# Men, Women, & Leadership In Groups

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# The gender composition of a work group not only affects the group's performance, it influences the emergence of leadership in the group.


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Much research and theory has addressed how gender influences an individual's chances of emerging as a leader in a small group or team. Little is known, however, about how a group's gender composition influences its emergent leadership structure: that is, whether a group develops a more *centralized* structure – whereby leadership is concentrated in one or a few group members – or a more *decentralized* structure, whereby leadership is shared among members. This is an important issue, because centralized structures have been linked to lower levels of group cohesion, satisfaction, and performance, and to higher levels of tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover. Moreover, conventional wisdom and some theories suggest that a group's leadership structure is shaped by its gender composition.

### Leadership Centralization in Groups

We define leadership centralization as 'the degree to which control over group activities is concentrated in one group member'. In this conceptualization, leadership centralization reflects a pyramid-shaped distribution of power, such as that observed in many organizations. Centralization is higher the larger the distance in control between the lead member and the other members of the group. Accordingly, a four-person group with one leader and three followers is more centralized than a four-person group with three members who share the responsibility of leadership and one member who carries out their wishes, even though the distance between the highest and lowest levels of control held in the group may be the same.

How might a group's gender composition determine its leadership centralization? Current research focuses on how gender influences an individual's likelihood to emerge as a leader, but it fails to address the question of how the composition of a group influences its leadership *structure*. To best address this group-level question, we believe it is important to consider group members' preferences for leadership centralization, and how these preferences might combine and interact when group members work together over time.

Research suggests that groups of men and groups of women have different norms and patterns of interaction: namely, that groups of men are marked by more centralized patterns of interaction and that groups

of women have more egalitarian styles of communicating. Why might this be the case?

Existing explanations focus on gender differences in personality or social roles. For example, men are (or are expected to be, and therefore act) *agentic* – competitive, pro-active, aggressive, controlling, and dominant. Women are (or are expected to be) *communal* in orientation – selfless, passive, caring, supportive, and selfless. It is not clear, however, how a group of agentic individuals would necessarily have more centralized patterns of interaction than a group of communal ones. Centralization requires that a majority of members (or all but one) yield to a leader, or act communally. Equality requires that all members take responsibility for the group and lead to some extent, or act both agentically and communally.

We suggest that a better explanation than individual differences is that men and women have different *preferences* for how power is distributed and shared within groups. Research suggests that men are more likely to prefer centralization and inequality than women; studies of social dominance orientation, for example, report that men endorse social inequality more than women. Men tend to support policies that favor social hierarchy, whereas women favor social equality and communality. Further, men tend to favor *equity norms*, which reward individuals for their contributions to a group, and women tend to favor *equality norms*, which emphasize equal outcomes for group members regardless of their contributions. Equity norms tolerate and often facilitate inequality and social hierarchy, whereas equality norms do not.

An explanation for emergent leadership structures based on members' preferences for these structures shifts the focus of causation from an explanation based on additive individual behaviour toward one based on *collective group expectations*. That is, rather than asking how individuals of 'type A' will behave, how individuals of 'type B' will behave, and how these individuals' behaviours 'add up' to define group behaviour, our approach requires an analysis of how individuals of type A and type B wish and expect the *group* to behave, and how these desires and expectations combine to shape group interaction.

Preferences for certain group structures should affect these structures through the development of group norms. In particular, gender differences in preferences for equality should produce centralized patterns of leadership in all-male groups and relatively decentralized patterns of leadership in all-female groups. If group members believe that men and women differ in their preferences for equality, they will base their expectations for leadership centralization in their group at least in part on the gender of their group members. Groups of men should therefore prefer and expect more centralized patterns of leadership than groups of women, and these preferences and expectations should, in turn, lead groups of men to have more centralized leadership than groups of women. Patterns of leadership that reflect these preferences are likely to emerge as members with similar backgrounds implicitly agree on norms for the group.

Centralized leadership in groups of men and decentralized leadership in groups of women are likely to go unchallenged if these structures reflect members' preferences. If a member does try to challenge them – such as being dominating in a group of women or challenging the leader in a group of men – the member is likely to be ignored, undermined, or openly criticized by the rest of the group, making the preferred social arrangement explicit and protecting it.

## Men and women have different preferences for how power is distributed and shared within groups.

### Implications for Mixed-Gender Groups

What do men's and women's different preferences for leadership centralization imply for mixed-gender groups? We suggest that women are more likely to adopt men's preferences than vice-versa at the onset of group interaction, making leadership patterns in mixed-sex groups resemble those of all-male groups more than those of all-female groups. Women are more likely to adopt men's preferences than men are to adopt women's, because women are more able and motivated to do so. They are more able because, to a greater degree than men, women must operate in both female-dominated and male-dominated (in power, numbers, or both) domains, the latter of which include most public realms (e.g., business, politics, entertainment, the media, church, and military). This is analogous to the way in which ethnic minorities are more likely than ethnic majority members to have to understand and operate in both ethnic minority and majority cultures. Women are likely to be more motivated than men to learn and engage in other-gender norms due to gender differences in power. Learning men's preferences and perspectives may grant women access to valuable resources that are primarily controlled by men, and to higher levels of social status associated with male-dominated realms and identities.

Supporting the notion that women more than men follow other-gender norms in mixed-gender groups, one study found that female newcomers to majority-male groups 'fit in' with their groups better than male newcomers to majority-female groups. In addition, women in mixed-gender groups engage in lower levels of socio-emotional behaviour than women in all-female groups, suggesting that women adhere to more masculine norms in the presence of men than in the presence of other women.

