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# Gender and Public Talk: Accounting for Women's Variable Participation in the Public Sphere

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## Abstract

This article develops a theory of the gendered character of public talk as a way to account for women's variable participation in the settings that make up the public sphere. Public settings for citizen talk such as radio call-in shows, social networking sites, letters to the editor, and town hall meetings are culturally coded female or male. In feminized settings, where the people who organize public talk are from feminized professions and where the favored modes of talk and action emphasize stereotypically feminine values, women are likely to be as active and influential participants as men. We test this proposition by way of an examination of the organized public deliberative forums in which many Americans today discuss policy issues. We show that women truly are equal participants in these forums. We account for this surprising development by demonstrating the female gendered character of the contemporary field of organized public deliberation.

## Keywords

deliberative democracy, culture, gender

While advocates across the political spectrum have championed the importance of citizen talk for healthy democracies, social scientists have cautioned that depending on the circumstances, public talk can be narrow-minded (Bellah et al. 1985; Perrin 2006), apolitical (Eliasoph 1998; Mutz 2006), paralyzingly contentious (Baiocchi 2005), exclusive (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2003; Lichterman 2005), alienating (Fishman 2004; S. Hart 2001; Lee 2007), or only sociable rather than oriented to solving problems (Schudson 1997). What matters are the social norms defining the topics that are appropriate, the styles of talk that are acceptable, the courses of action that are imaginable, the kinds of evidence that are credible, and the people whose opinions are authoritative. Sociologists

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have located those norms variously in the “group style” of particular organizations (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2005), in the idiom of associational structures such as churches and unions (Perrin 2006), in the deep codes of civil discourse (Alexander and Smith 1993), in the character of ties linking social groups (Baocchi 2005; Fishman 2004), or in a regional cultural repertoire (Bellah et al. 1985; Eliasoph 1998; Lee 2007; Mutz 2006).

We contribute to these lines of inquiry by theorizing about the norms that make citizen talk equal: that is, talk in which people’s social status does not determine the likelihood that they participate, express opinions, or are listened to seriously. That citizen talk be egalitarian in this sense is central to normative theories of deliberative democracy (Bohman 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Knight and Johnson 1997) and makes intuitive sense. After all, granting groups access to the public sphere would not count for much if they were not listened to there. We focus on equality between men and women and we locate the norms producing gender equality in the *gendered character of the institutional settings in which public talk takes place*. Settings such as radio call-in shows, legislative hearings, social networking sites, and public deliberative forums communicate different messages about the appropriate gender of authoritative speakers, topics, and styles of talk. The gendering of the site affects how men and women participate in it. It may also affect how much influence their talk has outside the site.

By default, most sites of public political talk are masculine. However, some of the discourses that are used to talk about public life are anchored in feminized institutions such as social work and psychotherapy (Cloud 1998; Tonn 2005). Similarly, some settings for public talk communicate stereotypically feminine norms of participation. In this article, we theorize the features of settings of public talk that define them as feminized or masculinized, the processes by which settings become feminized or masculinized, and the consequences of a setting’s gender coding for the talk that takes place within it. To do these things, we draw on scholarship on the gendering of occupations but we adapt its expectations to account for public talk rather than employment. We contrast our account of the conditions in which men and women participate equally in public talk with perspectives that emphasize the gender composition of the group and the gendered character of the topic.

To appraise our theory, we examine one institutional setting of public political talk: the organized public deliberative forums in which hundreds of thousands of Americans have made recommendations about health care, urban planning, crime and safety, education, and foreign policy (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004; Gastil and Levine 2005; Rosenberg 2007). We chose this setting for two reasons. One is that, more than any of the other settings we mentioned, public deliberative forums aim to approximate a public sphere (Habermas 1984) in which citizens’ opinions are freely exchanged with the objective of arriving at areas of common ground or consensus (Chambers 2003; Fung 2007). The other reason is that public deliberation has been the target of criticism by feminists for favoring men over women (Bickford 1996; Fraser 1992; Sanders 1997; Young 1996, 2000). Alone among settings of public talk, organized public deliberation has already been analyzed as a gendered institution—a masculine one. However, in the absence of up-to-date empirical investigation, that characterization is speculative.

Recent research leads to a different conclusion. Differences in men and women’s styles do not translate into inequality. Our case study allowed us to examine plausible explanations for women’s equality centering variously on the equalizing efforts of deliberation facilitators, the topic or composition of the deliberating group, and stratified self-selection processes. None of those explanations make sense of the patterns we document. Instead, our analysis of the contemporary field of organized public deliberation supports an alternative

explanation. Although this was unanticipated by its founders, organized public deliberation in America has become feminized in ways that have equalized men and women's statuses within public deliberative forums. The upside of this development is that women and men today are equal participants in such forums. But there may be a downside, which we only begin to explore: the same features that have attracted women to public deliberative forums may contribute to limiting the impact of those forums on policymaking.

## DIFFERENCE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Contemporary enthusiasm for the democratic virtues of public talk owes much to Habermas's theory of the public sphere. In public discussion that is open to all and governed by norms of equality, rationality, and reflexivity, Habermas argued, citizens can arrive at a consensus on matters that affect them. Democratic legitimacy can and should be grounded in public deliberation. In his earliest work, Habermas ([1962] 1989) found historical precedent for such a consensus in the eighteenth-century public sphere. In coffee houses, salons, table societies, and journals of opinion, private citizens debated issues that were once the exclusive purview of the state. Such debates were conducted without regard for status and they formed the basis for criticizing the state in the name of public interests.

To be sure, the progressive features of the eighteenth-century public sphere were offset by its exclusive character. It was, Habermas recognized, barred to women. And it was quite specifically a *bourgeois* public sphere: the indifference to status operated only within the boundaries of the middle class. So, Habermas by no means advocated simply resuscitating the eighteenth-century public sphere. Where he saw emancipatory potential, however, was in the notion of public debate that was open to all and governed by reason. In his later work, Habermas (1984) sought to ground that potential in the norms of ordinary speech rather than in a historical precedent.

For scholars and political observers who, like Habermas, worry that contemporary political discourse is characterized by manipulation, spin, and uninformed debate, the idea of consensus arrived at through rational critical public discussion remains compelling. Giving people the opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern in a setting characterized by openness (Bohman, 1996; J. Cohen 1989; Fishkin 1995), equality (Knight and Johnson 1997; Mansbridge et al. 2008), and an orientation to reason-giving (Bohman 1996; J. Cohen 1989; Gutmann and Thompson 2004:3; Habermas 1984) should yield, if not consensus, then a fuller appreciation of a range of preferences as legitimate. Integrated into existing electoral, legislative, and administrative processes, public deliberation should produce better policies, better citizens, and better politics (Barber 1988; Bohman 1996; J. Cohen 1989; Dryzek 2000; Fishkin 1991, 1995). And indeed, as we noted earlier, exercises in public deliberation have proliferated in the past decade, with deliberative forums now routinely conducted by civic coalitions and governmental agencies.

But amid the enthusiasm for public talk, critics have sounded an important caution. Making politics more deliberative may not make it more democratic. Even if people are granted equal access to deliberative forums, they are not equally able to use the discourse that is privileged there (Bickford 1996; Fraser 1992; Mansbridge 1999; Sanders 1997; Young 1996, 2000). Again, Habermas did recognize that the public sphere of the eighteenth century excluded women and the working class. What he did not recognize, say critics, was that the public sphere *depended* on its exclusion of women and the working class. It was constructed in deliberate contrast to the style of talk and interaction associated with women and the working class. Bourgeois republicans valorized an austere and reason-based style of public discourse in explicit opposition, on one hand, to the French intellectual salon

discourse dominated by women and seen as effeminate and aristocratic and, on the other, to the more contentious forms of politics and street protests of the working class (Eley 1992; Landes 1988; Ryan 1992).

