Gender Equalization in Computer-Mediated Communication

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INTRODUCTION

While traditional face-to-face (FtF) forms of interaction have proven disadvantageous to females in mixed-sex settings, computer-mediated communication (CMC) holds the promise of helping to level the playing field between the sexes, at least in terms of equitable communication between genders. However, evidence from resent research shows that gender inequalities persist. The objective of this article is to shed light on why the promise of gender equalization in CMC is not evidenced.

BACKGROUND

The equalization phenomenon of CMC is attributed to the reduction in social cues associated with an online virtual environment (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Kiesler, Zubrow, Moses, & Geller, 1985; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986). In this comparatively lean mode of interaction, it is argued, status cues are filtered out, which leaves people feeling more anonymous and less individual. This "deindividuation" lowers self-awareness and self-regulation, resulting in less evaluation apprehension and overall reduced social inhibitions. According to Kiesler et al., the relative distance and anonymity afforded by CMC decreases the salience of status, resulting in the increased participation of lower status members. The emphasis shifts from message contributor to message content, thus serving to equalize the influence of high-status individuals.

Indeed, a repeated finding in the early research in this area is that both participation in group discussion as well as influence over group outcome is more equal under conditions of asynchronous CMC compared to traditional FtF interaction (Clapper, McLean, & Watson, 1991; George, Easton, Nunamaker, & Northcraft, 1990; Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986; McLeod, 1992; Rice, 1984; Zigurs, Poole, & DeSanctis, 1988). Females, being of lower status than males (in most cultures), are thus expected to fair better in a CMC context as compared to a traditional FtF context. However, as pointed out by Postmes and Spears (2002), many studies of electronic media use have not found evidence to support the equalization hypothesis (Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1991; Berdahl & Craig, 1996; Hollingshead, 1996; Matheson, 1991; Saunders, Robey, & Vaverek, 1994; Straus, 1996; Weisband, 1994; Weisband, Schneider, & Connolly, 1995).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The article begins by reviewing literature on status, particularly as it relates to gender differences in traditional FtF communication environments before moving into CMC environments. The focus of the review concerns mixed-sex, task-oriented work situations.

Sociological-Based Theories

Sociological-based theories pertaining to status include status-characteristics theory (SCT) and social-role theory. SCT is concerned with the effects on face-to-face interaction of differences in individuals' status. A central tenet of SCT is that status hierarchies influence interaction in groups (see Wagner & Berger, 1993, 1997, for summaries). Findings indicate that high-status members contribute more opinions and enjoy increased influence in groups. Regarding gender, males are accorded a higher status than females and are believed to have more expertise overall (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 1981; Kent & Moss, 1994; Wood & Karten, 1986). Thus, both sexes expect higher task performance from males, independent of whether gender is relevant to

the group's task at hand (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). In mixed-sex groups, females contribute less task-relevant content due to the expectation of superior male performance. As pointed out by Johnson et al. (1998), these findings are consistently supported (Anderson & Blanchard, 1982; Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson, & Keating, 1988; Lockheed & Hall, 1976; Piliavin & Martin, 1978; Strodbeck & Mann, 1956; Woody & Karten, 1986).

The SCT research considers traditional FtF interaction. In an attempt to tease out the effect of differing degrees of FtF interaction on the effects of status, Mueller et al. (2002) found that the predictions from SCT are more likely to be supported when "women and men regularly interact face-to-face" (p. 178). Thus, they conclude that the amount of face-to-face interaction best predicts whether SCT's claims on gender inequalities will be supported.

Social-role theory (Eagly, 1987) asserts that males and females are socialized differently such that each sex learns dissimilar (i.e., gender-appropriate) behavioral patterns. Females are socialized to respect and defer to males and to exhibit relative docile behavior (Seibert & Grunfeld, 1992). Males, on the other hand, are socialized to be more assertive, competitive, and aggressive (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Powell, 1988).

These socialization processes result in individuals exhibiting stereotypical traits and behavior associated with their gender, which is reflected within the interaction of participants in mixed-sex groups (Broverman et al., 1972; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Strodbeck & Mann, 1956). This body of research generally finds that males participate more and are more influential in mixed-group settings than their female counterparts (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 1981; Williams, 1992). Males also emerge more frequently as group leaders (Eagly, 1987). These findings hold regardless of the sexual composition of the group (see below). Although social roles have become less rigid over the years, gender stereotypes continue to persist (Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Diekma & Eagly, 2000; Steil, 1997).

Structural Theory

The theory of proportional representation (Kanter 1977a, 1977b) provides a structural approach for accounting for within-group behavior due to status differences. It posits that the numerical representation of a status category (e.g., race, sex) influences intragroup interaction. A group member from the numerical minority experiences feelings of isolation and powerlessness. This leads to behavior by the numerical minority that tends toward passive and inhibited conduct. As a means of lessening the feelings of isolation and powerlessness and to fit in, the numerical minority may adopt the behavioral characteristics of the numerical majority. These behaviors are evident in "tilted" groups, where group members account for between 15% to 35% of the minority status, but are more prevalent in "skewed" groups, where they represent less than 15% of group membership. Polarization occurs as the numerical majority alienates the numerical minority by discounting contributions of the minority.

In terms of mixed-gender groups, proportional-representation theory suggests that the numerical representation of men and women directly influences behavior rather than the sex or socialized-gender roles of the individuals themselves. Research suggests that the results of proportional representation are quite direct. For example, Johnson and Schulman (1989) found that solo female members engaged in task activities significantly below the group average. However, there is evidence that men and women are differentially affected by underrepresentation. That is, when females are in the majority and there is a lone male group member, the solo male may dominate (e.g., Crocker & McGraw, 1984; Williams, 1992).

Linguistic Differences in Communication of Men and Women

Researchers within the area of sociolinguistics have uncovered numerous differences in the way males and females use language to communicate and interact. These differences occur to such an extent that sex-specific patterns of communication are evident in discourse (Coates, 1986; Preisler, 1987). Men's discourse is more competitive and involves preserving their independence, while women's is supportive, consensus seeking, and socially oriented (Coates; Preisler; Rhodes & Wood, 1990). Women express more agreement and seek the opinions of others to a greater extent than men (Eakins & Eakins, 1978).