Leader Gender and Group Functioning in the Sexuality Education Discussion Group

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Abstract

This study investigated leader gender and group functioning in undergraduate sexuality discussion groups. Anonymous questionnaires were collected from 674 students enrolled in a human sexuality course over four years. The population sample was roughly 2:1 female to male. The questionnaire consisted of three subscales (Supportiveness, Risk-Taking, Group Performance) measured via a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

Chi square test of independence was significant for all three sub-scales and leader gender. Female-led groups had higher mean scores for Group Performance and Supportiveness than male-led groups, while male-led groups had higher mean scores for Risk-taking.

It was concluded that the gender of the leader has an impact on the nature of group functioning: female leaders created an environment of safety and support, while male leadership was associated with more risk-taking and nonconformity. Implications include the need for gender-awareness training for peer educators. Limitations include non-random sampling, potential environmental bias, and possible interaction between gender of student and leader.

Introduction

Small group work is a popular and effective method to generate discussion and clarify values in college sexuality courses (Barbour, 1989; Strouse, Krajewski & Gilin, 1990). The need for rapport and safety in discussing very personal issues, and hearing others' beliefs and experiences, is helpful in clarifying one's own sexuality. Small groups contribute to this end by providing peer environments that allow for freer discussion than is generally possible in the large classroom, in which interaction may be inhibited by the class size or the presence of the instructor.

Typically, sexuality discussion groups are facilitated by graduate or undergraduate students who have completed an introductory course and have shown potential as small group facilitators (Delameter, Hyde, & Allgeier, 1994). The task of the supervising faculty is to select, train and supervise leaders to ensure that leaders provide a safe, yet provocative climate in which students can clarify personal sexuality attitudes and values. Training typically includes skill development in small group facilitation and examination of sexuality education principles (Sprecher & Pocs, 1987; Barbour, 1989).

Despite efforts to train discussion group leaders in group facilitation skills, however, larger societal attitudes and norms impact interactions between members and leaders. As Evans (1996) notes, "discussion groups are extremely complex academic, social and cultural contexts" in which the assumed ideal often falls prey to larger societal norms (p.194). Among the most powerful norms are gender-associated leadership styles and members' perception of leadership behavior. Canada and Pringle (1995) posit that the mixed-sex educational environment "largely acquiesces to the broader culture's construction of gender" (p.180) in which traditional attitudes toward gender-appropriate behavior influence perceptions and interactions.

Communications research suggests that small group interactions are consistently influenced by gender composition, and particularly, by the gender of the leader. In general, female leaders exhibit and value communal, cooperative, and affective-oriented social skills (Canada & Pringle, 1995; Graham & Papa, 1993; Meyer & Brashers, 1994). Females in general and female leaders show more concern, stress interpersonal relations and are more receptive to ideas than male group members and leaders (Andrews, 1992; Jurma & Wright, 1990; Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995). Male leaders tend to be more assertive and controlling, more egocentric, and use more competitive tactics to achieve goals (Canada & Pringle, 1995; Gayle, Preiss & Allen, 1994; Mulac, Lundell & Bradac, 1986).

Research also suggests that *member perception* of leadership behavior is gender-associated. In her explanation of gender-associated communication theory, Andrews (1992) describes how external characteristics (sex, age, race) form initial expectations of relative competencies of leaders. Perceptions of female leaders tend to be more negative, particularly when female leaders exhibit behaviors that are traditionally considered effective leadership, e.g., assertiveness, task-orientation, and talkativeness (Butler & Geis, 1990; Canada & Pringle, 1995).

Gender-associated leadership styles and perceptions affect student participation and idea generation. In their study of teaching styles, Canada and Pringle (1995) found that female professors were more likely to invite student participation and had more control

over the progression of the discussion than their male counterparts. In contrast, male professors promoted a lassiez-faire classroom environment with greater frequency of student-initiated participation and more diversity of ideas.

These gender-associated differences are of particular interest in sexuality education. As noted earlier, the sexuality discussion group pursues two potentially conflicting objectives: 1) participant safety and rapport, and 2) a provocative atmosphere in which individuals are challenged to evaluate deeply held convictions. Research indicates that these two objectives may be uniquely gender-linked, with female leaders creating a safer climate and male leaders creating a more challenging climate. Additionally, gender norms for sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are rigorously enforced and reinforced in the broader culture. Many traditional gender norms can have negative effects on sexual health. For example, the expectation that women should be less sexually experienced than men might inhibit female-initiated discussion of safer sex behavior.

The purpose of this study was to investigate interactions between group leader gender and group functioning in peer-led undergraduate human sexuality discussion groups. It was hypothesized that 1) groups assigned female leaders will report significantly greater "supportiveness" and lower "risk-taking"; and 2) groups assigned male leaders will report significantly greater "risk-taking" and lower "supportiveness", and 3) there will be no significant difference in group performance between groups led by females and groups led by males. For the purposes of this study, the construct "supportiveness" was defined as perceived safety, "risk taking" as perceived challenges to social norms, and "group functioning" as perceived satisfaction.

