Offender Experiences and Opinions of Mixed-Gender Group Work in the Community: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The National Probation Service in England and Wales currently delivers community-based accredited offending behavior programs in mixed-gender groups. There is at present a lack of research on the potential impact of mixed-gender group work on female offenders, who are often the minority within the group. This study aimed to improve our understanding of the area using qualitative methods. Sixteen offenders who had participated in a mixed-gender offending behavior program were interviewed as part of this study. Themes from the interviews were analyzed using Grounded Theory techniques. The findings illustrated an overall preference among all participants for mixed-gender rather than single-gender group work. The specific advantages of mixed-gender group work included increased learning about the opposite sex and a more relaxed atmosphere within the group. Although this study reflects positive attitudes to mixed-gender group work, the findings need to be tested further using empirical methodology.

The National Probation Service (NPS) in England and Wales has been delivering accredited offending behavior group work programs since the late 1990s. More than 17,000 offenders participated in a program in the years 2007 to 2008. It is current

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practice for the NPS to place female offenders on mixed-gender offending behavior programs where no provision of an all-female alternative exists. With fewer female than male offenders within the criminal justice system, it is often the case that female offenders are the minority within the group. Currently, there is a lack of research as to whether the use of mixed-gender groups puts female offenders at a disadvantage. An extensive search of the literature failed to identify any articles that specifically examined the gender composition of groups participating in offending behavior programs. Instead, a small body of literature was identified that examined the impact of gender composition on group work with drug and alcohol addicts.

Although this body of literature is too small to draw any firm conclusions regarding whether single-gender or mixed-gender group work is more effective (Sun, 2006), research does suggest that women in mixed-gender groups may encounter a series of difficulties that puts them at a disadvantage. For example, the literature suggests that mixed groups tend to be male dominated (Walker, 1981), leading women to be quieter (Wright, 1996) and feeling more restricted (Hodgins, El-Guebaly, & Addington, 1997). These disadvantages are thought to be more acute for women who are in the minority, or the only woman, in a mixed-gender group (Wright, 1996). Research also suggests that there will be subgroups of women who seek out single-gender programs as a treatment of choice (Green, 2006), for example, women who have a history of childhood sexual abuse (Copeland, Hall, Didcott, & Biggs, 1993). For these women, participation in a mixed-gender group may seem particularly threatening. Female clients are also thought to have different needs to their male counterparts. These differences include personal history, reasons for abuse, patterns of abuse, presentation at the beginning of treatment, treatment needs, change processes, and recovery between male and female addicts (Kaskutas, Zhang, French, & Witbrody, 2005).

Although the literature review was unable to identify any published research that specifically examined the impact of mixed-gender versus single-gender offending behavior programs there is a sizable literature that examines the rehabilitation of female offenders (e.g., Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Covington, 2001; Hollin & Palmer, 2006; Sorbello, Eccleston, Ward, & Jones, 2002). The rehabilitation of offenders is predominately based on the principles of risk, need, and responsivity (Andrews & Bonta, 1994). This model of rehabilitation states that offenders should receive treatment appropriate to their level of risk of reoffending, appropriate to their criminogenic needs, and that is delivered in a way that is appropriate to their learning styles. A meta-analysis of the outcomes of rehabilitation programs with female offenders suggests that there are many similarities between male and female offenders in terms of risk, need, and responsivity (Dowden & Andrews, 1999). However, although significant similarities exist, differences have also been noted; for example, even if female offenders have very similar criminogenic needs to male offenders, the level and causes of these needs may vary (Hollin & Palmer, 2006). In general, the area suffers from a lack of good-quality studies, the meta-analysis by Dowden and Andrews used only 26 studies, making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions.