The problem, in other words, was not just that women and the working class were excluded from the places in which the public talk that mattered took place, but that they were seen as incapable of the kind of talk that was required there. Simply inviting them in would not solve the problem. And simply inviting them in *has* not solved the problem. Critics cite the example of juries. Women participate in jury deliberation but are less likely than men to speak and less likely to be listened to when they do speak (Fraser 1992; Sanders 1997; Young 1996). The reason, say critics, is that women (as well as working-class men, non-native English speakers, and people of color) are both less comfortable with an abstract discourse of reason-giving and less likely to be seen as capable of such discourse no matter how they speak (Bickford 1996; Fraser 1992; Mansbridge 1999; Sanders 1997; Young 1996, 2000).

This suggests not only that Habermas's vision of a deliberative public sphere has yet to be realized. It also suggests that it cannot be realized—or at least cannot be realized in a way that makes participants' equality as important as their use of what passes as rational discourse. Deliberative democrats insist that what people say should be evaluated on the basis of the substance of their claims rather than on the basis of their personal status (Knight and Johnson 1997; Mansbridge et al. 2008). But if women's claims cannot be evaluated separate from women's status, then women might be better off being represented by higher status speakers than participating themselves.

## EVALUATING THE DIFFERENCE CRITIQUE

Are the critics right? Are women still marginalized from the public sphere? Are they marginalized even (or especially) from settings that prize deliberative discourse? No one has undertaken a comparative investigation of the places in which citizens talk about politics. But the individual studies that have been conducted paint a sobering picture. Men monopolize talk in Congressional subcommittee hearings (Mattei 1998), state legislative committee hearings (Kathlene 1994, 2005), New England town meetings (Bryan 2004), municipal public hearings (Karpowitz 2008), conversations with acquaintances in public settings (Conover et al. 2002), radio call-in shows (Davis and Owen 1998), letters to the editor of newspapers (Cooper, Knotts and Haspel 2009; R. Hart 2001; Hessing 2003; Perrin and Vaisey 2008), political blogs (Herring and Paolillo 2006; McKenna and Pole 2008), and online chat rooms and discussion groups (Davis and Owen 1998; Herring 2003; Savicki, Lingenfelter, and Kelley 1996; Stromer-Galley 2002). These studies show, variously, that men speak (or write) more often, speak for longer turns, interrupt more, are more hostile in tone, are more likely to be responded to, are more likely to be responded to respectfully, and are more likely to respond to women in a challenging way.

However, there are also settings in which women and modes of talk associated with women predominate: in daytime television talk shows (Davis and Owen 1998), for example, as well as in personal experience blogs (Herring and Paolillo 2006) and in school board meetings (Tracy and Durfy 2007). Critics might argue that these venues lie outside the mainstream public sphere. They are like the intellectual salons of the eighteenth century: places that are seen as not fully political. Yet, recent research on the main setting that critics cite in claiming the exclusive character of deliberative talk—jury trials—suggests that women may not be marginalized there any longer (Cornwell and Hans 2011; Hickerson and Gastil 2008). And as we will show, women participate just as actively and influentially as men in the

organized public deliberative forums that are championed as the contemporary incarnation of a Habermasian public sphere.

Our point is not that things are rosier for women than it seems. Rather, we begin with the recognition that the contemporary public sphere includes multiple publics and multiple institutions, with distinct norms for access, communication, and influence (Clayman 2004; Jacobs 2003). That leads us to ask three questions. What is it about certain institutional settings of talk that encourages or discourages women's involvement and influence? How and why do settings change in the extent to which they encourage women's involvement? How does the gendered character of the setting affect the wider political influence of the talk that takes place there? In other words, we take seriously feminist critics' view that the norms of discourse reflect the institutional settings in which they develop. But we argue for a fuller examination of just how institutional settings convey gendered norms of appropriate discourse.

## THE GENDERED PUBLIC SPHERE

To say that an institution is male gendered is not to say simply that men hold more positions of power in it. It is to say that in numerous, diverse, and sometimes hard to detect respects, the institution enacts a distinction between male and female and privileges stereotypically masculine values over stereotypically feminine ones. As a result, seemingly neutral policies, categories, and evaluative criteria operate consistently to advantage men over women (Acker 1990; Brown 1992; Burghardt and Colbeck 2005; Duerst-Lahti 1997; Williams 1995).

Scholars have used this perspective to account for how women fare in terms of pay, promotions, and power in jobs and organizations. To turn the perspective to how women fare in terms of equality and influence in the public sphere, we need to adapt it significantly. First, while scholars have described whole institutional spheres as gendered (as Acker 1990:57 puts it, "law, politics, religion, the academy, the state, and the economy" [see also Brown 1992; Duerst-Lahti 2005]), that characterization is contradicted by the existence of female-gendered organizations, occupations, and fields *within* overall male-gendered institutional spheres (Bordt 1997; Burghardt and Colbeck 2005). We draw accordingly on research that has focused on the gendering, specifically, of occupations, and on the consequences of changes in occupations' gender composition. But the consequences we are interested in are not equality in pay or mobility, but rather equality in talk. Accordingly, we emphasize the importance not only of the gender composition of the occupations sponsoring and organizing public talk, but also of the gendered norms of talk that are promoted.

We define a setting of public political talk as a place in which citizens are regularly invited to discuss matters of political concern, a setting that is structured by formal or informal rules about how discussion should unfold, and organized by people whose job responsibilities include regularly running such forums. For example, the public hearings that municipal governments hold as part of redevelopment efforts invite members of the public to stand before a microphone for a specified period of time to communicate their concerns to a panel of public officials. Radio call-in shows invite listeners to phone in and convey their opinions directly to the show's host, guests, and other listeners.

The average citizen's contact with institutions like these is fairly superficial, short, and sporadic or one-time. Still, citizens probably form an impression quickly of the gender norms for talk that are operative in such settings and they probably try to act in line with those norms. We argue that one indicator of the gendered character of the setting is the relative prominence of women and people from women-identified professions in sponsoring,

organizing, and facilitating discussion. A second indicator is the kind of talk that is encouraged. In a feminized setting, emotional expression and empathetic listening are likely to be emphasized over technical analysis and adversarial argumentation. The purposes of public talk are likely to be aligned with stereotypically feminine modes of civic engagement more than masculine ones. For example, participants in public talk may be described as “community members” more than “citizens.” Their targets of reform are likely to be described as the “community” rather than “government” or “policy.”

Note that the gendered features of talk are not just a result of the fact that men or women predominate among speakers. Rather, the setting is structured in such a way as to encourage a particular form of talk. Online talk, for example, has very few regulatory structures. In surveys, men say they appreciate that character, which they see as consonant with the value of free speech. Women, by contrast, value politeness more and say that they are alienated by the adversarial norms of online talk (Herring 1994). Nor do the gendered features of talk necessarily flow from the gendered character of the topic. In Balka’s (1993) study of Internet forums devoted to feminist issues, one mailing list, “soc.women,” adopted an impersonal and antagonistic style. The other, “femail,” adopted a much more personal and supportive style. Although both forums were about women-oriented topics—namely, feminism—soc.women attracted mainly men and femail attracted women.

