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Same-Gender vs. Mixed-Gender Small Groups: Which is Better?

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Accountability. Spiritual growth. Encouragement. Authentic and honest relationships. Consistency. Support. In colleges all over the country, thousands of Christian students become members of a small group for reasons such as these. They seek a place of belonging within a group of people who will genuinely care about them and spur them on toward spiritual growth. Christian colleges often provide small group ministries for their students, and secular colleges typically host ministry programs such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Navigators, or Intervarsity, all of which offer small group opportunities to the students.

Purpose and Importance of Study

After making the initial decision to join a campus small group, college students must then choose to join either a same-gender small group or a mixed-gender small group. By nature, each type of group will have benefits as well as disadvantages. The purpose of this study is to determine whether same-gender small groups or mixed-gender small groups are more beneficial to college students. This information is specifically valuable to Messiah College as their Koinonia small group ministry is currently revisiting their vision and mission statement. At present, this ministry organization only supports same-gender small groups. However, if mixed-gender small groups are equally beneficial or more beneficial than same-gender small groups, Koinonia will refocus its mission to include mixed-gender groups, thus allowing the ministry to most effectively meet the needs of the student body. Additionally, this research is useful to small group ministry organizations on other college campuses as they endeavor to provide their students with the most beneficial small group opportunities and structures.

Literature Review

Research evaluating same-gender and mixed-gender small groups within a religious context is minimal, but some studies comparing same-gender interactions to mixed-gender
interactions have been done. For example, Lott (1987) placed male and female college students into same-gender pairs and mixed-gender pairs, giving these dyads the task of creating a domino structure. The people in this study were previously unacquainted, and the environment was void of any “sexual, nurturance, or specific reward cues” (p. 49). Upon observing their interactions, Lott noted that women in both mixed-gender and same-gender pairs displayed no discernible difference in the treatment of and response to their assigned partner. However, men in mixed-gender pairs “were found to distance themselves from a woman partner (as compared to a man) by turning their faces or bodies away and making negative comments, by not following advice, and by placing dominoes closer to themselves” (p. 47). Lott explains this response by concluding that, regardless of what men may profess verbally, they remain sexist toward women, as evidenced by their behavioral discrimination.

In a similar study, Bilous and Krauss (1988) investigated the effect that same-gender dyads as compared to mixed-gender dyads had on conversational behaviors. They conducted an experiment with sixty college students, giving each participant one problem to solve in a same-gender dyad and a different problem to solve in a mixed-gender dyad. When observing the communication between the partners, the researchers recorded the total number of words uttered, interruptions, short and long pauses, listener channel-back responses, and laughter. Their data showed that in mixed-gender groups, females reduce their total number of words and their interruptions. For males, however, those conversational behaviors are unaffected by the gender composition of the dyad. In mixed-gender dyads, males increase their channel-back responses and shorten the length of their utterances. In same-gender dyads, males take longer pauses much more frequently than they do in mixed-gender pairs.
However, upon synthesizing this data, Bilous and Krauss (1988) were forced to conclude that “the pattern of results [they] found was too complex to permit a simple generalization about the effects of gender composition on conversational behavior” (p. 189). Yet, although they could not satisfactorily answer their specific research question, they could confidently conclude that neither males nor females exhibit dominating conversational behaviors in mixed-gender dyads. Their findings contradict what Lott (1987) concluded about males displaying a sexist attitude toward females, as evidenced by the males’ behavioral communication.

In 1989, researcher Anthony Mulac conducted yet another study on the communication between same-gender and mixed-gender dyads. He operated under the definition that power is the ability to influence one’s partner, and that the person who talked and had longer utterances would most likely be displaying power over his/her partner. For his experiment, he put 108 college students into both same-gender and then mixed-gender dyads, giving these partners eight minutes to solve a given problem. Mulac observed these dyads to determine if men’s and women’s amount of talk time and their length and rate of utterances would differ when placed in same-gender dyads as compared to mixed-gender dyads. If a difference was found, he could then make conclusions regarding talk behaviors as related to the establishment of power over one’s partner.

His findings showed that men in mixed-gender dyads spoke more than did men in same-gender dyads, and that men had longer utterances than females, regardless of the dyadic composition. Mulac (1989) concluded that although some differences in talk patterns could be predicted based upon gender, “gender leads to differences in talk behavior that are consistent with the appearance, but not necessarily the actual implementation of, power” (p. 249). Thus, although men talked more and had longer utterances, Mulac could not prove any correlation with
such data as being indicative of men exerting power over their partner, as he initially assumed would be possible to conclude based on his definition and understanding of conversational power. His results therefore support the conclusions of Bilous and Krauss (1988), who determined that men do not exhibit dominating or power-seeking conversational behaviors.

