Spiral of Silence and Fear of Social Isolation in Faith-Based Campus Organizations

Amy Ives, Jessica Kennedy & Catherine Sylvester | Department of Communication and Journalism
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Martha Fay

ABSTRACT
The Spiral of Silence (SOS) Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1977) states that if two groups differ significantly in their willingness to express views publicly, the group displaying more willingness is more likely to “have the future on its side” (p. 50). In addition, the majority united in opinion expression will take a long time before asserting contrary opinions. Willingness to communicate (WTC) research shows that fear of social isolation (FSI) motivates learning public opinion on issues (Hayes, Matthes, & Eveland, 2011). Research also shows that family and friends’ opinions and perceived support of an individual’s opinion determines the likelihood of the individual expressing an opinion (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001). This study tests whether phenomena predicted by SOS are occurring in faith-based campus organizations and whether individuals who perceive their views to be different than the majority are willing to communicate their views in various interaction types. Data was collected by survey to examine: 1) initial willingness to communicate contrary opinions, 2) preferred forum for opinion discussion, and 3) the level of FSI expressed in determining WTC. Results showed that members of faith-based campus organizations generally feel comfortable expressing minority opinions to other members of the group and forum of expression is not a large determinant of expression. In addition, the more members are willing to communicate a contrary opinion, the less they fear being socially isolated.

METHODS
- Fifty-two students involved in campus faith-based organizations
- Survey administered through Qualtrics survey system and distributed through email and social media
- Cru, The Edge, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and the Navigators, Athletes in Action and Newman Parish took part
- Cronbach’s Alpha = .74
- Fear of Social Isolation Scale (M = 2.89, SD = .70)
- Survey Participants

RESULTS
RQ1: Do members of faith-based conservative campus organizations who have viewpoints that oppose the organization on social and/or spiritual issues feel comfortable expressing them to other members of the organization?
- Members felt comfortable expressing contrary opinions to other members of their organization (M = 4.04, SD = .76)
- Agreement with the organization about social and spiritual issues was positively correlated with willingness to express a contrary opinion (r = -.33, p < .05)

RQ2: Is having a contrary opinion as a member of a faith-based conservative campus organizations associated with a preference of opinion expression in a 1-on-1, a small group, or a large group setting?
- Social Issues
Expression was positively correlated with all three forums:
- one-on-one conversation (r = .36, p < .05)
- small group discussion (r = .54, p < .001)
- large group discussion (r = .40, p < .01)

- Spiritual Issues
Expression was positively correlated with all three forums:
- one-on-one conversation (r = .51, p < .001)
- small group discussion (r = .47, p < .01)
- large group discussion (r = .40, p < .01)

RQ3: Is having a contrary opinion as a member of a faith-based conservative campus organizations associated with fear of social isolation should they express that contrary opinion?
- Members had a moderate fear of being socially isolated by their fellow members (M = 2.89, SD = .70)
- There was a negative correlation between FSI and expression (r = -.52, p < .001)

DISCUSSION
Despite the fact that the results show that members are willing to express a contrary opinion to other members of their organization, much of this appears to be rooted in the fact that most members believe their opinions are in line with those of the organization. It is possible that members would be less likely to express their opinions if they perceived those opinions to be in opposition to the opinions of the organization.

In regard to the second research question, it was found that members overall show no preference for forum of opinion expression: 1-on-1 conversation, small group discussion, or large group discussion. In line with the findings for the first research question, all three forums were positively correlated with willingness to express opinion.

It would appear that the campus faith-based organizations conduct their meetings and express themselves in a manner that fosters communication and opinion expression to the extent that members feel comfortable being open and honest.