-specific connotations. The managerial and interpretive functions are more typically ascribed to men, whereas the educational and collaborative functions conform to stereotypical expectations for women. Furthermore, the nature of the consultant's role and the authority vested in it are explicit and open to study. The common theoretical framework and controls noted above make the AKRI conferences an excellent setting for investigating people's reactions to women in authority.

Hypothesis

The study investigated the effects of the small group consultant's gender on participant learning during seven group relations conferences. At each conference small, self-analytic groups met at least twice before the intergroup event began. Because the conferences' primary task was educational, the criteria for evaluating performance is participants' self-assessments of what they learned. The following factors known to decrease negative responses to women in authority were in operation during the conferences: the consultants'

being formally appointed to their positions of authority; the staff's consulting to groups comprising almost equal numbers of men and women; ambiguous task performance criteria; nontraditional training methods; and the consultant roles' having both agentic and communal aspects. We therefore hypothesized that *participants would report that they learned more from the women consultants than from the men consultants.*

Method

The AKRI conference administrator or a research assistant mailed a return postcard and a brief questionnaire to all participants of the seven conferences studied. Each participant was sent these materials approximately three months after the conference ended, so as to allow for distance and integration (Bunker & Knowles, 1967). All respondents gave informed consent to the research by signing a separate postcard, and anonymously completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of 5-point Likert-type scales for participants to use in providing ratings. Of the 35 items, 16 asked respondents to rate their learning, emotional involvement, and verbal participation and the staff's facilitation of the *conference structure* with respect to the small group event, intergroup event, application group, and conference discussion. Staff facilitation refers to the consultants' perceived helpfulness in enhancing participants' learning from a particular event. For example, a high score for staff facilitation with the intergroup event indicates that the respondent considered the staff helpful in aiding learning about intergroup collaboration and competition in the action-oriented, uncertain event.

Respondents also were asked to evaluate how much they had learned about the following 14 *topics*: delegation of authority; intergroup relations; personal power; group dynamics; leadership effectiveness; effective

"followership"; unconscious or covert processes in small groups; organizational dynamics; the effects of group process on task performance; interpersonal problems in the exercise of leadership; managing organizations; managing peers; the effects of race on authority; and the effects of gender on authority. The respondents also were asked to rate the following five *criteria*: overall learning; emotional impact; how well they could generalize the knowledge gained to other settings; whether or not they would recommend the conference to a friend; and whether or not they would attend another conference in the future. Finally, respondents were asked the names of their small group consultants. This procedure has been shown to be an effective, nonintrusive measure of participant learning (Correa, Klein, Howe, & Stone, 1981, 1983).

Because the small group event is the first one participants are exposed to during an AKRI conference, it has a lasting effect. Therefore, we considered the participants' gender and that of their small group consultants when analyzing the follow-up data. We did not inform the participants of our interest in studying the effects of gender, but merely asked them to evaluate their experiences with the conferences.

The unstructured nature of the self-analytic small group event and the focus on covert dynamics make conferences such as these particularly vulnerable to experimenter effects. For this reason, we used a post-test only design (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Studying seven different group relations conferences having some variation in context and design, however, allowed multiple replications.

Sample

The conference participants came primarily from the fields of mental health, education, and management. The subjects consisted of the members of 29 small groups of mixed gender, having 8–12 members each, from seven

group relations conferences held during 1982–1983. Within each conference, the ratio of men to women was similar for each small group; the average group consisted of five women and four men. All the conferences were directed by men, six by a senior psychologist and one by a psychiatrist. The conferences differed as to geographic location, residential status, duration, number of events, and sponsorship. Sixteen men and 13 women served as the small group consultants, with some variation between the men and women as to age and seniority. The average age of the men consultants was 49 years, whereas that of the women consultants was 43 years; the men

consultants had on average previously staffed 64 conferences each, whereas the women consultants had on average previously staffed 16.