How does an institutional setting become feminized? We can identify two distinct processes. In one, a previously masculinized setting becomes feminized. Reskin and Roos (1990) show that jobs as varied as clerical worker, telephone operator, wait staff, public school teacher, and bank teller became women’s jobs after men left them for jobs with better pay or more autonomy. Women moved into jobs that were preferable to traditionally female jobs. Adapting this process to settings of talk, we would expect that a setting would become feminized when the people responsible for organizing the talk within it shifted from predominately men to predominately women. For example, the setting of the jury would become feminized when the jobs tasked with selecting and instructing juries became dominated by women. And in fact, while women have yet to achieve parity with men in either judgeships or lawyering, increases in the number of women holding these positions, along with women’s domination of other courtroom positions such as clerk and court reporter, may have shifted the gender coding of the courtroom. This may account for Cornwell and Hans’s (2011) finding that women jurors consistently reported participating as much as men, regardless of the gender composition of the jury.

A different process involves the emergence of a new setting for talk, one that is feminized from the beginning. This is analogous to the creation of a new occupation that draws women from the start. For example, the introduction of the typewriter in the 1870s led employers to create the new occupation of typist. Offering little possibility for promotion to the ranks of management, the job attracted women who had been copyists in their homes. In the case of political talk, we would expect to see that the people organizing talk came from feminized settings. For example, Phil Donahue pioneered the participatory daytime talk show, in which mainly women talked with celebrity guests about issues ranging from abortion and atheism to white supremacy and nuclear energy. Before that, Donahue specialized in “female-only two-way talk” radio shows aimed at women who were interested in participating in frank conversations about sex. He brought his team of mainly women producers with him when he moved his show to television in 1967 (Timberg and Erler 2002).

Once a feminized setting of political talk has come into being, what does its existence mean for the equality of talk within the setting—and outside it? No one has addressed the question. But again, we can extrapolate several plausible scenarios from the literature on the feminizing of occupations. One scenario is that women do better, one is that they do not, and

one is that they do better within the organization but at the cost of influence outside it. In line with the first scenario, the more women in the organization, the better all women are paid, the more likely they are to be promoted, and the less likely their work is to be devalued (L. Cohen, Broschak, and Haveman 1998; Ely 1995). One might imagine, accordingly, that in sites of public political talk that are gendered female, women would reap rewards in speaking time and influence. They would speak as much as or more than men and would be awarded the same or more respect, as measured, for example, in the number and kinds of responses they elicited.<sup>1</sup>

In line with the second scenario, in occupations that are made up mainly of women, such as nursing and elementary school teaching, men still have an advantage. They benefit from a "glass elevator" that propels them to higher pay and better positions (Maume 1999; Williams 1995). Adapting this scenario to public political talk, one might imagine that in a setting that is sex-typed female, for example, daytime talk shows or school board hearings, men, even if they were few in number, would monopolize discussion. Women would say less, would be responded to less often and less seriously, and would be less likely to set the topics for discussion.

In the third scenario, the sex typing of the occupation or organization disadvantages *all* those who work in it. Numerous studies have shown that as women's share of an occupation rises, the pay of both women and men falls (Baron and Newman 1989; Lewis and Nice 1994). Adapting this scenario to public political talk, in a feminized setting of talk, men and women might be equal within the site, but at the cost of the setting's wider political influence. One way this would happen is that fewer men would participate. This is important since settings of public political talk often make some claim to be representative of the public. If the collective opinions that issue from a setting are mainly *women's* opinions on an issue, they are likely to have limited influence. Alternatively, the female-typed character of the setting may lead decision makers to treat it as less seriously political. One can imagine, for example, that politicians might pay more attention to talk radio programs than to daytime television talk shows, not strictly because of the content (since daytime talk shows treat issues of health, education, crime, and welfare that are likely relevant to policymakers), but because of a perception of talk radio as more properly political. Finally, the people who organize public talk in a feminized setting may themselves subscribe to a view that the talk there is not appropriately political and thus curtail the routes therein to political influence.

Our expectations are as follows. In line with the first scenario, but in contrast with the second, we expect that in a feminized setting of public political talk, women will be as active and influential as men. We argue that the gendered character of the setting will matter more in accounting for men and women's participation than the institutional sphere within which the discussion takes place (say, politics or the economy). It will also matter more than either the gender composition of the group or the topic under discussion. We draw attention to gender composition because scholars have suggested that gender interaction styles may differ depending on the proportion of men and women in the group. In groups comprised exclusively of women, women are more active and authoritative than they are in mixed groups (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Savicki and Kelley 2000). Some studies have shown that where women make up a clear majority of participants, they tend to control discussion topics and elicit responses from other members of the group; the overall tone is also more civil (Baym 1996; Herring 1994). Other studies have shown that men respond to women's presence by monopolizing discussion even more (Kathlene 1994, 2005). If we are right that the institutional setting matters more than the composition of the group, then in feminized settings, women will be equal or dominant participants whether the group is male-dominated, mixed, or female-dominated.



With respect to the topic of discussion, researchers have shown that in gender-mixed groups, when the task is popularly viewed as feminine, for example, sewing or child care, women tend to be active and influential participants. Women are implicitly credited with expertise on a stereotypically feminine task (the terms *task* and *topic* are used interchangeably in this literature; cf. Dovidio et al. 1988). When the task is a stereotypically masculine one, say, car repair, or is neutral, men display dominant behavior and monopolize discussion (Dovidio et al. 1988; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Wagner and Berger 1997). However, the experimental character of the research has made it difficult to disentangle the effects of topic and setting. For example, imagine a gender-mixed group talking about foreign policy on a daytime television talk show. Our theory would predict that an institutional setting that is seen as the purview of women (daytime television talk shows) would trump the effects on discussion of a topic in which men are seen as expert (foreign policy).

A feminized setting is likely to promote equality *in* talk. We focus our empirical examination on this possibility. But we want to identify, at least hypothetically, what may be an unintended downside to this development. Women's equality within the setting may come at the expense of the influence of the setting on broader political processes. In line with the third scenario we described previously, men may be less willing to participate in the discussions, politicians may devalue the collective opinions that are voiced in the setting, and discussion facilitators may describe positive outcomes of public talk in ways that exclude direct influence on the policymaking process.

## WOMEN AND MEN IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Our empirical investigation focuses on one contemporary setting for public political talk in the United States: the organized public deliberative forums currently sponsored by civic groups and governmental agencies in which ordinary citizens discuss matters of public concern, such as public safety, environmental issues, education, housing, and budgetary issues, with the objective of arriving at group recommendations. Such forums include study circles, civic dialogues, Deliberative Polls, citizen juries, 21st Century Town Meetings®, citizen assemblies, community conversations, and visioning workshops. The forums operate differently (study circles, for example, extend over many weeks while Deliberative Polls and 21st Century Town Meetings® are usually one-off affairs; Deliberative Polls and citizen juries rely on sampling while the other forms do not) but they share norms for organizing discussion (Mansbridge et al. 2006). Their organizers are part of a community of public deliberation specialists (Ryfe 2007), which includes national organizations, academic institutes, regular conferences, a journal, and multiple listservs and blogs.

Public deliberative forums have not yet replaced traditional instruments for securing public input into policymaking such as public hearings and neighborhood councils. Rather, they have emerged in parallel with those instruments, adopted in some cases by policymakers who were frustrated with traditional methods of public input (Leighninger 2012). In that sense, they represent a new field of public talk. Democratic theorists have touted these forums as an incarnation of the Habermasian ideal of unrestricted and equal public discourse (Chambers 2003; Fung 2007). Again, they are only one among the many settings for public political talk that together comprise the public sphere. Unlike radio call-in shows, blogs, or most settings of public political talk, however, public deliberative forums have as their *only* goal public discourse that simultaneously educates citizens and transmits their generalized interests to policymakers. The spread of such forums offers the opportunity to assess the feminist critique of deliberation empirically, both in terms of the ostensibly gendered character of the field and the way men and women interact within it.