With a lack of research evidence in the area, this study sought to examine the issue of gender composition of offending behavior programs by examining the experiences and opinions of both male and female offenders who had participated in mixed-gender groups. The aim of this research was to inform policy decisions relating to the use of mixed-gender programs. Qualitative method was used to examine the issues identified in the literature. These include the disadvantages and advantages of mixed-gender groups for both males and females, preferences regarding mixed-gender or single-gender groups, and whether female offenders felt the programs effectively met their needs. The key research questions were as follows: How do participants describe their experiences of mixed-gender groups? What are the participants' opinions on mixed-gender groups? What are the participants' opinions on single-gender groups?

Method

Participants

Participants were selected using opportunity sampling. Probation service staff from the North West and the South East regions selected participants who met one of the following criteria: any female offender who is currently participating in or has previously participated on an offending behavior program, and any male offender who is currently participating in or has previously participated in an offending behavior program and was a member of a mixed-gender group. These selection criteria were designed to include program completers, noncompleters, women in all-female groups, and women in mixed-gender groups.

In total, 16 participants were recruited for this study; 6 of these were male and 10 were female. The average age of the participants was 33 with ages ranging from 18 to 54. Participants were recruited from the South East ($n = 10$) and Yorkshire and Humberside ($n = 6$) regions. Three of the participants were on a custodial sentence; the remainder were on community orders. The index offenses of the participants were violence ($n = 4$), theft ($n = 3$), burglary ($n = 1$), public order offenses ($n = 1$), drug-related offenses ($n = 2$), fraud ($n = 1$), and driving offenses ($n = 4$).

The offending behavior programs that the participants attended were Drink Impaired Driving ($n = 2$), Think First (a general offending behavior program based on the acquisition of cognitive skills, $n = 8$), Anger Replacement Therapy ($n = 2$), and Enhanced Thinking Skills (a general offending behavior program based on the acquisition of cognitive skills, $n = 4$). Because of the small sample size, differences between these programs were not examined. Seven of the participants were still participating in their programs when they were interviewed, seven had recently completed their programs, and two had dropped out of their programs. Of the two participants who had dropped out of their programs, one attended the first 10 minutes of the first session and the other attended for two sessions. Three of the participants were serving custodial sentences in an open prison, and two of these participants had attended Think First in the community. One of these participants had been removed from her community Think First group to one within the prison halfway through her course.

The participants in this study experienced a range of different gender compositions in their mixed-gender groups. Two of the participants attended groups with an equal number of men and women in the group; seven of the participants attended groups that only had one woman in the group; two participants attended groups in which women were in the minority (the minimum number of women in these groups was three), four participants attended groups in which men were in the minority (the minimum number of men in these groups was two); and two participants attended all-female groups (these were both in custodial settings). Four of the participants in this study were women who attended a mixed-gender group as the only female.

Participation in this study was voluntary. An informed consent form and preinterview discussion with the researcher were used to explain the purpose of the study, to inform participants how the data would be treated, and to answer any of their questions. Participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study, that the data would be treated confidentially, and that there would be no implications in terms of their sentence if they chose to participate (or not) in the study.

Materials

This study used a 19-item semistructured interview schedule that was constructed for the purposes of this study. The schedule was divided into four sections: background information, experiences of mixed-gender groups, opinions on the gender composition of groups, opinions on the program, and recommendations. Because of space limitations, only example questions from the schedule are provided here. These include the following: "What was being a member of a mixed group like for you?" "What would you say were the good things about a mixed-gender group?" "To what extent do you think the program focused on problems or issues that you wanted to work on?" "If you were to go on to more programs in the future, would you prefer that they were same-sex or mixed groups?"

Procedure

In most cases the interviews were conducted in the probation office local to each of the participants. In the case of the participants on custodial sentences, interviews were conducted in their prison establishment. All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with the first author of this article, in a private interview room. Every interview was audio recorded to enable accurate transcription of the interviews at a later date. None of the participants withdrew their participation during the interviews or refused to answer any of the researcher's questions. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 1 hour. All the noncustodial participants in the study ($n = 13$) were given retail vouchers to compensate for any travel expenses and the inconvenience of coming to the interviews.

