**Effect of Skewed Gender Composition on Student Participation in Undergraduate Engineering Project Teams**

Lorelle Meadows¹ and Denise Sekaquaptewa²

¹ College of Engineering, ² Department of Psychology, The University of Michigan

**Introduction**

Although women are well represented among the total undergraduate population at the University of Michigan, female students are outnumbered by male students in the College of Engineering. In 2009 and 2010, the incoming class in engineering was 23% female, consistent with national trends and reflective of gender stereotypes depicting engineering as a “male” domain. Because there are fewer female than male engineering students, the composition of small groups of students, including those assigned to complete class projects, is likely to be skewed in favor of men. In this study, we draw on research findings from psychology on the influence of gender stereotypes and skewed gender compositions on women working in male-dominated fields as well as research on self-efficacy and active participation to investigate the effect of skewed gender composition in small class project groups. We address the question of whether being in the gender minority has a detrimental effect on active participation in group project teams for female engineering students.

**Study Setting**

In Engineering 100: Introduction to Engineering, students are assigned to 4 to 6 person teams to complete a semester-long introductory engineering design project. Project teams are created based on several variables including gender, race/ethnicity, living location and skill sets. Overall teams are often skewed in favor of men, with a variety of team gender compositions within any given section.

At the end of each semester, teams are required to deliver a final oral presentation, which is videotaped (Figure 1). This research project explores the observation that in mixed gender teams, female students would more often present less technical material, while male students would more often present more technical material.

**Research Methodology**

There were two primary components to this research investigation:

- A systematic investigation of the roles adopted by male and female students as a function of gender composition of the presentation group in videotaped presentations.
- A questionnaire administered to a subset of students immediately following delivery of their final oral presentations to assess student self-perceptions.

**Study Variables**

A preliminary analysis of this data set was performed using:

**Dependent measures**

- Number of technical or non-technical slides each student presented
- Speaking time ratio (actual time/expected time)
- Number of questions answered by each student
- Leadership and effective speaker ratings assessed by two independent judges

**Predictor variables**

- Student gender
- Group gender composition (male dominated, equal split, female-dominated)

**Results**

Data were analyzed using a 2(student gender) x 3(group gender composition: male dominated, gender equal, female dominated) ANOVA.

![Graphs showing results](image)

**Conclusions**

Results suggest that:

- Women were more likely to adopt passive, supporting roles and present non-technical information.
- Men adopted active roles and presented more technical information in group presentations.
- When men were under-represented, their behavior aligned with the stereotype; they became more assertive in taking questions posed to the group as a whole.
- Questionnaire responses showed that men rated their performance and leadership higher in groups with more women.
- Women rated their own performance as better in all-female groups than those in which the participant held solo status.

**Acknowledgements**

This project was supported by the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching Investigating Student Learning Program and the College of Engineering.