Based on this, we hypothesize that women are more likely than men to conform to other-gender preferences for leadership centralization in groups. We predict that in the early stages of group interaction, mixed-gender groups have levels of leadership centralization similar to

those of all-male groups because this is the easiest path for groups to follow.

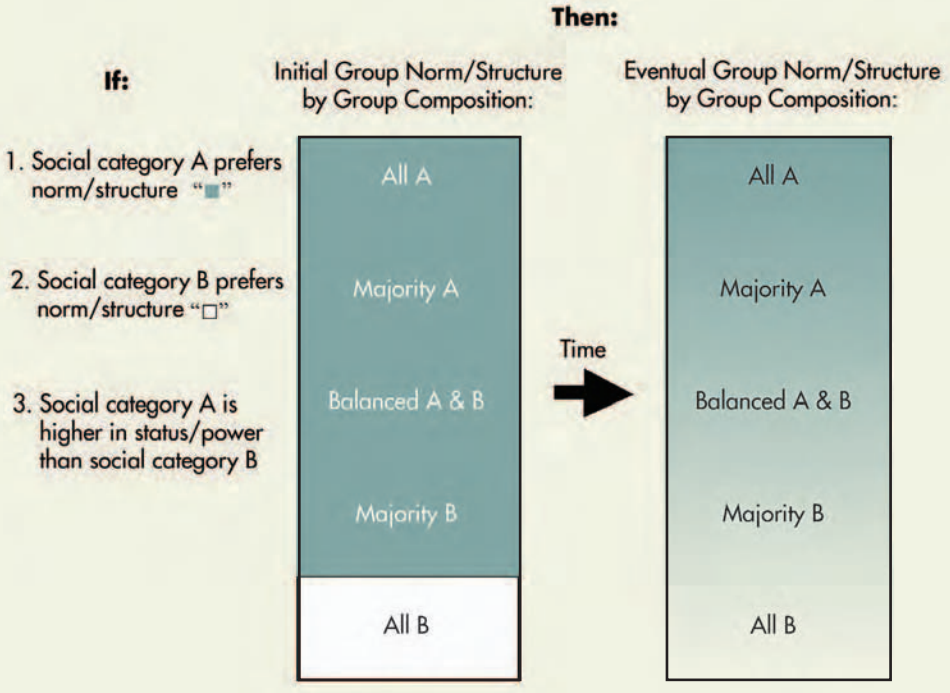
In mixed-gender groups, the dissonance between female members' preferences for decentralized leadership structures and the centralized patterns that initially emerge should cause leadership to become less centralized over time. Groups may integrate their members' preferences over time so that eventual group structures begin to reflect an average of member preferences. Members of the group may grow more comfortable voicing their preferences as they become familiar with each other. Furthermore, social cues in mixed-gender groups with a significant number of women in them are likely to reveal a preference for less-centralized group activity. If mixed-gender groups are initially marked by centralized leadership consistent with men's preferences, we predict they become less centralized over time in proportion to the number of women in the group.

Results of our research were consistent with our Dominant Norms Model (**see Figure One**), which makes predictions based on gender differences in preferences for equality. Supporting the premise of these predictions, women more than men described their ideal companies as having egalitarian cultures. Consistent with these preferences, all-female groups developed less-centralized patterns of leadership than all-male groups. Consistent with the idea that women's preferences for equality become integrated in mixed-sex groups over time, centralization decreased in balanced groups, which initially resembled all-male groups and then became less centralized than all-male groups.

Our research confirms that women more than men prefer equality in groups, that women are more likely than men to adapt to other-sex preferences at the onset of group interaction, and that over time, group structures reflect an average of member preferences. Instead of treating the emergence of a group-level leadership structure as the additive combination of individual leadership behaviour, the Dominant Norms Model treats it as a function of individual preferences for leadership structures.

Consistent with prior research, we found evidence that leadership centralization is negatively related to group performance. The groups in our study worked on additive tasks, for which performance was likely to be better the more each member of the group contributed to the project. Centralized leadership was thus likely to hurt performance on these tasks if it meant few members actively contributed to, and led, the group's activities. Centralized leadership seems likely to hurt performance for groups engaged in other types of tasks as well, such as brainstorming, judgment, and decision-making. In some contexts, however, a high level of centralization might be an effective way to organize group activities and may improve performance in groups requiring a lot of coordination and planning (e.g., large groups or groups working on complex tasks).

**Figure One: The Dominant Norms Model**




## Conclusion

In addition to moving beyond direct effects toward process models of diversity, researchers are beginning to move beyond studying mere difference. Early research on diversity treated alternative differences equivalently (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), which inhibited the ability to explain different results for different social categories.

Researchers are now beginning to consider the histories and meanings of differences as they are reflected in the different status, stereotypes, and perspectives associated with different social groups. The Dominant Norms Model could be useful in this endeavor. It can be used to study a variety of group compositions, norms, and outcomes. By considering how different demographic groups (e.g., cultures, generations, and socioeconomic classes) differ in their preferences for social norms and structures (e.g., formality, individualism and collectivism, or uncertainty avoidance), and by considering the relative status and power of these groups, one can anticipate which norms develop in groups over time from their demographic compositions. If these norms affect group outcomes, predictions can be made for those as well.

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