



**THE ART OF INVITATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE
EFFECTIVENESS AND EXPERIENCES OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

By: Katti Sneed, Deborah Teike, and Amanda C. Blake

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Katti Sneed PhD, MSW, LCSW, LCAC; Deborah Teike MSW, LCSW; Amanda C. Blake BSW candidate

This research was done in order to better understand the effectiveness and overall experience of participants in Art of Invitation. Art of Invitation is a program developed to challenge churches and not-for-profit agencies to alter their perceptions in order to be better equipped for open dialogue. The findings from this qualitative study will help to better understand Art of Invitation and the participants' experiences. Four main themes were found after coding the interviews.

Art of Invitation

Background

Art of Invitation is a program which was created by Deborah Teike MSW, LCSW. Art of Invitation is taught through sessions at retreats, conferences or in small groups. Art of Invitation was created in order to help better equip churches and not-for-profits become more open and inviting to others. Being open and inviting is accomplished by learning how to build relationships with individuals who may not normally interact. Art of Invitation teaches individuals to recognize barriers which may hinder invitation to certain individuals. Art of Invitation provides a framework for individuals to work from in order to learn to become open and inviting. Art of Invitation has three main goals: to help individuals learn about themselves

and how to express themselves, to help individuals understand others and learn about interacting with “outsiders” and to create a sense of belonging within an organization or community.

Purpose of Study

This research study was conducted in order to better understand Art of Invitation and the outcomes experienced by the participants. The researchers also wanted to review Art of Invitation as a whole and better understand its effectiveness. This understanding and review could be used to better the program and can be used to promote the program. The study was also done to learn about the needs of the church in becoming open and inviting and how Art of Invitation can be implemented into churches to counteract these needs.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted as a generic, qualitative study. The interviews were semi-structured, giving participants the freedom to expand on and explain in detail their experiences with Art of Invitation. The qualitative research approach was chosen over quantitative, because qualitative research produces more details about what the participants actually felt and thought.

The participants were randomly selected from a larger group of individuals who had participated in Art of Invitation. The past twenty-five presentations of Art of Invitation were reviewed and the participants were chosen as a result in order to have a diverse sample. Potential participants were contacted via telephone or email and asked if they would be willing to participate in the research. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Each participant was asked ten questions. The interview questions allowed each participant to be as open and detailed as they would like. The first question had to do with where the individual attended Art of Invitation and when they attended it. The last question pertained to how Art of

Invitation could be improved. Since these questions did not provide any themes, they are not included below.

Interview Question 2: *What were some of the key things that you remember about the training? What was the most valuable? What was the least valuable?*

Interview Question 3: *Since you attended AOI how have you altered your personal contacts with other people?*

Interview Question 4: *What do you remember about the concept of Second Thought?*

Interview Question 5: *Do you recall anything about being invitational versus confrontational versus presentational?*

Interview Question 6: *Was the discussion about barriers and values helpful?*

Interview Question 7: *What kind of people or what groups of people do you think could benefit from participation in AOI?*

Interview Question 8: *Are there any people or populations that you feel that the AOI would not apply to?*

Interview Question 9: *How would you describe the AOI to someone who know nothing about the workshop?*

After the interviews were completed and recorded, they were transcribed by yet another individual. All interviews were transcribed except for three. These three had issues because the recorder lost its battery during the interview. One person chose to fill in the empty spaces via email, one person decided to redo the interview and one person decided to opt out of the interview all together. Once all of the interviews were completed, transcribed and compiled, a separate person coded the interviews. The interviews were read through and color coded in order to find common themes. This process happened two times until the themes were established.

Demographics

Although many people attend the Art of Invitation sessions, this research was done using interviews from six participants. The demographics of the participants are depicted in chart 4.1:

Chart 4.1

Participant	Gender	Time Since AOI	Setting of AOI	Secular or Faith-Based	Race	Occupation	Age	Marital Status
1	Male	2.5 years	Church Sunday School	Faith-Based	White	Retired	81	Married
2	Female	2.5 years	Adult Church Group	Faith-Based	White	Nurse	50	Married
3	Male	1.5 years	Church Staff Retreat	Faith-Based	White	Director of Social Service Agency	28	Married
4	Male	6 months	Sunday School Class	Faith-Based	White	Teacher	39	Single
5	Male	1 year	Adult Church Group	Faith-Based	African-American	Purchaser	64	Married
6	Female	1 year	Adult Church Group	Faith-Based	African-American	Township Trustee Employee	63	Married

These participants made up a representative sample of the individuals who participated in Art of Invitation. Since it was a representative sample, a realistic understanding and review of Art of Invitation can be established. Each interview occurred separately, except for participants 5 and 6 who were interviewed concurrently; since they are married it was convenient to interview them together.