Results

Analyzing the Data

The analysis for this study was based on techniques drawn from Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Concept labels were generated around the three key research questions for this study: What was the experience of being in a mixed group like for the participants? What are the participants' opinions on mixed-gender groups? and What are the participants' opinions on single-gender groups? Each transcript was examined for any data that would relate to these three areas. In total, 342 concept labels were generated for the study. To examine the different experiences and opinions of the different subgroups of participants, the concept labels were then gathered together for women in groups with two or more female members (*n* = 6), women who were the only female in their group (*n* = 4), and male participants (*n* = 6).

Taking each research question at a time, all of the relevant concept labels were then listed for each participant subgroup. This list was then filtered into subject groups by the researcher. Subject groups were chosen that reflected the aims of the study. For example, participants' opinions on mixed-gender groups were filtered into the following groups: negatives about mixed groups, positives about mixed groups, personal preference of group type (mixed or single gender), opinions on groups in general, opinions on the sexes, opinions on the program, and (where relevant) opinions on being the sole female in the group.

Having filtered the concept labels by research question, participant subgroup, and subject, concept labels were then grouped together into themes. For example:

Research question	What are the participants' opinions on mixed-gender groups?
Participant subgroup	Male offenders
Subject	Benefits of mixed groups
Concept labels with similar themes	Women reduce conflict in the group
	More respect in group
	Nicer atmosphere
	More relaxed
	Less intimidating
	Behavior is different because more relaxed
Theme label	Having women in the group creates a better atmosphere

The themes generated from the interviews are presented in the following sections.

How Do Participants Describe Their Experiences of Mixed-Gender Groups?

Female participants (two or more women in the group). Most of the women in this subgroup were not concerned about participating in a mixed-gender group. However,

when asked how they would feel if they were the *only* woman in the group, most of the women did have concerns. Their comments ranged from thinking that they might be a bit quieter in the group, to not want to attend a group if they were the only female.

When it came to discussing their participation in a mixed-gender group, these participants viewed this experience in a mostly positive light. The key themes to emerge from these participants were a lack of inhibition, feeling listened to, and feeling happy to challenge others. Other positives mentioned were not feeling intimidated by the group and feeling free to discuss personal issues. Elements of the experience that were negative were mentioned in a couple of instances. One participant did not feel comfortable enough to challenge other members of the group, another participant reported feeling threatened by a male group member during the program: "I was not scared of him but I felt threatened by him. When I was alone with him, outside the building waiting to go in. I realized that he was putting on the 'hard man' thing, but I felt a bit threatened" (Participant 3). In terms of group observations, a couple of the participants mentioned an element of competition and conflict among the men in the group that they attributed to a need for there to be a "dominant male."

Female participants (only one woman in the group). All of women who were told that they were going to be the only female in the group initially had some concerns about this. These women typically reported feeling nervous and thinking that they would find being the only woman slightly intimidating. When it came to discussing their experiences in a mixed-gender group, these participants reported some positive experiences with one suggesting that the reality of the groups was not as bad as she had initially feared. Although some of these women said that they were not intimidated or inhibited, a common theme was that of isolation in the group: "I know I was the only one in there and I stuck out like a sore thumb" (Participant 4).

Some of the women reported being afraid of certain male members of the group. This fear appears to be based on concerns over the previous offenses of the male participants: "But one of my worries was what offenses are they in here for. Because it could be rape or anything" (Participant 6). Although this participant reported a generally positive experience of being in a mixed-gender group, she still felt that the lack of any other women in the group was holding her back from being totally open in the group: "I feel like I can't talk, there is a line that I can't pass but I would like to talk about it. . . . I feel that I can't express myself to the limit that I want to with my tutors because I am in a group full of men—do you see what I mean?" (Participant 6).

One of the women in this subgroup of participants reported a particularly negative experience of participating in a mixed-gender group. This participant was enrolled in an anger management program but withdrew from the group within 10 minutes of the first session. The participant said that she left the group as she felt that she stood out, that the men were making fun of her, and that she had nothing in common with the other people in the group.

Male participants. Most of the men in the study did not have any concerns when they were told that the group would be mixed-gender. Only one participant expressed any concern about women being in the group; this appeared to be the result of recent

problems with his female partner. The key themes to emerge from the men regarding their experiences of a mixed-gender group were a lack of inhibition, feeling listened to, and feeling happy to challenge other group members. One of the male participants expressed concern over the offense history of the women in his group. In this case, the female offenders were on custodial sentences whereas the male offenders were in the community.

In terms of group observations, there were reports of the group working well together and the minority gender (whether male or female) mixing well within the group. Another common theme across the interviews was the use of humor in the groups. There was also a sense that the women in the group helped male members with the course: "We have got quite a good relationship, basically the girls help the lads get through the course" (Participant 9).

Opinions on Mixed-Gender Groups

Female participants (two or more women in the group). These participants expressed positive attitudes to mixed-gender groups; key themes were that they were more fun, created a more relaxing atmosphere, exposed participants to a wider range of opinions, and taught participants how the other sex thinks. When asked whether they could think of any disadvantages or negative points about mixed-gender groups, none of these participants could think of any. When asked to state their preference between attending mixed-gender or single-gender groups in the future, all of the women in this subgroup of participants stated a preference for mixed-gender groups.

One of the aims of this study was to examine whether female participants felt that the courses were relevant to their needs. Most of the women in this subgroup felt that the course was relevant to their needs and covered everything that they need help with. One of the participants in this subgroup dropped out of the course because she felt unable to balance attending program sessions with looking after her children: "I wish I could have continued with it. But being here nearly all day is not realistic when you've got kids" (Participant 7).

When asked for their opinions about only having one woman in the group, most of the women felt that this would have some form of negative impact on them, either making them quieter or more embarrassed when doing the role-plays. One of the participants suggested that being the only woman in a group run by male staff would be particularly hard.

Female participants (only one woman in the group). In general, these participants had positive attitudes to mixed-gender groups. They saw few negatives about mixed groups and stated a personal preference for mixed-gender groups rather than single-gender groups. In terms of negatives about mixed groups, Participant 4, who dropped out of her group after only 10 minutes of the first session, suggested that she had different needs to the other participants because she was female. Consequently, this particular participant may not consider any mixed-gender group to be suitable for her.

The women in this subgroup felt that mixed groups had the advantages of a better atmosphere and exposing them to a greater range of opinions; one participant also felt that being on a mixed group helped teach her more about men. In terms of attitudes about the sexes and attitudes about the course, one participant felt that men and women had different emotional needs and that as such her needs were not being addressed by the course: "We talk a lot more about anger, because we are in a group full of men. They don't talk about emotions considering me. You know, it's a lot more about the man's side of things. It's all about anger and like, police officers and court. But I've never had any bad experiences with things like that" (Participant 6).

Although most of the women in this subgroup had a fairly positive experience on their groups, they all felt that it would be better to have more than one woman in a group: "I think that I would have got the same out of the course. It's just that I would have felt a bit more comfortable if there had been more women" (Participant 5). When asked what could make the experience of being the only woman in the group easier, suggestions included having female staff, meeting the staff before the group started, and having smaller groups.

Male participants. Of the three subgroups of participants, the male participants appear to have the most positive attitudes toward mixed-gender groups. As with the female participants, they could associate a number of positives and few negatives with mixed-gender groups. One of the participants felt that being in a mixed-gender group had taught him more about how women think and helped improve his attitude toward women: "Having the argument from the female side of it as well, and hearing their side . . . I think it just gives you a little bit more respect, from both sides, not just all-males, but you respect females a little bit more and learn what they might be thinking" (Participant 16).