Based on these research studies, one can generally determine that men and women display different styles of communication when in same-gender dyads as opposed to mixed-gender dyads. Additionally, the conclusion can be made that men and women in mixed-gender dyads are of conversationally equal status, as each person is heard and respected. When applying such findings to small groups, there is a slight disconnect in that all these studies were limited to dyads, not small groups of approximately ten people. However, taking note of that fact, one can generally conclude that in both mixed-gender and same-gender small groups, every person, regardless of gender, is of equal importance in the conversation. Therefore, it follows that both mixed-gender and same-gender groups hold potential benefits for group members, and that conversation dominance is not a factor that will hinder group dynamics or communication. Leaders of mixed-gender groups should, however, be mindful of the differences in the communication styles of men and women when they are facilitating group discussions.

Although communication plays an important role in the effectiveness of a small group, it is only one dimension of a successful group. No research exists that explores other aspects of same-gender and mixed-gender small group communities. Davis (1996), who works with the Navigators ministry, suggests that other dimensions of an effective small group include close, honest relationships between members, as well as spiritual growth in Christ. Staff members from the InterVarsity ministry (1982) add that the community should be nurturing and discipleship-focused. They also highlight the stages of a small group, indicating that conflict is almost
inevitable in any group. Regardless, each small group should continue to meet weekly, thus allowing them to work through any problems that arise, while retaining their close-knit community of commitment and trust. All of these authors concluded that an effective small group is one in which those specified goals and dimensions can be accomplished. Based on a synthesis of these small group purposes, the research studies cited above, and my personal experience with small groups, I chose to evaluate the aspects of intimacy, relationships, commitment, group dynamics, spiritual growth, and communication within both same-gender and mixed-gender groups. My purpose was to discover, given these criteria for an effective small group, whether same-gender or mixed-gender small groups are more beneficial for college students.

Methodology

In order to gather pertinent information to address this question, I created two different online surveys. One survey was designed for college students currently involved in a small group, and the other was for college pastors or staff members who had experience working with campus small group ministries.

The survey created for college students was sent to students involved in small groups at Messiah College, Penn State University, Asbury College, and Texas Tech. There were 136 Messiah students who chose to take the survey, 96 of whom were involved in same-gender groups and 40 of whom were involved in mixed-gender groups. Over half of these small groups were formed voluntarily by the students and the rest were formed through a college ministry organization. About 60% of the groups consisted of students from various class levels, and 40% of the groups were composed of students from the same class level. Most groups were student-
led, contained a mixture of young and mature believers, and had weekly meetings that centered around Bible study, prayer, encouragement, and fellowship.

There were a total of 16 students from the other three colleges who chose to take this survey, 8 of whom were involved in same-gender groups and 8 of whom were involved in mixed-gender groups. These small groups were all put together through college ministry organizations, consisted of students from various class levels, and contained a mixture of young and mature believers. Similar to the small groups at Messiah College, the majority of these groups were also student-led and consisted of Bible study, prayer, encouragement, and fellowship.

The survey completed by all these college students contained three different sections. The first part consisted of several statements pertaining to each of the six categories of an effective small group—intimacy, relationships, commitment, group dynamics, spiritual growth, and communication. For example, one statement from the intimacy section read, “Group members can comfortably and honestly discuss and pray over any area of personal struggle or concern in their lives.” Students taking the survey were asked to mark either “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree” as represented to their opinion. They first selected their level of agreement with each statement as applied to same-gender groups, and then marked their choice for each statement as applied to mixed-gender groups.

The next section of the survey consisted of several small group purposes and goals, and the college students were asked to select whether same-gender, mixed-gender, or either type of group was most effective for accomplishing the given purpose. This was followed by another section with the same format but consisting of statements pertaining to personality types and life situations of small group members.
The final section of the survey contained free response questions. I asked the college students to describe some of the benefits and challenges for same- and mixed-gender small groups that they had personally witnessed and/or experienced. I then asked them whether they thought same-gender or mixed-gender groups were more beneficial for college students, also providing room for any other additional comments.