Procedure

Anonymous paper-and-pencil questionnaires were collected from 674 undergraduate students enrolled in a human sexuality course over a period of four years at a large mid-western university. Both the introductory course and the discussion group leader course were co-taught by the same two faculty, with very minor content changes, during this period. Students were randomly grouped into 12-15 member semester-long discussion groups with the exception of efforts to ensure gender diversity. Leaders were recruited by course faculty via announcements during lectures. Selection criteria included interpersonal communication skills, and abilities in fostering group rapport and confronting controversial issues. Leader selection was based on previous academic and work history, application essays, and personal interviews. The leader training course involved weekly mini-lessons on learning styles, public speaking, group facilitation skills, review of activities, discussion and problem-solving. There was no specific training component on gender communication and role expectations. There was roughly a 3:1 ratio of female to male students in each discussion group. There was a 2:1 ratio of female to male group leaders.

The groups met weekly immediately after a 90 minute lecture. At two points during the semester, students completed and submitted the questionnaire during the lecture. To protect the anonymity of the (fewer) males in each group, student gender was not measured. The data used in this study were a composite of the mid-semester and final evaluation questions. Questions omitted from this composite were related to the overall course expectations, class material and perceived link between lecture and group discussion.

The anonymous questionnaire measured dimensions of discussion group functioning via three sub-scales: 1) General Group Performance (SS1); 2) Supportiveness (SS2); and 3) Risk-Taking (SS3). Each question (Figure 1) was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with the options of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Sub-scale items were developed from group communication theory and the Sexuality Attitude Restructuring (SAR) model, which posits that confronting social norms is necessary to clarify beliefs (Strouse, Krajewski, & Gilin, 1990). Face validity was established by senior health education faculty with familiarity in sexuality education. Internal reliability coefficients (alpha) for each sub-scale were all within acceptable ranges, although not robust (SS1: .61; SS2: .68; and SS3: .49).

SS1: General Group Performance

Q1: I am satisfied with the group's general performance.
Q5: The group's interaction includes all group members.
Q3: Group activities have contributed to my understanding of human sexuality.

SS2: Supportiveness

Q4: The climate is supportive and non-threatening.
Q2: The group members communicate with each other.
Q8: The group leader promotes discussion within group.

SS3: Risk-taking

Q9: The group does not avoid sensitive issues, rather it pursues them.
Q6: The group allows for disagreement and differences of opinion.
Q7: The group leader encourages expression of minority or unpopular opinions.

Figure 1: Sub-scale items of Group Function Questionnaire

Table 1: Leader Gender and Sub-Scales Mean Scores and Chi Square Tests of Independence

	Female Leaders		Male Leaders		Chi Square		
	M	SD	M	SD	x^2	df	p
Group Performance	4.1	.57	3.66	.69	96.96	11	.000
Supportiveness	4.35	.51	3.95	.62	87.89	9	.000
Risk-taking	3.98	.80	4.24	.46	66.72	10	.000

Results

Mean scores were tabulated for each sub-scale by leader gender, and are presented in Table 1. Chi-square was used to determine whether there was a lack of independence between each sub-scale and leader gender. All three sub-scales were found to be significantly lacking in independence and are presented in Table 1.

Discussion

These data support the directional hypotheses that female leaders in this study were more likely to create an environment of safety and support, while male leadership was associated with more risk-taking and nonconformity. The results do not support the hypothesis that there would be no difference in overall group performance between groups led by male and females as measured by the general group performance sub-scale. Since female-led groups had greater supportiveness and greater group performance means it is tempting to assume that supportiveness is therefore better for group functioning than is risk-taking. This conclusion runs counter, however, to the SAR model, which theorizes that a certain level of personal anxiety is necessary in order to challenge and clarify existing beliefs. A more likely explanation is the significant disparity in the male - female ratio, which may have impacted the group performance scores. Female students were far more likely to have a female leader than the converse. It may be that having a leader of the same gender promoted group performance of female-led groups. Leaper et al. (1995) found this to be true in their study of self-disclosure and listener verbal support. In particular, while men made more self-disclosing statements, woman-to-woman dyads exhibited more active understanding than all the other dyad arrangements. The authors concluded that this may "encourage the partner to explore the disclosure topic further" (p. 399). Thus, discussion groups with a higher ratio of same-sex relationships between leader and member may experience better group performance.

The limitations of this study include non-random, convenience sample selection, and adequate, but weak, instrument reliability and validity measures. The context of data collection may have also influenced the results by contributing to social desirability bias and concerns for student anonymity. Additionally, the lack of student gender information prohibited investigation of inter-gender relationships between group members and leaders and the potential associations of this with group performance.

Implications of this study are the importance of gender in sexuality education discussion group functioning and the need for gender-awareness training for peer educators and teachers. This study suggests the need for further replication with a more rigorously developed instrument and identification of student gender to study inter-gender affects. A study of sexuality discussion group functioning and leader gender-scripting (masculine, feminine, androgynous) would be an important addition to the body of knowledge. Further, an experimental investigation of group functioning comparing group leaders having undergone purposeful gender awareness training with group leaders who have not, would contribute to the field of sexuality education.

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