A common theme from the male participants was that the presence of women in the group helped create a more relaxing atmosphere. The men felt that this reduced conflict, made the group less intimidating and made the group more respectful. Some of the male participants suggested that having women in the group made them more likely to attend sessions. Most of the men found it easy to open up to women: "When we first started, I was all shy and that, but with the girls there, I suppose they made you come out of your shell a little bit more" (Participant 8).

All of the men in this study expressed a preference for mixed-gender groups rather than single-gender groups. When it came to examining their comments about groups in general, there was a sense that all groups are difficult, regardless of gender and that issues such as offense history can make as big a difference as gender composition.

Opinions on Single-Gender Groups

Female participants (two or more women in the group). This subgroup of participants generally expressed a negative attitude toward single-gender groups. Their main concerns were that single-gender groups would lack the breadth of opinions that mixed-gender groups have, would be boring, and would be full of gossip. No positive aspects

of single-gender groups were mentioned by these women. In terms of the participants' personal expectations of how they would feel or behave in an all-female groups, there was a sense that changing the gender composition of the group would not be enough to counteract some of the problems that they encountered while on mixed-gender groups. The participants still felt that they would be nervous, quiet, and possibly intimidated by other group members: "But it was nerve wracking. It would have been really anyway, even if it had been all-females" (Participant 1).

Although most of these women expressed negative attitudes toward single-gender groups, the women who had previous experiences of being in an all-female group reported feeling comfortable in the groups and feeling that the group worked well together.

Female participants (only one woman in the group). The women who had experienced a mixed-gender group in which they were the only female had a slightly more balanced attitude toward single-gender groups. Some of these participants felt that an all-female group would have a worse atmosphere as a result of women being judgmental or "bitchy." However, some of the women in this subgroup felt that there were positives about single-gender groups. These women felt that in contrast to their experience as the only female in a group, they would have more in common with other group members, feel more comfortable, and feel less intimidated in an all-female group.

Despite having a slightly more positive attitude to single-gender groups than the other participants, there was a sense that simply being placed in an all-female group would not resolve many of the problems associated with attending a group program. Participant 4, who dropped out of an anger management program during the first session, felt that an all-female group would not have been enough for her. When asked what her personal preference for future groups would be this participant stated a preference for one-to-one work. In contrast, one of the other women felt that having some women in the group would be beneficial, but it would not have to be an all-female group: "If there was women in my group who had been in the same situation as me then maybe I would feel like I could open up more. So it wouldn't have to be the fact that it was all women, just a few more, not just me" (Participant 6).

Male participants. The male participants in this study generally had poor opinions about single-gender groups. There was a consensus among the participants that the atmosphere in all-male groups would be worse, leading to increased competition among group members, macho attitudes, less respect in the group, and finding the group more intimidating.

There was also a sense that this atmosphere would make the sessions less productive. "Too many people thinking that they were better than the others. I don't know. But you know what us boys are like. We're like 'I'm better than you.' . . . All they are going to want to do is mess around during sessions, and that's not what you are there for" (Participant 2). Another common theme was a feeling that there would be less interaction among group members in an all-male group: "If it were all blokes it would be all manly and just sit back like that and not say anything. . . . I don't think that there would be as much interaction as what there is now" (Participant 8).

The men in this study were not able to think of any positives regarding all-male groups.

In terms of their personal expectations regarding their feelings and behavior in an all-male group, most of the men felt that it would have a negative impact on them. Some of the men felt that they would be less comfortable in an all-male group and would open up less during sessions. One of the participants felt that his attendance may have been worse if the group had been all-male: "I think with an all-guys group I wouldn't have opened up as much as I have done and I think that I probably would have turned up and maybe not" (Participant 16).