RESULTS

We asked 265 conference participants—139 women and 126 men—to complete the study questionnaire. Of these, 60% (158) did so. Table 1 shows the results of the analyses of variance for consultant and participant gender for all significant ratings only.¹ Overall, the most significant effects involved the women consultants. The only effect associated with a more positive response to the men consultants

Table 1
Analysis of Variance for Consultant and Participant Gender^a

Variable	Consultant gender (C)		Participant gender (P)		CxP	CxP interaction cells ^b
	woman	man	woman	man		
<i>Conference structure</i>						
Staff facilitation of intergroup event	2.91	3.40*				
<i>Topics</i>						
Intergroup relations	4.09*	3.76			WxM*	(4.35; 3.88; 3.77; 3.76)
Group dynamics	4.44*	4.04				
Unconscious process			4.27	4.44*		
Organizational dynamics					WxM*	(3.85; 3.52; 3.38; 3.47)
Group effect on task	4.33*	3.97			WxM*	(4.45; 4.24; 3.69; 4.25)
Gender effect on authority			4.17**	3.56		
<i>Criteria</i>						
Overall learning					WxM*	(4.50; 4.16; 4.13; 4.29)
Overall emotion					WxM**	(4.55; 4.16; 4.10; 4.39)
Knowledge gained					WxM**	(4.52; 3.95; 4.18; 4.20)

^aEntries are the means for statistically significant main effects or interactions.

^bThe interactions provided are for woman consultant, man participant; woman consultant, woman participant; man consultant, man participant; and man consultant, woman participant. Italicized figures indicate two cells in an interaction that differ significantly from each other.

**p* < .05

***p* < .01

involved one aspect of the conference structure: Participants in small groups with men consultants gave the staff a higher rating for facilitating the intergroup event.

The findings also indicate that the consultant's gender influenced learning about the topics covered during the conferences. Participants belonging to small groups with women consultants reported that they learned more about intergroup relations, group dynamics, and the effects of group process on task performance. With respect to group members' gender, men reported learning more about unconscious process, whereas women reported learning more about the effects of gender on authority.

Six interactions of consultant and member gender were significant, all involving men participants and women consultants. These were related to learning about intergroup relations, organizational dynamics, and group effect on task, as well as the criteria of overall learning, overall emotional impact, and how well the knowledge gained could be generalized to other settings. To further explore these interactions, we performed Tukey's (1953, 1956) studentized range tests on all significant interactions. The italicized figures in the sets of interactions shown in Table 1 indicate that we found statistically significant differences between the two cells. Men participants whose small group consultants were women reported learning significantly more about the effects of group process on task than did men participants who worked with men consultants. Men participants who worked with women consultants reported more knowledge gained than did the women participants. Inspection of the individual cells for the consultant-participant interactions shows that the highest ratings associated with each of the six significant interactions were made by men participants who worked with women consultants.

Readers should note that learning about ten topics did not seem significantly affected by

consultant gender: delegation of authority, personal power, leadership effectiveness, effective followership, unconscious processes, interpersonal problems in leadership, managing organizations, managing peers, the effects of gender on authority, and the effects of race on authority. Moreover, two criteria did not seem significantly affected by consultant gender: the participant's recommending the conference to a friend, and the participant's intending to attend another conference in the future.

DISCUSSION

Although all the conferences studied were directed by men, and the women consultants were younger and less experienced than their male colleagues, data for nine of the ten areas significantly affected by consultant gender favored the women consultants. These results are similar to those obtained by Reed (1979). In our study, men participants who worked with women consultants reported higher levels of emotion, involvement, and learning, and a greater ability to generalize what they learned to other settings. Although the type of affect was not reported, the participants' enhanced involvement and positive outcomes suggest that the intensity of affect may matter more than its positive or negative direction.

In accounting for these findings, we stress that several of the factors that reportedly decrease people's negative responses to women in positions of authority were present during the group relations conferences studied. The women consultants were formally appointed to their positions and thus had enhanced status (Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). The groups of participants were of mixed gender, and had an almost equal ratio of men to women—a condition said to attenuate the effects of gender (Carli, 1982). Finally, the ambiguous criteria for evaluating the task performance and the nontraditional methods used to pursue it may have enhanced ratings of the women

consultants' effectiveness because of the interaction of their gender and work roles.

Women who assume both the managerial and educational functions of the role of a consultant during a group relations conference challenge gender role stereotypes in compelling ways. Specifically, during the early phases of the small group event, when the members must confront the agentic aspects of the consultant's role, the stereotypically based expectations that women consultants will have a communal style are not met. This effect is enhanced by the participants' increasing awareness of the managerial aspects of the consultant's role and the regressive impact of the unstructured, self-analytic group task (Slater, 1966). These regressive effects are particularly noteworthy because they may stimulate transference based on participants' earlier experience with authority figures and increase the salience of distal causes of gender role differences in adults, such as socialization (Eagly, 1987). Lerner (1974) also suggests women leaders arouse more intense, primitive feelings in people, and previous studies of women consultants have tended to focus primarily on such distal causes (Bayes & Newton, 1978; Tischler et al., 1986).

We believe that the experience of a group with a woman consultant is more complex than that of a group with a man consultant, because of both psychological and social factors. On a psychological level, the group must contend with the participants' primitive affects and the pre-Oedipal defenses used to cope with these (Bion, 1959). On a social level, the woman consultant plays a role associated with such stereotypically masculine features as authority, leadership, and interpretive functions. Women filling such a role are often considered intrusive and/or aggressive.

The combination of unmet expectations as to the agentic dimensions of the role of a teacher and leader and unfulfilled wishes that women assume a traditionally communal role results in

cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and negative affect (Beauvais, 1976; Reed, 1979). Because the task of the small group is to explore authority relations, the need to resolve this dissonance forces group members to pay attention to the learning task. Their discomfort, however, also forces them to focus on the reality of their experience. They cannot easily deny authority relations or "here and now" issues under these conditions. The heightened salience of both the cognitive and experiential aspects of the small group may thus account for the higher levels of learning reported by participants who underwent the novel experience of working with women consultants. This effect would be enhanced for men participants, especially in light of this study's adult sample, and thus may account for the potency of the interaction effects of women consultants with men participants.

Although one may attribute to random occurrence the finding that both men and women participants who worked with men small group consultants rated the staff as significantly more facilitative in the intergroup event, this follows logically from the explanation offered above with respect to participants' reacting to conflicting gender and work roles. As noted previously, the small group consultant's role is often perceived as agentic, particularly during the early phases of the event, and thus consistent with stereotypically male behavior. In contrast, the staff's role in the intergroup event may be considered more communal because of the collaborative aspects of organizational consultation and the opportunity to observe communal behavior among staff members working openly as a management group. In each of the conferences studied, the small groups met at least twice before the intergroup event was held, thus heightening the contrast between the more agentic role of the small group consultant and the communal role of the intergroup consultant. Particularly for the men consultants, this highlighted the con-

trast between their assuming a role consistent with stereotypically male behavior and one contrasting with this. The opposite shift may have occurred with respect to the women consultants, and readers should note that participants whose small groups worked with women consultants were not particularly impressed with the staff's helpfulness during the intergroup event.

These findings are consistent with the concept that gender roles interact with the agentic and communal aspects of the learning task. The intergroup event provides more opportunities than the small group event does for participants to behave agentially. Because those men participants working with women consultants in the small group event may struggle with cognitive dissonance and intense affect, and perhaps have some fear of powerful women (Lerner, 1974), they may feel driven to adopt agentic behavior—such as aggressively taking control of situations—once outside their small groups. We observed examples of this during the conferences. Such behavior likely heightens the men participants' learning during the intergroup event.

The men participants' reporting higher levels of learning about unconscious process may be a function of their work roles and/or identification with the men directing the conferences. Approximately 20% of the men participants were psychiatrists or psychologists, whereas only 6% of the women were, and the AKRI conference training model differs from those used by such organizations as NTL Institute by focusing on the unconscious, so that aspect is most identified with the man serving as conference director.