Themes

A number of themes were found to be common among the interviews, and after multiple times coding the interviews, four themes were found to be most prominent: *Motivation to be Open, Overarching, Barriers, and Most Valuable Take-Away*. These themes show and explain the overarching thoughts and feelings of the individuals who participated in Art of Invitation. The researcher and developer of Art of Invitation will use these themes to better understand church attenders in relation to attending Art of Invitation.

Discussion

Motivations to Be Open

The theme of *motivations to be open* explains the participant's willingness and reasoning for being inviting and inclusive of other individuals within their churches. This theme was evident throughout the interviews and contains the subthemes of *Christlikeness* and *being nonjudgmental*. The subthemes are the two main reasons given as to why the participants felt they should be open to other individuals.

Christlikeness. Four out of the six participants cited Christlikeness as a motivation to be open and inviting to other people. They talked about how since Christ has called us to love others, we should love others. Participant 3 stated: "...if we're supposed to be the Body of Christ and we're supposed to act like Christ...why are we often the ones who get the worse wrap of how we treat people...". Participant 5 also said "... from a Christian standpoint, I have to emphasize too, it is one of the key elements that the Lord expects from us is love and from saying that, I have to go back to the basis of how can you say you love the Lord when you don't love your brother?". The overarching reason and motivation to be open to others from this group of participants is summed up in these two quotes.

Nonjudgmental. The other idea of why these participants wanted to become more open and inviting was because they wanted to be nonjudgmental of other individuals. Along with being nonjudgmental, it was also mentioned that they wanted to be respectful of other individuals. Four out of the six participants quoted being nonjudgmental as a motivation to be open and inviting to other individuals. Participant 3 put it like this: “you have no idea who they are and where they come from, but always having a loving and caring kind of open attitude and no matter what kind of comes from those interactions you’re not judging people”.

Overarching Effectiveness

The theme of *overarching effectiveness* has to do with how effective Art of Invitation was overall. It deals with what the participants grasped from the sessions and how they implemented it into their lives since attending. This theme was broken down into two subthemes: Art of Invitation *changed the participant’s interactions with others* and Art of Invitation was a *good reminder and created a good framework* for the participants to work from.

Changed interactions with others. Every participant (six out of six) stated that Art of Invitation had positively changed their interactions with others. Four out of the six participants specifically stated their communication skills had improved as a result of attending Art of Invitation. Participant 5 stated: “As I relate or communicate with other individuals I try to use that same mentality because now the class is not for just Christians within a church household or church environment, it’s for your relationship as a whole regardless if you’re inside the church, outside the church, outside your home, if you’re walking down the street or if you’re in a classroom, you’re on the job or something...there’s so many aspects and facets that you can use the knowledge that was gained as far as relating to other individuals”. Participant 2 stated: “[The Art of Invitation] helps you understand how to build better relationships and communicate better

in all situations not just a relationship that got conflict in it or struggling, but just in general it can help you have a look at who you are to make you better”. All participants gave personal stories as to when they used the skills learned in the Art of Invitation. These stories ranged from within their marriage, to at their church, and to at their work.

Good Reminder/Framework. The participants also stated Art of Invitation provided them with a good framework to work from and in some cases was a good reminder of ideas they had learned in the past but had not applied. Three out of the six participants stated they had already learned skills similar to those in Art of Invitation. This does not discount Art of Invitation in their eyes, but rather strengthens it and cements its importance. Participant 2 stated: “I mean, I was kind of like that anyway, but, I mean, something about the Art of Invitation just really stuck in my mind as the second thought and seeking to understand more and it’s just made me a much better listener and then in turn improved my communication”. Two out of the six participants stated Art of Invitation was a good framework and building block which allowed them to better implement skills they had already learned. Participant 4 stated: “I guess in some ways it just seem kinda like common sense, but, having it spelled out well here’s you know”.

Barriers

Art of Invitation dealt with barriers individuals develop. The participants viewed the *barriers* as ideas or thoughts that got in their way of being inviting and open to other individuals. The barriers the participants talked about were not very specific in nature. The main theme of barriers can be broken down into three subthemes. These subthemes are: *different types of people* cause barriers to be established, *people with different values* cause barriers to be established and coming from a *different background* can cause someone to develop barriers towards another individual. Participant 6 summarized the usefulness of knowing barriers very well: “...if you’re

not willing to work with the barriers or if you deny that there's barriers...that's not going to get you to being invitational”.

Different people. The subtheme of different people means the participants viewed people who were different from them as a cause of barrier development. Three out of the six participants talked about how different types of people influenced their barriers. Participant 3 stated: “I think you can't let differences get in the way of truly just being able to get to the core of you're a person just like I am at the end of the day and we both need the same thing”. Participant 6 stated: “I think when you look at the world today...it is a very divided world. Even though with all of the communication and all of the technology and all of the being able to...instant this and instant that...we still have Christian against non-Christian. We still have black against white, we still have student against teacher, we have parents, mother against daughter, father against son, we still have so a broad gap within acceptance of one another for whatever reason”. These three participants all mentioned how just because someone looks different does not mean they cannot be inviting and open to them.

