

Suggested APA style reference: Davis-Gage, D. (2011). *Gender and group leadership: Using the research to improve counseling practice*. Retrieved from http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas11/Article_61.pdf

Article 61

Gender and Group Leadership: Using the Research to Improve Counseling Practice

Darcie Davis-Gage

Davis-Gage, Darcie A., is an assistant professor in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of Northern Iowa. Her research and scholarship has focused on an exploration of how to incorporate gender, social class, and ethnicity into the training and practice of group and individual counseling and supervision.

Gender is an unavoidable dynamic in group counseling. Gender differences have received more recent attention in the literature as one element of multicultural competent practice (McAuliffe, 2008). Historically, gender differences in counseling were explored extensively in the late 1970s and early 1980s. More recently, gender differences between client and counselor have received some attention, but little has been done to explore how gender impacts groups. Research has been conducted on a variety of issues related to gender and has concluded that gender influences both group leaders and members (Jackson, Engstrom, & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; NeSmith, Wilcoxon, Satcher, 2000; Rosenberg, 1996). The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of gender on leaders and identify how to use this information to improve group counseling in practice. First, typical characteristics of female and male group leaders will be addressed and then these differences will be discussed in relation to the group configuration (e.g., all male, all female, etc.). Lastly, recommendations will be made on how to increase group leaders' awareness of gender differences, which operate in most groups, and how to use this awareness to improve the effectiveness of group work.

Definition of Effective Leadership

Gender has traditionally been studied as a dichotomous variable: male or female. Since the majority of research on gender and group leadership has studied gender as this dichotomous variable, this manuscript will examine leadership expectations and traits based on the categories of male and female. Gilbert and Scher (1999) describe this paradigm as the Traditional Model of "Opposite" Sex (Gender) Identify. This model conceptualizes men and women at opposite ends of a gender spectrum and whom have traits and roles very different from one another. According to Gilbert and Scher, males are described as competitive, stoic, and tough where women are described as emotional and relationship orientated. Although this model may seem outdated to some, Western society still socializes men and women into these somewhat restrictive categories. As

research on group leadership is explored in this paper, readers will notice these same themes about gender still operate within groups. The author recognizes that some individuals do not feel that those categories necessarily describe their gender, but exploring that topic is beyond the scope of this article. It is hoped by continuing to explore how male and female gender may impact group leadership, the field will start to explore gender in a more inclusive manner.

A variety of aspects are involved in identifying effective group leadership. Gladding (2008) recognized effective group leaders are flexible, versatile, and skilled in the core competences of group work (i.e., linking, facilitating, blocking); display personal characteristics of warmth and self-awareness; and are capable of handling conflict. Effective leaders also demonstrate the ability to nurture a sense of hope and display positive attitudes and emotional supportive behaviors (Dykeman & Appleton, 1998; Stockton, Morran, & Velboff, 1987). One challenge of exploring the topic of group leadership and gender is the actual definition of effective leadership. Kawakami, White, and Langer (2000) address an important double bind present in current research on gender and effective group leaders. Their literature revealed that some research has shown that traits of effective leaders tend to be associated with typical masculine traits (Hackman, Hills, Paterson, & Furniss, 1993) while other research has shown that effective leaders are ones who follow their stereotypical gender role or are “gender congruent” (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). This tends to put women in a double bind: if they act feminine, they will not be seen as effective, but if they act masculine, they will be seen as gender incongruent and consequently ineffective. Kawakami et al. believed there were more elements of effective leadership than listed above and found if women used a genuine, mindful, and charismatic approach as a group leader, they were seen as effective whether they acted feminine or masculine.

Jackson et al. (2007) also demonstrated this double-bind might be changing. They conducted a study with undergraduate students who identified their preference for male or female leaders. Their results were in conflict with historical data which found that both men and women tended to choose male leaders over female leaders. Their results indicated men tended to choose male leaders and females tended to choose female leaders. Currently, it appears expectations regarding gender and leadership may be changing. By identifying these trends in the research, group leaders will be able to identify typical expectations members may have about them based on their gender and develop ways they can use their gender intentionally and effectively in group counseling.

Gender Difference and Group Leaders

The research reviewed in the previous section demonstrated that a variety of differences exist between how men and women may operate as leaders of groups. Some of these differences are related to gender specific expectations while others are related to actual differences between how men and women behave as group leaders. The following application section will explore how female and male leaders can account for gender differences and how these approaches may be modified for different types of groups.

Female Leaders

Female group leaders are influenced by their socialization from a young age. A female leader needs to be aware and informed of how her socialization has contributed to her behavior and beliefs about her role as a woman. Bernandez (1996) suggests:

A female group leader needs to overcome the by-products of her subordinate status, value her sex and other women, and have integrated her knowledge of new theories of female experience and behavior with her other clinical theory and her own experience so that there are as few incongruences as possible. (p. 421)

Once a leader has examined these issues personally, she will be better equipped to facilitate discussions about gender in an unbiased manner. If she has not addressed these issues, the leader could transfer some of her bias and prejudices onto the group members. By examining some of her own feelings about gender, female leaders may be able to support women regardless of their choices to conform to traditional roles or explore less traditional roles.