Recent studies suggest that men and women interact in surprisingly egalitarian ways in public deliberation. In a study of 11 groups deliberating about urban problems in Philadelphia, Dutwin (2003) found no significant differences between men and women in their rates of participation or contribution of ideas. In a study of online and in-person Deliberative Polls convened between 2002 and 2005 to discuss, variously, foreign policy, presidential candidates, and health and education policy, Siu (2008) found that women spoke as long as men, made as many statements as men, and used as many words as men. Price (2009) studied two online forums. In the one on health care, there were no differences between men and women in the number of words each contributed to the discussion. In the one on the 2000 presidential campaign, women contributed significantly more words than men. Wilson, Padgett, and Wallace (2007) found that in an in-person forum to discuss the rebuilding of New Orleans, women in 16 randomly selected groups spoke more often than men.

### OUR CASE: LISTENING TO THE CITY

Our own research went beyond these studies by focusing not only on women's levels of participation, but also on their styles of talk and the responses they elicited. We studied an online forum that was convened over two weeks in the summer of 2002 to solicit public input into the rebuilding of the former World Trade Center site. The forum, *Listening to the City*, was sponsored by a coalition of civic groups and downtown rebuilding authorities and followed a one-day in-person forum by the same name. Twenty-five groups of ordinary citizens, recruited by way of advertisements and nonprofit organizations, discussed preliminary plans for the site. They also discussed housing, transportation, economic development issues, and plans for a memorial to the victims of the attack. Between 9 and 15 members of each group of 30 participated regularly, following an agenda set by forum organizers that allowed a few days to discuss each topic. Periodically, groups summarized their conclusions, which were then forwarded to rebuilding authorities.

Organized by one of the largest deliberation-sponsoring groups in the country and run by trained facilitators, *Listening to the City* has been widely recognized as an exemplar of contemporary American public deliberation (Bingham Nabatchi, and O'Leary 2005; Figallo, Miller, and Weiss 2004; Gastil and Levine 2005; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Polletta and Wood 2005; Roberts 2004). We chose to study this forum because it was composed of 25 groups of people following the same agenda over the same period. This allowed us to analyze participation in groups that varied in their gender composition. While it is often difficult in online discussions to know whether a particular poster is a man or a woman, this particular forum was run by an organization that was committed to reducing what it saw as the destructive impact of anonymity in online discussions (Weblab n.d.). For that reason, participants introduced themselves to one another at the beginning of the forum and in addition described themselves in a group biographies thread, which remained available whenever one clicked on an online name. As a result, participants probably had a good sense of whether a woman or a man had posted a particular message.

The 25 groups in *Listening to the City* varied not only in their gender make-up, but also in whether an active facilitator was assigned to the group. In the nine groups without a facilitator, participants were periodically sent instructions on discussion topics and were able to ask the forum organizers questions. But they were expected to welcome each other, respond to and summarize each other's responses, and help each other to solve technical problems. This allowed us to see the effect of facilitation on gender norms of participation. Finally, the discussion ranged over topics that could be considered stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine. The memorial to the victims of the disaster might be seen as a feminine topic, given women's symbolic association with memory (Gillis 1994). But there was also

discussion of economic development and transportation options for the site, both typically coded masculine (Law 1999; Nelson 1996). Together, these features of the data allowed us to appraise an explanation for patterns of participation based on the gendered character of the institutional setting, versus explanations based variously on the gender composition of the group, the gendered character of the topic, and the presence of active facilitators.

The case has limitations. The fact that the forum occurred after a traumatic event may have encouraged people who did not usually participate to do so, and given New Yorkers' reputation for assertiveness, it is possible that women in this forum were less reserved than women elsewhere might have been. Even though participants probably knew whether a poster was a woman or a man, their inability to see or hear each other undoubtedly reduced their ability to perceive norms that in a face-to-face setting might have discouraged women from speaking up. For these reasons, we consider our findings in conjunction with those that have emerged from the existing research on deliberation on more routine topics, in other places, and in face-to-face rather than online forums.

We downloaded the discussions from a public site. The word count of each of the 8,017 messages posted, along with each message's author and location in the topic threads, was calculated automatically using a program created by John Lee. This allowed us to compare the frequency and length of women's messages relative to men's. To capture additional dimensions of women's involvement and influence in the discussion, we used quota sampling to select 12 groups' discussions for more detailed coding. Following what sociolinguists have identified as indicators of conversational influence (Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1985; Ridgeway and Smith Lovin 1999), we looked to see whether women's opinions were responded to by other members of the group and responded to seriously, that is, whether the substance of the opinion was engaged in the response. We also looked at the response to women's opinions that were backed up by reasons and those that were accompanied instead by stories. We compared patterns of men and women's participation in groups in which more than 60 percent of the messages were sent by women with those in which that was not the case. (We defined female-dominated groups in terms of the proportion of *messages* sent by women rather than the group *members* who were women; given the virtual character of discussion, we guessed that women who did not participate would not have much of an effect on people's experience of being in a male- or female-dominated group.) We also compared groups that were actively facilitated with groups that were not. And we compared discussion threads that centered on economic development and transportation planning with ones that were about other topics (see appendix for a discussion of our coding categories and methods of statistical analysis—available online at <http://stx.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>).

In short, we found no evidence of gender inequalities in discussion. Women who had registered for the forum were as likely to post at least one message as were men who had registered for the forum. As Table 1 shows, women, on average, posted as many messages as did men. Women's messages were, on average, as long as men's.

As Table 2 shows, women were as likely as men to advance opinions in their messages. They were as likely as men to have their opinions engaged—that is, responded to seriously rather than cursorily. Women's messages in groups in which more than 60 percent of the messages were sent by women were no more likely to advance opinions or be responded to in an engaged way than they were in more evenly mixed groups. Men's messages in female-dominated groups were no more likely to advance opinions or be responded to in an engaged way than they were in evenly mixed groups.

We did find evidence of gender *differences*, but differences that did not seem to translate into inequalities. For example, women were significantly more likely than men to back up their opinions with stories, rather than reasons. However, they were just as likely to have the

**Table 1.** Zero-truncated Negative Binomial Regression Model for Message Length and the Number of Messages Sent by a Participant.

	Message length		Number of messages	
	Incident Rate Ratio	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient
Female	0.944	-0.058 (0.05)	0.948	-0.053 (0.19)
<35 years old	0.956	-0.045 (0.05)	0.741	-0.299 (0.19)
Not white	1.041	0.040 (0.06)	0.794	-0.229 (0.19)
No college degree	0.840	-0.174** (0.06)	1.460	0.379 (0.24)
<\$75,000	1.146	0.137* (0.05)	1.001	0.002 (0.17)
Female-dominated group	1.120	0.114 (0.09)	1.157	0.146 (0.25)
Facilitated group	1.035	0.035 (0.05)	0.597	-0.515 (0.27)
Constant		4.958*** (0.05)		2.935*** (0.28)
Wald chi square		15.67		18.90
Observations		8,017		487

Note: Model 1: Standard errors are adjusted for the 487 individuals who posted at least one message in all groups.