Thus far, we have discussed the study's findings as they relate to the small group event, intergroup event, and the relationship between the two. We now discuss the systems dynamics of the organizational structure and the explicit delegation of authority within the conference as a temporary institution. As noted previously, the consultants derived their

authority from their appointment by the conference director, a man. Therefore, if participants test the competence of the women staff members, this represents a challenge to the integrity of the director's appointments. Because the participants may consider women's authority to be illegitimate, they—particularly the men participants—may focus on the conference director's role and organizational structure and how these affect the small groups. In the case of the men participants who worked with women consultants, this may have contributed to their learning more about organizational dynamics. Moreover, these men may have learned more about intergroup dynamics as a reaction to "being under" women consultants and in response to the more agentic aspects of the intergroup event, and their identification with the male conference director.

An alternative explanation for the findings with respect to women consultants relates to the psychodynamic aspects of authority. In the early stages of the small group event, or at times of heightened anxiety, regressive defensive tactics are rampant. Group members unconsciously "split off" the more destructive and aggressive characteristics of themselves and project them onto the person in authority. This results in fear and anger toward authority and simultaneous identification with the fearful and enraging aspects of it (Wells, 1985). The group's overt behavior may become quite hostile at such times.

When the conference approaches its conclusion, the staff seeks to help participants identify and "take back" those characteristics of themselves they may have projected onto others. This process, which often occurs in the application group, enables participants to recognize that they may have treated the small group consultant unrealistically and unfairly. Although an understanding of transference is valuable knowledge, it can cause participants to feel guilty and in need of making reparations. Thus, our findings may possibly reflect the participants'—particularly the men's—

desire to make amends to the women consultants three months after the conference by overrating what they learned.

We also compared the topics and criteria found to be significant and insignificant. The four topics that participants reported more learning about all involved collective dynamics (group dynamics, group effect on task, intergroup relations, and organizational dynamics) whereas the other ten topics (unconscious process, personal power, delegation of authority, leadership, followership, interpersonal problems, managing organizations, managing peers, the effects of gender on authority, and the effects of race on authority) dealt with individual or applied aspects of learning. The three criteria for which more learning was reported by participants working with women consultants (overall learning, overall emotion, and the ability to generalize knowledge gained from the conference) specifically addressed participants' experience with the conferences, whereas the other criteria (would recommend the conference to a friend and would like to attend another conference) dealt with external events that would occur after the conference ended. This post hoc analysis suggests that specific topics addressing collective/group dynamics and criteria for the conference itself are the most sensitive to the gender of the consultants. This is because women consultants to small groups engage the participants' thinking and emotions.

CONCLUSIONS

Women's holding positions of authority is still a novelty for most adults. The study reported in this article offers some findings related to the contributions of gender and work roles to the effectiveness of women in such positions of authority. Findings for participants of 29 small groups taking part in 7 different group relations conferences held in different geographic locations during a two-year period

consistently reveal that those who worked with women consultants reported higher levels of learning, despite these consultants' being younger and less experienced than their male counterparts. Using Eagly's (1987) theoretical model of differences between adults' gender roles and psychodynamic theory, we find that a more complete explanation of the gender differences found results from considering the agentic and communal dimensions of the specific task, the ambiguous criteria for task evaluation, the enhanced status of the women consultants, the mixed-gender groups, and the transference of reactions to those in authority.

Although one of the study's strengths was its use of AKRI conferences—which form temporary, social institutions—as a field setting, the lack of controls and/or experimental manipulation does not permit one to test the relationships identified or to eliminate alternative explanations of the findings. Despite these limitations, the rather uniform setting and methods of the conferences highlight the importance of taking into account the social structure of the research setting, the specific delegation of authority, the nature of the group task, and any transference reactions whenever investigations attempt rigorous tests of hypotheses about the impact of gender and authority on learning.

NOTE

1. Analyses of variance were computed using the following formula: 2 (gender of consultants) \times 2 (gender of participants) \times 4 (categories of conferences grouped into four geographic locations), because in this unbalanced design conference had to be taken into account. We only report the effects of gender because we found no significant triple interactions, and because this article does not focus on conference effects (of which we found a few). Another, larger study—involving more conferences—is being undertaken to examine how conference characteristics affect participants' learning.

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