Another product of women's socialization involves their abilities to cope with anger and hostility. Spillman, Spillman, and Reinking (1981) questioned female leader's ability to adequately deal with hostility when it is presented in a group. A female leader needs to be able to deal effectively with conflict and anger that presents during group interactions. Bernardez (1996) suggested by learning to differentiate between anger, hatred, and resentment, female leaders may more fully understand anger and be able to identify it in a group setting. Rosenberg (1996) suggests female leaders need to demonstrate the capacity to be comfortable when anger presents within a group and respond objectively. When female leaders are able to deal with anger and hostility in groups without expressing helplessness or intense affect, they are viewed as more effective leaders.

Once female leaders are comfortable dealing with anger and hostility, another area to address is authority and power issues in group. This is especially important when dealing with all male groups. All male groups tend to be more leery and uncomfortable with female authority figures because the men fear becoming dependent and losing control. Female leaders need to balance power and nurturing by being confident and comfortable in the leadership role while being able to remain warm and caring. If authority and power issues are addressed in all male groups, men report greater learning experiences, increased abilities in dealing with emotions, and the ability to use these skills outside of group (Correa et al., 1988).

According to Yalom and Leszcz (2008) groups tend to be a recapitulation of the family of origin. In order to be most effective, female leaders must be aware and have worked through family-of-origin issue and also be aware they may be cast into the role of mother. Addressing this perceived role is particularly important in working with all female groups. By addressing the issue, women can learn more about relationships with other women as well as their own relationship with their mothers. Then, they can transfer this learning into group by helping women explore these roles and relationships for themselves.

Other important factors in effective female leadership are endorsement by authority figures, credentialing, and experience of the leader. Past research has indicated that when an authority in the field, especially another female, endorsed the group leader,

the effectiveness of the leader was rated higher than if no endorsement was given (Gies, Brown, & Wolfe, 1990). Other research has found that group members will also rate credentialed female counselors as more effective (Taynor & Deaux, 1973). Related to these aspects, research has also found female leaders are rated as more effective if they have more experience as group facilitators. Therefore, it seems important for female leaders to explain their credentials and share the amount of their leadership experience with group members as part of the screening process to legitimize their effectiveness as leaders.

By acknowledging the effects of socialization, female leaders are able to improve their effectiveness. By demonstrating their awareness in group, they can also influence how group members conceptualize their own gender roles and experiences. Male leaders can also have similar influence by acknowledging their gendered experience.

Male Leaders

Male leaders will also need to address characteristics that are often equated with their gender. Past research indicated men were viewed as very effective leaders and that masculine traits tended to be associated with effective leadership (Kahn, 1996), but male leaders are still faced with challenges regarding the effect of gender on their group leadership.

Due to sex-role expectations, male leaders are often expected to be authoritarian, well organized, and in constant control of their emotions. Although being well organized is very beneficial as a group leader, controlling emotions and authority issues need to be dealt with to be an effective leader. Men who are comfortable with their emotions and role as leader will be more likely to produce a therapeutic environment for a group. In all male groups, it is important for the leader to demonstrate it is safe to relinquish power, control, and dominance. Leaders also need to be able to demonstrate that power and emotions are not mutually exclusive. Once these behaviors are modeled, especially for male group members, participants may become more inclined to express their emotions and deal with more highly emotionally charged material (Rosenberg, 1996).

Conversely, with all female groups, male leaders need to be comfortable with the emotion of intimacy. Male leaders may accomplish this by discussing the meaning of intimacy and how to express feelings of intimacy. Leaders can demonstrate that intimacy can be achieved without displaying weakness or incompetence. Research has found that male leaders who are able to portray intimacy in a genuine manner were rated as more caring and effective group leaders (NeSmith et al., 2000; Spillman et al., 1981).

Similar to female leaders, male leaders need to feel comfortable dealing with hostility and anger within the group setting. Their challenge becomes differentiating between aggressiveness and assertiveness. When a male leader is able to model how to handle anger assertively, members will not only be given tools to deal effectively with their angry feelings, but will also emphasize that the group is a safe place to explore and express anger (Bernardez, 1996).

Since groups recreate the family unit, male leaders will need to be comfortable with the father role and the transference that may result. Male leaders, like female leaders, need to have worked through their own family of origin issues so they will deal with transference in a constructive manner when it occurs in groups (Rosenberg, 1996).

Recommendations and Implications

Ideally, a female and male co-leadership team may be a useful approach to address gender issues and model new behaviors. Kahn (1996) believes using female and male co-facilitators provides group members with role models of both genders and allows them to witness a healthy opposite-sex relationship. This leadership dyad can also model effective communication and conflict resolution. Members can benefit by witnessing leaders who are able to disagree in a respectful manner and share the authority role. Yalom and Leszcz (2008) believe the use of some male-female co-facilitation can assist in producing an environment that is a corrective recapitulation of the primary family group. Although co-leadership is ideal for managing the effects of gender on group leaders, financially it may not be possible for many agencies.