Different values. Different values specifically means barriers are created when there are individuals who have different and difficult to understand values. Five out of the six participants cited different values as a barrier to being open and inviting. This could be high as a result of these participants being from the church population, so values are of high importance. Participant 2 stated: “My concept of morality and someone else's might be totally different simply because of their values and the environment they were raised in, so, I think knowing that that piece exists and tying it in to seeking to understand and giving second thought make you a much better communicator.”.

Different background. The subtheme of different background in detail means the environment a person was raised in and how that individual was raised. Four out of the six participants stated different environments could be a cause of barriers being put up between individuals. Participant 2 stated: “I can acknowledge them and I can seek to understand where other cultures and you know, are coming from, you know, I mean they have a total different view of the world than I do, their world view is totally different from mine, simply because they were born where they were born, to whom they were born to, I mean, it doesn’t make them right, it doesn’t make me right, it just makes us equal because if we understand those barriers and values that we have, it’s okay to disagree, but you don’t have to be confrontational on it and many times you can learn from one another.”.

Most Valuable

The theme of most valuable is about what the participants thought were the most valuable thoughts or skills they learned as a result of attending Art of Invitation. This theme specifically corresponds with question 2 which was stated previously. The two main subthemes from this theme are *seeking to understand* and *listening to others*. These are the two ideas the participants felt were of most value from Art of Invitation. Every participant talked about both of these ideas but not every participant cited them as the most valuable.

Seeking to Understand. Five out of the six participants cited seeking to understand as one of the most valuable ideas that they learned from Art of Invitation. The participants were in agreement that seeking to understand means not taking someone’s words at face value, but rather exploring the deeper meaning in order to better grasp what that individual is saying. This idea was cited as helping to improve communication with other individuals. Participant 4 stated: “...just seek to understand why this person is doing this and then can lead into how to work with

that individual” they later went on to say “seeking to understand just trying to put myself in their position and then also not jumping the gun”. Participant 3 stated: “I think trying to always see behind somebody else’s viewpoint is huge because we can all talk, we can ramble away, but it’s another thing to get behind somebody else’s eyes”.

Listening to others. Listening to others was cited as one of the most valuable ideas gained from Art of Invitation from five out of the six participants. The participants agreed that listening to others is more than just listening, but rather hearing, responding, and processing. Every participant cited listening to others as helping them to improve their communication skills with other individuals. Participant 3 stated: “[Being] a good listener. It’s so hard...it’s one thing to listen to somebody...audibly just listen to something, but it’s another thing to actually hear what that person is saying as in...you hear their heart or you hear what their actually trying to convey as opposed to just the words and the sentences that they’re forming.”. Participant 6 stated: “... learn to listen...to be an active participant in listening and listening is a participatory process in that you must engage with the individuals, it’s not just being physically present, but it’s you are present in all ways...”.

Discussion

Research to Support Themes: *Overarching Effectiveness and Most Valuable Idea*

Previous literature supports the notion that the skills of active listening, when taught, improve communication. Paukert, Stagner, and Hope (2004) focused on active listening in relation to telephone operators at a help center, through this they discovered active listening skills can be improved as a result of training and in turn can enhance the experience of using a helpline. Levitt’s 2002 research study showed active listening training helped to improve the skills of counseling students. Levitt found that if active listening is focused on compared to

other skills it increases as well as impacts the counseling student's active listening skills, self-efficacy and other skill areas. Miller, Hedrick and Orlofsky (1991) also studied active listening and the effects of training on the individuals. These previous studies show active listening can be taught and can improve one's interactions with others. This supports the findings from Art of Invitation themes discussed previously. Active listening is used in multiple different types of settings, but it has only been researched within therapy, counseling or formal situations (Weger, Castle & Emmett, 2010).

Active listening is trying to understand what another person is saying while withholding personal judgements. This definition shows that active listening can be related to both of the subthemes of seeking to understand and learning how to listen to others. Active listening requires the listener to show they are listening, repeat what the person had said then ask probing questions to better understand. This can lead the individual to listen without judgement (Weger et al., 2010). The Art of Invitation can be a relatively short class. But this does not make it any less effective. One study showed that active listening can be taught in approximately 150 minutes (McNaughton et al., 2007).

Research has shown that communication is very important in order to build and grow relationships (McNaughton et al., 2007). Training and being taught more about communication in addition to listening can help improve active listening skills. The research studies stated previously found that by improving active listening, the way a person responds to the other individual can also improve. The listening individual is taught not to try to fix the problem, but rather just listen to what the other person (Weger et al., 2010). Active listening is an effective tool to improve communication. Learning how to better listen can result in individuals in communication being able to understand each other. In a study done by McNaughton et al.

