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Battling Favoritism in Group Discussions

The dangers of differential responding in a small-group setting
James 2:1–13

In group discussions, some people respond more intently to the statements of one person than they do another. The technical term for this phenomenon is *differential responding*. In particular, differential responding becomes an issue if the difference in response to statements reflects such things as gender or racial bias, perceived status, or personal history.

When people begin to give more attention or importance to one person's statements because of class or other arbitrary designations, they have taken something away from the rest of the group and have been unfair to those who are ignored.

Defining the Term

The group I am a part of recently had a discussion about the way women's statements are not valued. One woman in the group (who has been on numerous governing boards and committees) described how she has frequently made statements that were ignored by others, only to have a male make a similar statement later and have it be valued. Other women in the group validated her observation with their own similar experiences.

Similarly, my spouse and I have had frequent discussions about how my statements are valued by others more quickly than hers—especially when my degree, title, or position is made public. We have had some laughs about this, remembering a time when we were invited to a gathering where we knew no one present. We were both being ignored until someone who knew me entered and addressed me with the “Dr.” in front of my name. Suddenly several people turned to us, wanting to engage us (me) in conversation. Needless to say, we were less interested in engaging them at that point than we might have been earlier in the evening.

It should be noted that differential responding is not the same as giving weight to a person's remarks because they have legitimate expertise. I will listen to my financial advisor's opinion about retirement funds more intently than my grocer, for example.

Taking Action

Differential responding often relates to a shared personal history, especially if the people in a group are couples or if two members have a relationship outside the group—employees, a history of committee work together, or similar experience. If the leader observes one person ignoring the statements of a partner, or if one person usually criticizes statements made by the same individual, it is an issue the leader needs to address—if the group doesn't deal with it first. The response pattern may have developed over many years of being together. Small groups in churches are not marriage therapy groups; however, they are appropriate places for couples or coworkers to examine their communication patterns with others who share an interest in the topic.

Addressing differential responding is most easily handled with a leader observation: “I notice that when women in the group make statements, you frequently [describe the behavior: laugh, don't respond, disagree, or the like].” It is more delicate for the leader when the issue is wrapped in personal history. “I notice that when your spouse [friend, coworker, or the like] makes a statement, you often close your eyes and make a face. What does that mean?” Be prepared, as a leader, for an intense discussion that other couples or friends in the group will join when this kind of observation is made.

In addition, this discussion may provoke some generalizations such as, “Men never...” or “Women always....” On the bright side, such discussions may be an opportunity for the group to challenge these generalizations.

—BROOKE B. COLLISON; excerpted from [*Know and Be Known*](#) (Alban Institute, 2007). Used with permission.

Discuss:

1. Describe a time when you felt ignored or unheard. What was the experience like?
2. What is the difference between showing favoritism toward someone with a particular degree and giving weight to a group member with legitimate expertise?
3. Is it appropriate to address with the whole group favoritism that seems to stem from personal history?