The survey I designed for campus pastors and staff members involved in small group ministry organizations contained only the second and third sections of the survey that the college students took. This survey was completed by 7 people with a variety of experiences: 2 from the Messiah College ministry department, 1 working with Penn State students, 1 former Wesley director at Texas Tech, 1 Campus Crusade director at Texas Tech, and 2 from the Asbury College small group ministry staff. The small groups on their respective campuses include a mixture of same-gender and mixed-gender small groups, some of which are student-led and some of which are staff-led.

Findings

In the first section of the survey that explored whether same- or mixed-gender small groups were more effective based on the six given categories, I discovered that the responses from the college students were not as varied as I anticipated. The students from both Messiah College and the other colleges indicated that same- and mixed-gender groups are equally effective in accomplishing the goals within the categories of intimacy, relationships, commitment, and group dynamics. This was determined by the majority of students selecting the “Agree” option as pertaining to the various statements in these categories.

In the category of communication, the majority of college students indicated that same-gender small groups were not as effective due to off-topic, irrelevant conversation during group
meetings. The students from the three other colleges indicated that off-topic conversation was also problematic within mixed-gender groups. Messiah students, however, only saw this as a problem within same-gender groups.

The goals within the category of spiritual growth were viewed by Messiah students as being equally attainable within either same- or mixed-gender groups. However, students from the other three colleges indicated that group members are more effectively challenged in their spiritual walks in same-gender small groups. Another statement in this category related to group members actively engaging in service. While Messiah students agreed that members of same- and mixed-gender groups are equally engaged in service opportunities, students from other colleges indicated that neither same- or mixed-gender groups encouraged group members to do service projects.

The second section of the survey asked people to select whether same-gender, mixed-gender, or either type of group was most beneficial for addressing certain goals and life situations. All of the college students, as well as the campus pastors and staff members, agreed that same-gender small groups are more effective for creating accountability, addressing tough issues, and allowing for intimacy in sharing. The college students also found same-gender groups more beneficial for developing confidence, whereas the college pastors and staff indicated that this goal could be accomplished in either type of small group. The students from the three other colleges additionally found same-gender groups to be valuable for finding one’s identity in Christ, as well as being an ideal setting for people with a reserved personality. Messiah College students and the campus staff, however, viewed these situations as being able to be accommodated in either type of small group.
As pertains to mixed-gender small groups, all of the college students agreed that these groups were more effective in providing a setting for a variety of perspectives to be heard. The campus staff members, however, indicated that same-gender small groups were equally effective in establishing an environment in which different perspectives could be presented.

The other area within this section that produced varying opinions was in regards to which type of small group would be most beneficial for a student seeking a Christian boyfriend/girlfriend and for a student not looking for a romantic relationship. All the college students agreed that those seeking a Christian dating partner should join a mixed-gender group. Their responses for what kind of group is best for those who are not looking for a relationship was split between the category of “same-gender group” or “either.” When examining the responses of the college staff members, the results showed that half of them indicated that for those seeking a Christian dating partner, either type of small group could be beneficial, with 33% suggesting that a mixed-gender group would be more appropriate. For those not looking for a romantic relationship, 83% of the campus staff agreed that either type of small group would be a good fit, and 17% advocated mixed-gender groups as the best placement.

The final section of the survey consisted of the free response questions about the benefits and challenges of both types of small groups. The majority of college students as well as staff members agreed that the biggest differences between these two groups were in the areas of intimacy, accountability, and diverse perspectives. Same-gender groups proved more beneficial for purposes of intimacy, honesty, and openness in sharing about tough issues or gender-related topics. Mixed-gender groups were more advantageous for hearing new perspectives and experiencing a more complete picture of the diverse church and the body of Christ. When asked which type of group was more beneficial, the majority of college students and staff members
agreed that both same- and mixed-gender small groups are equally effective. However, the college students ranked same-gender groups above mixed-gender groups in terms of effectiveness, whereas the college staff members placed mixed-gender groups above same-gender groups (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether same-gender small groups or mixed-gender small groups are more beneficial to college students. The questions on the college students’ survey addressing the aspects of intimacy, relationships, commitment, group dynamics, spiritual growth, and communication indicated that these dimensions of an effective small group could be successfully achieved within both same-gender and mixed-gender groups. The majority of questions in the second and third sections of the survey also indicated that for most purposes and situations, either type of small group was, again, equally beneficial. However, those sections
also brought to light some unique advantages of both same-gender and mixed-gender groups that were more effectively achieved in one type of group as opposed to the other.