When co-leadership is not feasible, the leader may need to make a more conscious effort to address gender difference in the group. Group leaders may want to follow three general practices: 1) Acknowledge gender differences during the screening or initial phase of the group; 2) discuss the presence and absence of different gender perspectives within the group; and 3) process the effects of gender differences, bias, and oppression both inside and outside of the group.

As mentioned earlier, not all readers identify with the traditional categories of male and female. Hence, the reader might consider viewing gender on a continuum versus as a dichotomous variable. Black, Crethar, Dermer, and Luke (2001) suggest when gender is considered a continuous variable, it provides a more accurate reflection of all individuals and is more inclusive in terms of diversity. If a leader is able to view gender in a more inclusive manner and demonstrate this within group, members may benefit.

Supervision may also provide an opportunity to discuss gender differences. Supervisors can pose questions to their supervisee about the gender dynamics of the group. By spending time discussing gender issues, a supervisee may be able to learn more about the effects of gender. The supervisor can also model how to bring up the topic of gender and could provide material about gender to discuss in the group.

Group leaders may also consider taking a course on gender issues in counseling. These types of courses tend to raise self-awareness about one's own development of gender and allow group leaders to gain a greater understanding of their gendered experience. Similar to Bernandez (1996), as discussed earlier, group leaders can benefit by blending their knowledge gained from a gender course into their existing theoretical approach and techniques.

Conclusion

To be an effective group leader, leaders need to be conscious of how gender stereotypes may play out in the group processes. It appears that group members may respond stereotypically to leaders and that leaders may respond in the same manner to members. Gender expectations tend to lead members to expect female leaders who are warm and caring and male leaders who are assertive and forceful (Rosenberg, 1996). When leaders address these initial expectations, they will be viewed as more effective leaders and the group will be more productive.

It appears the most effective way to deal with gender differences is to first be aware of differences and how they affect leadership style. Secondly, leaders must be aware of how these gender differences affect group members' responses to leaders. Lastly, effective group leaders should address gender expectations and differences within the group setting, which will hopefully facilitate growth in members regarding their awareness and the effects of gender.

References

- Bernandez, T. (1996). Conflicts with anger and power in women's groups. In B. DeChant (Ed.), *Women and group psychotherapy* (pp. 176-199). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Black, L. L., Crethar, H. C., Dermer, S. B., & Luke, M. (2001). My name is Samantha, not Sammy: Gender identity. In S. M. Dugger and L. A. Carlson (Eds.), *Critical incidents in counseling children* (pp. 133-146). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Correa, M. E., Klein, E. G., Stone, W. N., Achachan, J. H., Kossek, E. E., & Komarrajo, J. (1988). Reactions to women in authority: The impact of gender on learning in group relations. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 24, 219-233.
- Dykeman, C., & Appleton, V.E. (1998). Group counseling: The efficacy of group work. In D. Capuzzi & D. R. Gross (Eds.), *Introduction to group counseling* (2nd ed., pp. 101-129). Denver, CO: Love Publishing Company.
- Gies, F. L., Brown, V., & Wolfe, C. (1990). Legitimizing the leader. Endorsement by male versus female authority figures. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 20, 943-970.
- Gilbert, L. A., & Scher, M. (1999). *Gender and sex in counseling and psychotherapy*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gladding, S. T. (2008). *Groups: A counseling specialty* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Hackman, M. Z., Hills, M. J., Paterson, T. J., & Furniss, A.H. (1993). Leaders gender-role as a correlate of subordinates perceptions of effectiveness and satisfactions. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 77, 671-674.
- Jackson, D., Engstrom, E., & Emmers-Sommer, T. (2007). Think leader, think male and female: Sex vs. seating arrangement as leadership cues. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 57, 713-723.
- Kahn, E. W. (1996). Coleadership gender issues in group psychotherapy. In B. DeChant (Ed.), *Women and group psychotherapy* (p. 442-462). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kawakami, C., White, J. B., & Langer, E. J. (2000). Mindful and masculine: Freeing women leaders from the constraints of gender. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56, 49-63.
- McAuliffe, G. (2008). Culturally alert counseling: A comprehensive introduction. In G. McAuliffe (Ed.), *Culturally alert counseling* (p. 1-24). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- NeSmith, C., Wilcoxon, A., & Satcher, J. F. (2000). Male leadership in an addicted women's group: An empirical approach, *Journal of Addictions & Offender Counseling*, 20, 75-80.

- Nieva, V., & Gutek, B. (1981). *Women and work: A psychological perspective*. New York, NY: Praeger.
- Rosenberg, P. (1996). Comparative leadership styles of male and female therapists. In B. DeChant (Ed.), *Women and group psychotherapy* (pp. 442-462). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Stockton, R., Morran, D. K., & Velboff, P. (1987). Leadership of therapeutic small groups. *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama, & Sociometry*, 39, 157-165.
- Spillman, B., Spillman, R., & Reinking, K. (1981). Leadership emergence: Dynamic analysis of the effects of sex and androgyny. *Small Group Behavior* 2, 139-157.
- Taynor, J., & Deaux, K. (1973). The evaluation of male and female ability: Bias works in two ways. *Psychological Reports*, 32, 261-262.
- Yalom, I., & Leszcz, M. (2008). *The theory & practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm