

Reflections on the 2010 Midwinter Retreat

Long in its history as a space for the men of Division 51 to foster fellowship and to personally grow, this year's retreat was the first to include women. Much debate and deliberation preceded this year's invitation for women to join the group. Many who have been active in the Division are well aware of the strong desire of some perennial retreat goers to keep it an all-male event. For many of them, the desire was to create a separate retreat to be held concurrent to the all-male event, with an opportunity for a mixed-gender venue immediately following. This assertion was grounded in the belief that the presence of women may alter the dynamics and change how men confront personal and professional problems during the retreat. Men have not been the only advocates of this men's group, as one Division 51 female leader has publicly stated a number of times, women have been pleased over the years on the effect that the group has had on the (male) participants. When men return from a retreat feeling refreshed and productive, which has apparently been a common observation, that's a good thing for their families, co-workers, clients, and anyone else they encounter. Nonetheless, after nearly 20 years of being an all-male event, this past retreat was the first mixed-gender retreat of the Division's history. In order to commemorate this event Jennifer Primack, David Whitcomb, Chris Liang, and Fred Rabinowitz offer their reflections on this year's retreat and mid-year meetings.

Jennifer Primack
Brown University

"It's an historic moment for division 51" was a phrase that came up multiple times during the course of the Division 51 retreat. I've been a member of division 51 since 2001 and I have served on the board, first as a student representative and now as the Early Career Psychologist representative. After attending the first mixed-gender retreat I can honestly say that not only was it an historic moment for the division, but also a potential turning point for me in how I view my role within the division.

As one of the three women in attendance, I had mixed feelings about the retreat because I was familiar with history involved in the creation of the retreat and the lengthy discussions on the merits for and against including female members in the retreat. Walking into the room on the day of the retreat I was tense, anxious, and apprehensive. Did things run completely smoothly? Not completely. There were moments of tension when members discussed their feelings about mixed-gender retreats, but we worked through these moments in ways that ultimately strengthened my commitment to the division. Leaving the room at the end of the day, I felt relatively satisfied. I continue to feel appreciative toward the members who went out of their way to make the women in the room feel welcome and toward those members who were willing to open themselves up to changes that they initially had been reluctant to endorse.

The mid-winter retreat is a unique experience and one that I hope continues to be open to division 51 members of both genders. When I first joined the division I was struck by the welcoming spirit and closeness between the division members. However, over the years, despite my regular attendance at division events in the conferences, I never really achieved that level of camaraderie with division members (outside of my own core group from graduate school). After being able to attend the retreat for the first time this year, I realized

that the bonds between core division members are in large part fostered by events that occur during the retreat. The retreat provides members with an opportunity to discuss personal experiences with a focus on how gender influences those experiences. It provided me with the opportunity to learn about other division members in a way that had previously been unavailable to me. I strongly hope that the division retreat continues to be an opportunity that is available to all male and female division members and an event that all division members should experience at least once during their membership.

David Whitcomb
University of North Dakota

Dallas' Midwinter Meeting marked my fifth consecutive year attending SPSMM's annual retreat. In the first hour, the tension in the room was palpable as some men, tentatively, and others, more boldly, expressed their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about this new format. While some openly welcomed the change, I observed a process of mourning among men who were strong advocates of a men's only group. Some of their sharing made at least some of the women present feel uncomfortable and unwelcome, at least for a portion of the day. This process started before any of the women participants had spoken (aside from the traditional round of introductions and, for previous attendees, updates on the past year). I commented on the lack of female voices, which seemed to prompt one woman to be the next speaker. Still, female participation appeared to be much more tentative than the men's engagement, at least until the afternoon. By the end of the day, some men expressed that this was one of the best retreat experiences ever, while others appeared to hold onto their preference for an all men's group. I'm not sure how to summarize the women's experiences, but hope that they were positive enough for them to come back and encourage others to attend in future years.

Early in the day, I expressed my own feelings of loss in that, as a gay man who mostly works with women and socializes with LGBT folks, the retreats had been some of the only times I had meaningful interactions with a group of predominately heterosexual men in many years. Looking back a month later, I share with at least a few others the hope that we could still have a men's group in some capacity, just not one that breaks up the continuity of the official work of the Division at Convention or Midwinter meeting. I also believe that it is in the best interest of SPSMM to continue with this new format, so that women have the full benefits of division membership. These benefits include facilitated group session, currently a unique event among APA divisions, and one that strengthens our bonds as a community.