Discussion

A literature review of this area found a lack of research that examined the issue of gender composition in offending behavior programs. Previous research into the gender composition of groups outside of the offending behavior program setting have suggested that mixed-gender groups tend to be dominated by male members (Walker, 1981), which can lead to the women being quieter and feeling restricted (Wright, 1996). Some of the experiences reported during this study reflect both of these notions, with women in the group reporting that the men were overpowering and that they were consequently quieter. This study also supports the suggestion that women face greater problems as the ratio of women to men decreases (Wright, 1996). In this study, specific difficulties were associated with women who were the only females in a mixed-gender group. These women reported more isolation, fear of men, and inhibition than women who were in groups with a larger female-to-male gender ratio.

Although some authors suggest that all-female groups hold a number of advantages to women, including better levels of engagement, retention, and self-disclosure (Hodgins, El-Guebaly, & Addington, 1997), the women in this study stated a clear preference for mixed-gender groups and do not appear to associate many "positives" with all-female groups.

In the field of drug and alcohol addiction, some authors have suggested that female addicts have different treatment needs to male addicts (Kaskutas et al., 2005). There is also a similar literature on the differing needs of female offenders (e.g. Covington, 2001; Sorbello et al., 2002). Generally speaking, the women in this study found that the programs were relevant to their needs. However, one participant felt that the course focused on the male aspects of problems rather than the female side. As this offender was in a group with no other women, it may be the case that it was the gender composition, rather than the course content, that contributed to this feeling. However, the possibility that the content of some courses is not suitable for the specific needs of female offenders also needs to be considered.

The findings from this study are supportive of the use of mixed-gender groups for offending behavior programs in the community. The advantages of mixed-gender groups include creating a more relaxed atmosphere, exposing participants to a wider range of opinions, encouraging disclosure among male group members, and increasing understanding about the opposite sex. It is important that the extent

to which these advantages translate into improved outcomes (e.g., better attendance, increased learning, and improvements in offending behavior post program) is evaluated empirically. This study indicates that the advantages of mixed-gender groups are not just experienced by male participants. The women in this study also reported a preference for mixed-gender groups and listed the same benefits as those mentioned above. The women in this study had a fairly negative attitude to single-gender groups and indicated that single-gender groups would not necessarily combat any inhibition, nervousness, or fear of group members that they may have. The study indicates that the experience of attending a mixed-gender program can be improved through the use of female staff and effective facilitation of group discussions by staff members.

Because of a low ratio of female to male offenders within the criminal justice system, it is currently possible for individual women to be placed on a group that is otherwise all-male. When questioned, most of the women in this study expressed at least some concern at the prospect of being the only woman in a group. Although the majority of women in this study who were placed in this situation reported a fairly positive experience, these women were more likely to report concern before the program started, isolation during the program, and inhibition compared to women in groups with a more balanced gender ratio. The study indicates that the experience of attending a mixed-gender group as the only woman may be improved by discussing any concerns that the female group member may have before the program starts. Further empirical work is needed to establish the extent to which negative effects are experienced by women who attend programs in an otherwise all-male group and whether this in turn affects program outcomes. The overwhelming preference among the women in this study for mixed-gender groups indicates that improving the gender balance of groups, rather than changing to all-female groups, may be the most appropriate way to improve the experience of female offenders.

The extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized across the Probation Service is limited. Specific limitations include the relatively small sample size and the potential for bias in the sample. This study used opportunity sampling, which may have introduced a bias toward more compliant, pro-program participants. Offenders who may be underrepresented or omitted from this study include program dropouts, those who refused to participate in a mixed-gender program, and those women for whom a suitable program could not be found (e.g., female sex offenders). Although the sample size is limited, this study did manage to include two noncompleters and a good variation of gender ratios.

This study illustrates how hard it is to generalize the experiences and opinions of offenders in terms of their gender. The analysis of the transcripts has highlighted as many similarities as there are differences between male and female offenders. Generally speaking, most of the participants in this study had a positive attitude toward mixed-gender programs and stated a personal preference for mixed-gender programs. This study paints a more positive picture of mixed-gender groups than previous research. The extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized across a

larger population, along with the effect of gender composition on attendance levels, and group outcomes need to be tested using larger scale studies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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