Model 2: Standard errors are adjusted for 25 groups.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

opinions that they backed up with stories responded to and engaged (Polletta and Lee 2006). Another example of difference, but not necessarily inequality, was the fact that, as Table 3 shows, women were more likely than men to post in threads devoted to the memorial planned for victims of 9/11. But women's propensity to post to a topic one might call feminine did not come at the expense of their posting to the more stereotypically masculine topics of transportation or economic development.<sup>2</sup>

Women's pattern of equal participation was also reflected in their assessment of the forum. In surveys completed after the forum's close, women reported being just as satisfied as men with their experience. They were as likely as men to report having learned from the dialogue, having had their views affected by their discussions, and having cared about their groups (Figallo et al. 2004).

Overall, then, if the Listening to the City forum of is typical of contemporary public deliberative forums, there is reason to be optimistic about public deliberation's egalitarian character, at least when it comes to gender. To what should we attribute this character? After all, few would maintain that women in our society have achieved full gender equality. And even if we limit our focus to women's participation in public talk (given stereotypes of women as loquacious), the research we cited earlier has shown that men monopolize discussion in a variety of public political settings, from national- and state-level legislative hearings to radio call-in shows to online chat rooms. Why are we not seeing evidence of inequality in contemporary public deliberation? Clearly, explanations based on a notion of gendered spheres cannot account for the fact that some settings seem to foster gender equality and

**Table 2.** Mixed-effects Logistic Regression Models for a Message Containing an Opinion and an Opinion Being Engaged.

Fixed effects	Opinion in message				Engaged	
	Odds	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient
<b>Level 1</b>						
Constant		-1.936*** (0.20)		-1.957*** (0.20)		-0.998*** (0.21)
Message size	1.008	0.008*** (0.00)	1.008	0.008*** (0.00)	1.001	0.001* (0.00)
<b>Level 2</b>						
Female	1.149	0.139 (0.12)	1.226	0.203 (0.13)	1.114	0.108 (0.17)
<35 years old	1.144	0.135 (0.13)	1.145	0.136 (0.13)	0.974	-0.026 (0.18)
Not white	0.990	-0.010 (0.17)	0.986	-0.014 (0.17)	0.747	-0.292 (0.25)
No college degree	0.859	-0.152 (0.15)	0.860	-0.151 (0.15)	0.827	-0.190 (0.20)
<\$75,000	0.952	-0.050 (0.12)	0.938	-0.064 (0.12)	0.711	-0.342* (0.17)
<b>Level 3</b>						
Female-dominated group	0.614	-0.489 (0.38)	0.909	-0.096 (0.44)	1.091	0.087 (0.31)
Facilitated group	1.039	0.038 (0.22)	1.038	0.037 (0.22)	0.908	-0.097 (0.18)
Random effects						
Intercept (group)		-1.241*** (0.31)		-1.238*** (0.30)		-16.345 (3,471,540.34)
Intercept (poster)		-0.676*** (0.14)		-0.695*** (0.14)		-0.681** (0.23)
Wald chi square		545.77		547.91		13.75
N		4,314		4,314		1,316

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

some do not. Before we take up our own explanation, we want to consider several alternative explanations.

One would be that patterns of talk owe more to the composition of the group than to the gendered character of either the institutional setting or the sphere. Such an account would find one of two things: that in female-dominated groups, women would be as opinionated and influential as men, and more opinionated and influential than women in more evenly mixed groups, or that in female-dominated groups, men would resist women's presence by becoming disproportionately opinionated. But neither was the case. Group composition had no effect on women's posting or on men's.

A status expectations account might alternatively expect that the gendered character of the discussion *topic* would determine patterns of participation. As we noted, however, women's higher rate of participation in the memorial thread did not come at the expense of their participation in discussions of the stereotypically masculine topics of economic development policy and transportation policy. Additionally, as we mentioned, studies by other

**Table 3.** Logistic Regression for Posting in a Memorial Thread and in a Transportation or Economic Development Thread.

	Memorial threads		Transportation and economic threads	
	Odds	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient
Female	1.383	0.324* (0.15)	0.967	-0.033 (0.17)
<35 years old	0.510	-0.673*** (0.19)	0.493	-0.708** (0.22)
Not white	0.791	-0.235 (0.20)	0.920	-0.084 (0.23)
No college degree	1.323	0.280 (0.30)	0.838	-0.176 (0.30)
<\$75,000	0.840	-0.175 (0.18)	0.779	-0.250 (0.16)
Female-dominated group	1.263	0.234 (0.27)	0.829	-0.187 (0.20)
Facilitated group	0.935	-0.067 (0.23)	1.34	0.291 (0.20)
Constant		-0.317 (0.17)		-0.048 (0.23)
Wald chi square		42.83		26.05
N		487		487

Note: Model 1 and 2: Clustered robust standard errors are adjusted for the 25 groups.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

scholars show women participating just as avidly in topics conventionally seen as the purview of men, such as foreign policy (Siu 2008).

Finally, two plausible explanations for the gender equality we observed are somewhat specific to the case. One is that deliberation practitioners, cognizant of men's tendency to monopolize political discussion, conduct forums so as to discourage that from happening. If facilitators were responsible for equalizing participation, this would undermine our claim that the setting conveyed norms of equality in a more diffuse fashion. As we noted, in nine of the groups, participants were assigned no facilitator. Yet, as Table 1 shows, the number and length of messages posted by women were not significantly affected by whether the group was facilitated. As Table 2 shows, the likelihood that a woman's message contained an opinion and that the opinion was engaged were not significantly affected by whether the group was facilitated.

Another explanation might be that women who chose to participate in the forum were more educated and higher-earning overall than male participants. This would account for the apparent, but not substantive, equality we saw. However, the statistical models showed that at each level of education and income, women were no less likely than men to be active and influential participants.

In sum, neither the gender composition of the group, the gendered coding of the topic, nor the gendered character of the institution account for the patterns of interaction we observed. Those patterns are consistent, however, with an account emphasizing the gendered character of the institutional setting. Yet, this presents a puzzle. Organizers of contemporary public deliberation see themselves as promoting reasoned public discussion.

Why does this discourse no longer marginalize women? Our answer is that the contemporary field of organized public deliberation has become feminized. Contrary to the image presented by its critics (and even some of its defenders), the field has developed in a way that has valorized stereotypically female modes of talk.

We base this conclusion on our examination of the gendered character of the talk that is encouraged by public deliberation practitioners, the gender composition of the field's front-line organizations and the practitioners who come in most direct contact with citizens, and the gendered character of practitioners' professional backgrounds. The newness of the field has meant that there are few organized sources of information about its history or current scope or about the professional backgrounds or even demographic make-up of its members. For that reason, the first author, in collaboration with Caroline Lee, conducted an online survey of current deliberation practitioners in January 2010. The survey, which asked practitioners about their professional and educational backgrounds, training in related fields, current deliberation work, and recommendations for the development of the field, was completed by 434 members of the major networks of deliberation organizers and facilitators. Since about a quarter of the survey respondents described themselves as doing deliberation work outside the United States, we coded and compared their educational and professional backgrounds as well as their experiences of recruiting men and women with those of practitioners working in the United States.

In addition to the survey, we draw on 15 interviews with public deliberation practitioners, an analysis of the training materials used by facilitators and organizers of public deliberative forums, participant observation of the largest convention of public deliberation practitioners in 2008, data on the gender composition of attendees at conferences of deliberation practitioners in 2008 and 2009, and articles by leading practitioners of public deliberation.