Christopher Liang
University of La Verne

As a man who has benefited professionally and personally from the relationships developed through the retreat, I was filled with different emotions and thoughts about the change to the format of the retreat. Not only was I mindful about my own sense of perceived loss as well as the new opportunities this format might offer but I was also curious of how the group's dynamics might change as a result of this newfound inclusiveness. To be sure, this retreat was momentous and a time for celebration. Though change can be hard, the participants of this first mixed-gender retreat took brave steps. Courage to withstand the uncertainty and unease was needed for both women and men for the day to be

successful. Luckily, this trait clearly was evident among its participants. In my humble opinion, the participants of this previously all-male event all are trailblazers. Each confronted, embraced, and benefited from this new format.

As I reflect on my experience, I think of how appropriate the saying, “the more things change the more they stay the same” is for our Division’s retreat. As the day neared an end, I came to several conclusions. Among them were that my perceptions of loss were unfounded and that the group’s dynamics changed as a result of the absence of long-time attendees more so than because of the gender composition of the group. And, while this only was my fourth retreat, it seemed that the changes in the group’s composition notwithstanding, not only were similar themes explored but participants got what they needed from the retreat. On a final note, I believe that sharing what individual participants got from the retreat is only part of the story. For me, I believe that the Division benefited immensely from this new format. By including women in the retreat, the mid-year business meeting itself was made more open. And, as a result, the meeting was informed by their energy, knowledge, and passion for the study of men and masculinity. I do hope that the Division continues to embrace this format. It not only is socially just but important for the growth of our Division.

Fred Rabinowitz
University of Redlands

As a long term participant and one of the facilitators for the men’s retreat over the past several years, I welcomed the challenge of making what was an all male group into a meaningful, growth experience for men and women. I have run men’s groups for the past twenty-nine years, so for me, being in a men’s group is familiar and has been the scene for incredible psychological insight and change for men with whom I have worked. I love being in men’s groups as a participant as well. With curiosity and excitement, I sensed that this retreat would be an awesome opportunity for the men to be themselves in the presence of women and for women to be themselves in the presence of men. To be authentic in the presence of the other sex is huge, since many of us seem to hide parts of ourselves during these encounters. To me, this is what we have been striving for in terms of understanding the impact of gender and then being able to transcend it as an obstacle in our relationships.

Throughout the retreat, there was some resistance from those that highly valued the all male experience, and it was important for them to air their concerns in a genuine way and grieve its loss. It was also refreshing to have the women in the group acknowledge their apprehension and hopes. Ironically, most of the issues discussed were recognizable by both sexes. The all-male retreats of the past involved catching up from the previous year and introducing new participants. While that still occurred, something bigger was in the air. We were making history and it felt that way. Conflict was a part of the group and not avoided, but everyone stayed with the process, as uncomfortable as it was at times. I enjoyed the give and take. I thought the women shared deeply and with vulnerability. Many of the men did as well. I felt like we all got to know each other better; the sharing was real and intense. I found that the day invigorating, exciting, and intimate. I felt like we straddled the emotional edge by letting each other into our worlds. I look forward with anticipation to next year’s retreat.

Rory Remer

University of Kentucky

I struggled with sharing my reflections on the retreat. They are many, and continue to be provoked/stimulated even engaging in the process of writing them. An important one, for me at least, is that I tended to compare my experience with my previous ones. My inclination was to say it (whatever the “it” was) was better and/or worse. Rather, I think it was different. The fact of the mixed group was foreground in many ways, affecting what we did and how, perforce. I look at the differences as much as due to the people present and their idiosyncratic ways of interacting as due to gender differences—if separating the two influences is possible. Personally, being a leader for the first time, rather than only a participant, I didn’t get my needs met in the same way. I think we experienced each other in ways and depths we have rarely done in the past, and in other ways much as we have before. I liked the continued willingness to struggle openly—taking risks to go beyond our comfort levels. Anyway, I choose to look at the experience as “grist for the mill,” something I benefit from greatly when I have cause to reflect.