(2007), educators were taught active listening skills. The results of the study showed that the educators believed active listening should be taught to others educators outside of the study as well as stating that learning how to better listen improved their overall communication and increased their abilities when it came to working with others. This restates the same result found through Art of Invitation. Participants were able to better learn how to listen which in turn helped them to be better communicators. Better communication in turn helped them be inviting and open to other people who they may have not been inviting with because of barriers. In the same study by McNaughton et al. (2007), the receivers of active listening (parents) were appreciative of the active listening as well. They noticed a difference in the way the educators were responding and had positive feelings towards the change. This result also parallels what our study found. The participants' families and friends noticed a changed behavior, which ultimately helped to improve relationships.

Learning how to use interpersonal skills can improve communication followed by improvement in relationships (Weger et al., 2010). Initial interactions with others are very important in relationships. Initial interactions help to set the framework for the relationship. Individuals who are deemed as good listeners are seen to be more sociable. This makes other people more willing to talk with them. The individuals who talk with a so called "good listener" report feeling more understood than when they converse with people who are deemed "bad listeners" (Weger, Bell & Robinson, 2014) . Along with listening comes a response. A study done by Weger et al. (2014) showed that individuals who were speaking liked active listening when compared with advice giving.

Research to Support Themes: *Barriers*

Hate-crimes, prejudice and discrimination are widespread in the present day (Cox & Devine, 2014). Previous research has been done in order to support the findings of barriers being caused by different values and backgrounds. The prejudgment of how the morals of one group align to one's own morals dramatically affects a person's response to the other individual. Moral judgments affect responses more so than other types of judgements (Sawaoka, Newheiser & Dovidio, 2014). This is one explanation as to why different values were more of a barrier than different people or backgrounds. Those barriers (different people or backgrounds) have already been addressed by the majority of society, but different values have not been or they are just not changing. This is backed up by research which shows moral judgements being more intense and harder to change than other types of judgements (Sawaoka et al., 2014). People make assumptions based on stereotypes that they know and this affects the way they interact with an individual. Internal response without prejudice is based on the individual's values and morals and external response is based on societal norms (Cox & Devine, 2014).

Cox and Devine (2014) focused on individuals' internal motivation versus external motivation to respond with prejudice towards individuals. They found that if someone has high internal motivation to not respond with prejudice, they will not respond with prejudice. Alternatively, if a person has low internal motivation to respond without prejudice (meaning they are more motivated to respond with prejudice), but there is high external motivation to not respond with prejudice, they will respond without prejudice (Cox & Devine, 2014). Therefore, if the church becomes more outspoken against prejudice towards individuals with different values, then the congregation will respond without prejudice, whether or not they have internal motivation to do so. The congregation members will want to follow the social norm of the church.

Concurring with Cox and Devine (2014), Sawaoka, Newheiser and Dovidio (2014) found that people who desired their own groups to be superior to others needed more information on a gay man to deem him immoral or moral. But when the same individuals were asked about a heterosexual man they did not require extra information when they were asked to judge him as moral or immoral. This distinction between needing more information demonstrates the often judgmental nature of religious individuals. This attitude can be connected with the barriers stated by the participants. The participants stated that the major barrier to being open and inviting was different values, which was also shown by Sawaoka, Newheiser and Dovidio (2014). If someone has desire internally to not respond with prejudice they will not, and the barrier will not be formed, but even if they lack this internal motivation, they will respond with prejudice. This is not very open and inviting, but Art of Invitation is available in order to help the individuals work through their barriers. The participants were all aware of their barriers and they were all willing to work on them and understand the reasoning behind their own personal barriers.

Many ways have been found to help break down barriers within the church. Imagining one's self in the other persons position can help one to focus more on the out group and how they (the in-group) would feel if they were a part of the outgroup. This is easier and more effective than trying to understand that individual person without the empathy. Just focusing on the other's view and not on how they would feel if they were in the situation did not help reduce prejudices (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2014).

Conclusion

Art of Invitation is a program which was developed in order to help people learn how to become more open and inviting to other individuals. This study focused on six participants who attended the Art of Invitation through a church. These six individuals were contacted and

interviewed about their experiences during and after attending the Art of Invitation. After coding and analyzing the data, four main themes were found that each consisted of at least two subthemes. These themes included: Motivations to be Open (Christlikeness and Nonjudgmental), Overarching Effectiveness (Changed Interactions with Others and Good Reminder/Framework), Barriers (Different People, Different Backgrounds and Different Values), and Most Valuable Idea (Seeking to Understand and Learning to Listen). Previous research has been conducted that supports these findings. As a result of this research, Art of Invitation is shown to be an effective way to teach individuals how to be open and inviting to others. This program can be included and promoted within churches in order to assist them in being more inviting.

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