## THE CONTEMPORARY FIELD OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION

That the new field of public deliberation would be a feminized one was by no means inevitable. Most of the champions of public deliberation in the 1970s and 1980s were men with backgrounds in federal government, public opinion polling, and academia: people like pollster Daniel Yankelovich, who together with former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance formed Public Agenda to help educate citizens in policy issues; political scientist James Fishkin, whose Deliberative Polls brought together a random sample of citizens to deliberate about foreign policy, health care, education, and citizenship; and former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare David Matthews, who launched National Issues Forums in the early 1980s as part of a national network of discussion groups (Gastil and Levine 2005; Leighninger 2006; Sirianni and Friedland 2001). Moreover, in most American cities, as well as in a number of federal bureaucracies, there were instruments for public participation already in place, and these were part of a masculinized planning profession (Sandercock and Forsyth 2005). In a recent study of public hearings, which are the standard mechanism for soliciting public input into planning decisions, Karpowitz (2008) found that overall, twice as many men spoke as women and that the percentage of speakers who were men ranged as high as 85 percent.

However, as public deliberation was turned from an idea into a practice, complete with standard methods, training programs, and professional practitioners, it drew on feminized fields for people and ideas. Practices of *dialogue* were especially prominent. Dialogue has roots in the philosophy of Martin Buber and the psychology of David Bohm, as well as in family therapy, conflict resolution, and theories of organizational learning. In the past 30 years, it has spawned a host of techniques for discussing contentious issues in workplace,

educational, and community settings (Hogan 2002; NCDD 2009; Walsh 2007). Those techniques were easily adapted to the new field of public deliberation. The “marriage” of dialogue and deliberation (as Martha McCoy and Patrick Scully [2002], both of Everyday Democracy, put it in an influential article) is evident in the evolution of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, one of the two major networks of practitioners. In planning the first convention of practitioners, the NCDD’s founder and chair recounts that planners added “deliberative democracy” as a category of practice to four existing methods of dialogue. When polled, most of the conferees who characterized themselves as working in the area of deliberative democracy also described themselves as dialogue specialists (Heierbacher 2002).

Practitioners note that dialogue and deliberation are different. While deliberators aim to come to agreement on a decision or a policy choice, dialogue participants do not; rather, the purpose of the latter is exploration (NCDD n.d.; Study Circles 2006). Practitioners sometimes argue that dialogue is a necessary first step to deliberation (NCDD n.d.). Just as often, however, they use some combination of the terms such as “deliberative dialogues” or “dialogue and deliberation,” use the terms interchangeably, or subsume dialogue under deliberation, for example, in the many listings of groups sponsoring “deliberation” that also include dialogue groups (Fung 2007; Gastil and Levine 2005; Ryfe 2002; Williamson and Fung 2005; Yankelovich et al. 2006).

We argue that the union of dialogue and deliberation effectively joined a masculine practice with a feminine one. As described by its practitioners, dialogue emphasizes listening, understanding, expressing empathy and other emotions, being open to marginal viewpoints, and telling stories rather than making statements (Ryfe 2002). Dialogue practitioners are often skeptical of reasoned arguments, which they see as unaccountably ruling out emotions and experiences as the basis for opinions (Walsh 2007:54). In line with this view, handbooks and guidelines for deliberation emphasize empathetic listening much more than persuasion, telling stories more than making arguments, and focusing on the personal dimension of issues. In National Issues Forums, participants are urged “to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories” (National Issues Forum 2001:7). Moderators are urged to ask, “Within your family, or circle of friends, is this an important issue?” (National Issues Forum 2001:7). Important issues, in this rendering, are ones that directly affect participants or their circle of intimates.

The discourse around public deliberation also suggests that women are especially well suited to the practice. Half the practitioners we surveyed described men and women as having different interactional styles in deliberation (a quarter said that men and women did not have different styles; a quarter of respondents did not know). Asked to characterize those styles, respondents repeatedly described women as skilled in the behaviors valorized in deliberative dialogue: Women, they said, were more process oriented, more interested in feelings about and personal experiences with an issue, more comfortable in listening, and more oriented to relationships. Men were more outcome-oriented, more interested in facts and analysis than in feelings and personal experience, and more comfortable with debate and conflict. Respondents were sometimes explicit in linking women’s skills to those favored in deliberation: “Men tend to intellectualize and lecture, women can *follow the guidelines* to speak from personal experience better” (italics added); “[Men] tend to be slower at balanced participation, less likely to engage others initially. *Once they begin to understand the principles and practices of D&D, they catch up to the women*” (italics added).

The facilitators we interviewed said similar things. “Women are very relationally oriented and you know, tend to go for the touchy feely stuff,” said a professional mediator with a background in conflict resolution who had worked as a facilitator for AmericaSpeaks. “Men are socialized, have been socialized to stick to more fact-based exercises,” said the



director of a dialogue program who trains people in mediation. A male employee of an environmental conflict resolution agency, who distinguished dialogue from the stakeholder meetings that he described as dominated by men, explained: "I think women in our society have played more of that role of peace builder and also somebody who's able to be open to multiple perspectives and even if they disagree with somebody being able to see that that person has a valid perspective as well, so I think that might play part of it as well." An employee of one of the major organizations promoting dialogue put it this way: "My personal opinion is just that women are more collaborative. I mean it's just their nature perhaps? To want to talk through things."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, deliberation's purposes are represented in line with stereotypically feminine concerns and modes of civic engagement. The language of "community" is prominent (National Issues Forum 2001; Study Circles 2001, 2003) and carries feminine connotations given its emphasis on local rootedness and emotional ties (Mansbridge 1993). If public deliberation had been thoroughly feminized, one might expect that its purposes would be framed in terms of personal self-transformation (Tonn 2005 makes just this argument). Yet, this is not the case. The materials we reviewed described public deliberation's purposes as extending well beyond self-improvement. They were explicit in linking deliberative talk to action (Walsh 2007). However, the actions that they showcased tended to be local and citizen-initiated (Study Circles 2001). Historically, these have been the kinds of politics in which women participate (Mansbridge 1993).

The feminized discourse of deliberative dialogue matches the gender make-up of the field. Older public deliberative organizations, such as the National Issues Forum Foundation and Public Agenda, continue to be dominated by men (the President, Chairman of the Board, and most board members of the National Issues Forum Foundation are men; Public Agenda is chaired by two men, with a woman president). More typical, however, is Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circles Resource Center), which has organized forums in 550 communities in the past 15 years and appears prominently in rosters of public deliberation. A woman, Martha McCoy, directs the organization. Its associates, split between men and women, have backgrounds in feminized professions: social work, counseling, nursing, special education, law and education, and public administration. And according to McCoy, 9 out of 10 of the local organizers who convene study circles are women. AmericaSpeaks, which has involved more than 150,000 people in the forums it has organized, is directed by a woman. Sixty-seven percent of its extensive network of facilitators (with over 4,000 members) are women. The Public Conversation Project was founded by a family therapist and her husband; five of its six associates, who train people in facilitation, are women, and their backgrounds are in social work, family therapy, and conflict resolution. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, which maintains an email list of 10,000 practitioners and sponsors a biannual practitioners convention, is directed by a woman and four of seven board members are women; women have organized its conferences and made most presentations there. Conversation Cafe, which helps citizens to organize political discussions, is directed by two women.