To begin, the issue of intimacy within each type of small group yielded some interesting comments and results. Within the context of confidentiality and openness in sharing, both college students and staff members agreed that same-gender small groups are more effective for creating accountability, addressing tough issues, and allowing for intimacy. However, intimacy as applied to a relational context with the opposite sex proved to be a topic that elicited a variety of answers. The college students surveyed agreed that students seeking a Christian boyfriend/girlfriend relationship should join a mixed-gender group, and those not seeking a romantic relationship should join a same-gender group or either type of group. Their responses surprised me, because in the free response section, many of these same students indicated that college students in mixed-gender groups have the tendency to be so focused on impressing the opposite sex that they can become distracted from the spiritual formation purpose of the small group. Based on the free response questions, I would think that students looking for a romantic relationship might be best suited in a same-gender group so that they don’t become distracted during the small group meeting. Perhaps only students uninterested in a relationship should participate in mixed-gender groups.

Campus pastors and staff members also mentioned the fact that romantic attraction between members in mixed-gender groups often create an environment in which it could be harder for students to focus. However, they also mentioned that mixed-gender groups can teach college students how to develop appropriate relationships with members of the opposite sex as they learn to grow together as a diverse body of Christ and to practice an appropriate level of intimacy and openness within this setting. They can learn how to relate to each other and to
communicate effectively so that the members of the opposite sex are spurred on toward spiritual growth as brothers and sisters in Christ.

A final dimension of this topic relates to whether underclass or upperclass college students are more capable of gaining the benefits while avoiding the pitfalls of intimacy within mixed-gender groups. Several college students indicated on their survey that because upperclass students were more mature, they would be more equipped to operate within a mixed-gender small group. Underclass students are trying to discover who they are when they enter college, and same-gender groups provide them with the intimacy, support, and safety they need to find their identity in Christ, not in members of the opposite sex.

Some of the campus pastors and staff, however, approached this issue from a different angle. They explained that as students mature, they will be able to be more honest and open about their struggles, and thus will benefit from the depth and intimacy of sharing offered in same-gender groups. Underclass students, because they are not yet at this point of maturity, would perhaps be better suited in mixed-gender groups where discussion will not reach the level of intimacy and depth that same-gender groups achieve.

This discussion surrounding intimacy indicates that same-gender and mixed-gender small groups each have specific benefits, as well as disadvantages. There are valid arguments and concerns on both sides of the coin when attempting to discern which type of group will benefit which type of college student. In the areas where the opinions of the college students differ from the college pastors and staff, who is right? Should the opinion of the college students be favored because they are most aware of what they need as they are currently in this stage of life? Or do the college pastors and staff have the wisdom that comes from reflecting on their own college experiences and that of many others as they now oversee small group ministries? Again, there
are valid reasons for taking what both groups of people have said into consideration, as they each offer important information regarding this question.

Both college students and staff members have agreed that either type of small group can be beneficial and is equally necessary for spiritual growth. The question then, is how can we take this information and create a small group that meets all of the purposes? What kind of small group can provide the honesty and openness of a same-gender group, the diverse perspectives of a mixed-gender group, the safety and mutual experiences of a same-gender group, and the training ground for appropriate relationships of a mixed-gender group? The answer seems to be summarized in two options. To reap the equally important benefits of both types of small groups, college students should join both a same-gender and a mixed-gender small group. However, given the limited amount of free time in the life of a college student, perhaps this option is not always ideal. A second option would be for college students to join a mixed-gender small group that is formatted in a way so that the time of Bible study and discussion is done with all members, followed by a time of intimate sharing and prayer as the group splits into same-gender groupings. Assuming parity among all other variables, such as consistency, leadership quality, group commitment, etc., this second option should, in theory, most effectively enable students to experience the benefits of both groups. A secondary conclusion from this research is that, given the nature of the potential romantic component within mixed-gender groups, careful thought should be given when forming these groups and choosing their leadership teams.

As a result of this research, the Koinonia small group ministry program at Messiah College has decided to expand its vision to include mixed-gender small groups, as well as same-gender small groups. The mixed-gender groups will be modeled after the format described above by including a portion of same-gender group breakout time during each meeting.
Incorporating mixed-gender groups into Koinonia will enable the ministry to most effectively meet the needs of its student body. Although the goals of each individual college student may differ in what he/she desires to gain from being part of a small group community, a student should be involved in both mixed-gender and same-gender group environments if they want to reap the full benefits that small groups can offer.
References