If you are a citizen contemplating participating in a deliberative forum and are uncertain about the norms for appropriate participation, it is the frontline deliberative practitioners with whom you will most likely come into contact: the people who recruit participants and facilitate public deliberative forums. These are predominately women. As we noted, study circles are mainly organized by women and women predominate in the facilitator network used by AmericaSpeaks. In Deliberative Polls, the forums developed by James Fishkin, participants are recruited mainly by women and their discussions are facilitated mainly by women. Viewpoint Learning, which organizes dialogues for corporations, nonprofit groups,

and municipalities, relies on an informal network of facilitators. Female facilitators outnumber male facilitators two to one. Six of the seven community dialogue groups studied by Walsh (2007) were facilitated by women. The conferences for practitioners that are organized by national organizations and consortiums are attended mainly by facilitators. They tend to be women: 70 percent, for example, of those attending a 2008 conference convened by Everyday Democracy; the majority of those presenting at 2004 and 2006 conferences organized by the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. The trend is likely to continue: 60 percent of the graduates of the training programs in public participation techniques are women.<sup>4</sup>

Our survey of practitioners documents the feminized character of the field. Overall, 252 or 80 percent of respondents working in the United States with a certificate or advanced degree beyond a bachelor's degree listed fields in which the majority of master's or comparable degrees were awarded to women. These included education, counseling, social work, psychiatry, public administration, public deliberation/participation, and among those listed under "other," organizational development, clinical psychology and psychotherapy, and public health. Asked about their last job before becoming a dialogue and deliberation practitioner, 67 percent of respondents working in the United States listed fields and occupations that are dominated by women. These included career and organizational development jobs, such as facilitator, human resources manager, or leadership coach (21 percent); nonprofit management and staffing (15 percent); female-dominated education and library positions, such as K-12 education, teaching in community colleges, and staffing in universities (13 percent); communications and public relations (8 percent); social and psychological services (7 percent); and female-dominated government work such as administrative support (4 percent). The contrast between practitioners working in the United States and elsewhere was not sharp with respect to educational background (72 percent of international respondents with an advanced degree listed fields in which the majority of master's or comparable degrees were awarded to women), but it was sharper with respect to previous jobs: where 67 percent of practitioners working in the United States listed fields and occupations dominated by women, 54 percent of respondents working outside the United States did (see Appendix for information on these coding categories).

Note that although many respondents came from the field of organizational development, the forums in which they were now facilitating were generally *not* ones related to organizational development. Only 9 percent of the topics on which respondents had facilitated forums in the previous two years were in that category. The most common forum topics were urban planning and development (32 percent), safety and equity in the community (24 percent), environment and sustainability (14 percent), and education and youth (10 percent). This suggests that deliberation is drawing on practitioners from a field—organizational development—that uses dialogue as one among a variety of approaches aimed at problem solving in for-profit and nonprofit organizations. And indeed, more of our survey respondents reported training in facilitation methods that are used in the field of organizational development (methods such as open space technology, dynamic facilitation, and appreciative inquiry) than in facilitation methods developed by deliberation-sponsoring organizations (such as National Issues Forum and AmericaSpeaks), although many respondents had been trained in both.

In sum, although the contemporary American field of public deliberation was created mainly by men, from early on, it drew on feminized streams of practice, especially dialogue. Women now dominate the field; critically, not only as directors of major organizations sponsoring and promoting public deliberation, but also as the organizers who recruit people to participate in forums and the facilitators whom ordinary people meet when they go to a

deliberative forum. And the discourse is increasingly a feminized one. Feminist critics were right to link the character of public deliberation to the institutions sponsoring it. But those institutions are different today than they were in the eighteenth century—and even in the late twentieth century.

## EFFECTS

Of what consequence is the feminizing of American public deliberation? Most important, we have argued, it communicates to women the appropriateness of their participation and influence. This communication probably takes place in a variety of diffuse ways. Men and women are recruited by women to participate in forums. They see women sponsoring, organizing, facilitating, and promoting such forums. They hear deliberation described in an idiom drawn from feminized professions such as counseling and intercultural dialogue. They are encouraged to talk in ways that are stereotypically feminine, and they are encouraged to connect talk to stereotypically feminine forms of action. The result is that in such forums, unlike many of the other settings in which public political talk takes place, women are as active and influential participants as men.<sup>5</sup>

But what about outside the forum? Recall the three scenarios of how women might fare in a feminized setting of political talk. One scenario was consistent with what we found: in a feminized setting of political talk, women were as active and as influential as men. Our results ran contrary to a second scenario, in which the ostensible feminizing of the setting ends up being superficial, with conventional gender relations continuing intact. Again, this was not what we found. However, we have not appraised empirically a third scenario that appears in the literature on occupations. In this scenario, the sex typing of the occupation or organization disadvantages *all* those who work in it. In the case of public deliberation, feminizing the practice might mean depoliticizing it, in the sense that it comes to be seen as more like conversation and therapy, which are discourses associated with women, and less like public consultation or policymaking, which are discourses associated with men. That, in turn, might make men less likely to participate, might make policymakers less likely to take seriously the recommendations that come out of deliberative forums, and might make forums' organizers and facilitators less likely to press policymakers to act on those recommendations.

Is there any reason to think these things are occurring? We must be very tentative in our discussion here and emphasize the need for further research. As we noted earlier, the practitioners we surveyed characterized women's styles in line with the styles valorized in deliberation work. Did that translate into difficulty in recruiting men? The majority of our respondents (55 percent) said either that they did not know whether it was more difficult to recruit men or women or that it varied by group. But 26 percent said that women were easier to recruit compared to 18 percent who saw no difference and 1 percent who said that men were easier to recruit. Asked about the gender balance of participants in the groups people had facilitated over the past two years, 29 percent said that there were generally more women and 8 percent said there were generally more men (37 percent said that it varied from group to group and 25 percent said it was generally about equal). By contrast, 22 percent of the respondents who did not work in the United States said that there were generally more men in the groups they had facilitated. We cannot do much more than speculate, but the possibility raised by at least some practitioners is that the difficulty of recruiting men to public deliberative forums is connected to the feminized character of the field. Insofar as public deliberation's claim to influence rests on the presumed representativeness of deliberators, an inability to attract significant numbers of men might diminish the legitimacy of the conclusions such forums produce.

We must be even more tentative about the two other possibilities we mentioned. One is that whether men participate or not, the feminized character of the field leads decision makers to dismiss the recommendations generated within it. We do not know whether this is the case, but some practitioners do worry about it. One interviewee, who runs programs in dialogue and trains mediators commented, "If there are more women in the field, I don't know if the professionals would take it as seriously . . . it's probably seen as more . . . touchy feely—for the lack of a better word—profession where it is okay to be who you are kind of thing." A longtime organizer of forums says that she tells the people she works with "to be sure to invite males and local gov[ernmen]t officials if they want to be taken seriously. I give them a goal of 50 [percent] men. We never come even close."<sup>6</sup> Finally, it is conceivable that practitioners themselves might see deliberation as nonpolitical and therefore avoid pressing decision makers to pay attention to the recommendations that issue from it. Despite the fact that pioneers of dialogue emphasized that dialogue was *not* aimed at making decisions (Yankelovich 1999:15), practitioners today are increasingly concerned with deliberation's outcomes. They insist that deliberation's purposes extend beyond personal self-transformation to include action. However, guidelines on making an impact tend to emphasize grassroots, citizen-initiated action, often oriented to launching more rounds of discussion (Study Circles 2001).<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the goal is policy change, practitioners suggest inviting public officials to participate in dialogues, on the assumption that their involvement will lead them to take the recommendations arrived at seriously (Study Circles 2001). In this respect, the "marriage" of dialogue and deliberation may risk not so much privileging talk over action, but privileging grassroots action and moral suasion over the incorporation of deliberation into routine processes of policymaking.

Again, we cannot do more than speculate about these possibilities. We raise them, nevertheless, because they temper an obvious implication of our findings. If feminizing a setting of public political talk increases women's participation, then should not policymakers deliberately feminize settings where women are currently marginalized? Shouldn't they increase women's visibility in those settings, promote methods drawn from feminized professions such as counseling and education, and encourage stereotypically feminine styles of talk and interaction? The danger of doing so, we want to suggest, is that it may delegitimize such settings in the process. If "talk" is always at risk of seeming more like conversation or therapy than political decision making, aligning it symbolically with women increases that risk.

## CONCLUSION

Sociolinguists' conclusion that gender inequalities in talk are shaped crucially by the contexts in which talk takes place (Aries 1996) converges with the recent recognition by sociologists of culture that citizen talk is shaped by speech norms defining appropriate topics, authoritative opinions, and imaginable courses of action (Eliasoph 1998; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fishman 2004; Perrin 2006). Context matters. But which contexts? So far, sociolinguists' reliance on experimental settings has made it difficult to investigate the effects of naturally occurring contexts. Sociologists of culture, for their part, have focused on speech norms that derive from the "group style" of local organizations (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) and associational structures like churches or unions (Perrin 2006), from the character of ties linking social groups, for example, workers to intellectuals (Fishman 2004), and from regionally distinct professional norms (Lee 2007).

In this article, we have investigated speech norms whose source lies in the more macro structure of gender. We have treated gender, in this regard, less as a characteristic of individuals (something men and women have) than as an organizing principle of organizations

and institutions. It is not the only organizing principle, of course, but as previous scholarship has shown, it is one that is influential in shaping interactions within institutions.

We argue that settings of public political talk, that is, the venues that together make up the contemporary public sphere, vary in their gendered quality. Some enact masculinized norms, reward stereotypically masculine behaviors, and treat the normative actor as a man. In those settings, we argue, talk tends to be characterized by gender inequalities, with women talking less often, talking less, and talking less authoritatively. In settings that are more feminized, where stereotypically female behaviors such as the expression of emotion are rewarded and women are responsible for organizing discussions, talk between men and women tends to be equal.

That the field of organized public deliberation has become feminized is surprising since, in theory at least, it most resembles a Habermasian sphere of public reason, and accordingly, more than talk radio or online chat, has been subjected to feminist critique for marginalizing women. However, we have shown that the critique is simply wrong. The American field of organized public deliberation today is feminized. The result, we show through our own examination of talk in one forum and through the work of scholars on other forums, has been that in contemporary American public deliberation, women are as vocal and as influential participants as men. The female-gendered character of the institutional setting better accounts for women's levels and styles of participation than do any of the other contextual variables that scholars have seen as important, namely, the institutional sphere in which discussion takes place, the gender composition of the group, or the gender coding of the topic under discussion.

Our research points to additional lines of investigation. Although the low cost and convenience of online forums has led some to suggest that online rather than face-to-face deliberation will become the standard, we need to know more broadly how the visibility and audibility of interlocutors affects discussion norms.

Our approach might be trained on other sites of public talk: call-in television and radio shows, blogs, municipal hearings, and social networking sites, among them. The question would be whether the gendered features of settings that we have identified—the prominence of people from women-identified professions and styles of talk that are stereotypically feminine—are adequate to account for the pattern of gender interactions that result. In particular, do those features of the setting better account for the ways in which women participate than the topic, institutional sphere, or composition of the group? For example, our theory would hold that while discussions about education in local education board meetings would be equal, men would dominate discussions about education in Congressional hearings—even if there were more high-status women present than men.

The relationship between the gendering of the setting and influence outside the setting also invites much more scrutiny. We have argued that feminizing the field of public deliberation has meant assimilating it to dialogue. Dialogue, as a discursive form, privileges personal experience, emotional expression, and empathetic listening—all values that feminist critics have found lacking in deliberative discourse, to women's disadvantage. But dialogue also downplays efforts to mandate public input into policymaking in favor of sustaining a community of discussion. We wonder if that emphasis, combined with men's reluctance to participate in a form of civic engagement typed female and decision makers' possible reluctance to pay attention to it, may reproduce rather than remediate women's political marginality. Assessing that possibility requires a much better understanding than we have now of public deliberation's place in policymaking processes. Are public deliberative forums replacing older mechanisms for soliciting public input such as municipal hearings, or do they represent a new and parallel route to influence? To what extent is their influence shaped by their newness rather than their gendering?

Yet another line of research would be comparative. Public deliberation in other countries has developed not only in different formal political contexts, but fed by different institutional streams of practice. A cursory review of deliberative exercises in other countries suggests that women's high levels of participation in the United States may not be typical (see e.g., Akkerman, Hager, and Grin 2004; Albrecht 2007; Chang and Fan 2010 on the low rates of participation by women in deliberative forums in Germany, the Netherlands, and Taiwan, respectively). Is public deliberation making inroads into policymaking in places where the field is masculinized?

Research should go beyond gender inequality to look at other kinds of inequality in public political talk. For example, our theory would hold that in settings of public political talk that are coded white, people of color are unlikely to be active participants. This means that to ensure diversity, those organizing public talk need to do more than emphasize the instrumental benefits of participation (cf. the practitioners quoted in Walsh 2007), encourage informal styles of talk such as storytelling (McCoy and Scully 2002), or host public forums in places where people of color predominate. The racialized character of public talk, like its gendered character, is a function neither of the discursive forms used, the topic, nor the group's composition. Rather it reflects an institutionalized set of associations that communicate *whose* talk this is: who the normative participants are. The challenge for organizers of public deliberation, then, is to change those associations, perhaps by integrating public deliberation with streams of practice that already have legitimacy within nonwhite communities.

The larger point is that settings and forms of talk, like people, are culturally coded in terms of race, ethnicity, and a variety of other categories. The concept of gendered institutions, if made fully empirical, can serve as a model for explaining how these codes help to sustain inequalities within the public sphere.

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## NOTES

1. In what types of settings would women be *more* active and influential than men? We speculate that women will monopolize discussion where a feminized setting is combined with a feminized topic or a female-dominated group. However, the question demands more research.
2. The tables hint at the effects of other kinds of demographic differences, but these effects are not clear. As Table 1 shows, people without a college degree tended to write shorter messages, but those who made less than \$75,000 a year wrote longer messages. As Table 3 shows, people younger than 35 were less likely to post both in the memorial threads and in the transportation and economic development threads.
3. Chen interviews with L, P, B, and C, National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation, Austin, TX, October 3-5, 2008.
4. Polletta interview with Steven Rosell, December 19, 2008. On IAP2 training programs, Moira Deslandes email, December 4, 2008.
5. The cues that prospective participants and participants receive may do one of three things. They may signal to women that their *essential, natural* styles of talk are acceptable; they may signal to women that the styles of talk that they have been *socialized* into using in nonpolitical settings are appropriate

- here; or they may signal to women that they should adopt forms of talk that are *stereotypically associated* with women. Although we find the second and third accounts most plausible, our argument is consistent with all three.
6. Chen interview with L, NCDD Conference, Austin, TX, October 3, 2008; Nancy to Polletta email September 28, 2008.
  7. For example, participants in the "Imagine New York" forum in 2002 were assured by organizers that their recommendations would be heard by decision makers. At the "Citizen Summit" held several months later, however, organizers encouraged participants to write letters to their political representatives since that is how they would be heard (Polletta field notes on Imagine New York Citizen Summit, June 1, 2002; Polletta and Wood 2005).

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Online supplementary material is located online at <http://stx.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>.

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