

Matching Client and Therapist Gender: Does it Really Matter

A Brief Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews literature from the past six years and makes reference to earlier literature reviews on the subject of client preference for counsellor gender. Because of a lack of consistency in methodological approaches results of research in this area have been contradictory and inconclusive. It is concluded however that the role of the therapist is only one of many variables influencing clients' preference for counsellor gender and that competence and skill of the therapist in creating a therapeutic alliance may be more important than gender match.

MATCHING CLIENT AND THERAPIST GENDER - DOES IT REALLY MATTER? A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research on the preferences of clients for sex of counsellor has been sparse and has provided mixed results (Bernstein, Hoffman & Wade, 1987). In addition much of what has been written is now some years old and the last major review of the literature was 20 years ago (Tanney & Birk, 1976). In preparing this paper a literature search once again yielded little research in the area over the past six years.

This review therefore will be necessarily brief.

The question of whether female and male clients should be assigned to counsellors of the same sex is one that has been debated for years. The issue is one that is particularly pertinent for administrators of university counselling services in attempting to provide gender balance in staffing levels. In the current climate of political correctness much emphasis is placed on gender equity issues. But should political correctness drive counselling practice? And do we really know which therapist-client matches facilitate the most client growth? My attention was drawn to this issue after presenting a paper to a conference in which I described my work with some young adult female clients with histories of suspected child abuse. After the presentation I was berated severely for having the audacity to work with such clients. In the particular agency that the person was from it was apparently common practice to refer all female clients to only female counsellors. Unfortunately many agencies do not have this luxury and this can be particularly so in university counselling services which are small or which have split-campus operations that make it difficult to provide complete gender equity of counsellors.

Bilker (1993), identified this problem as a male therapist working almost exclusively with a population of adolescent females with eating disorders. His literature search also failed to find empirically validated evidence regarding the assignment of therapist by gender for that patient population. This is also true for the general client population and the research that has been conducted has yielded few consistent findings (Tanney & Birk, 1976). Much of the research has indicated that the majority of clients are female and that the majority of these prefer female therapists (Fenton et al. 1987). However, clients preferences have often been assessed prior to therapy and frequently in non-client population studies.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe some of the older literature which has been referred to by other authors and to examine some of the more recent literature from the last six years. In this respect there was very little published research concerning general client populations and most will focus on various specific client and analogue studies.

Bilker (1993) in his review of the literature noted the complexity of variables impacting upon the process and outcome of therapy in addition to the question of gender match. There were often complex interaction effects among these variables, and he noted that “significant relationships between outcome and gender match alone have not been found consistently” (p.397).

Among the findings in various studies with regard to patient variables were: More than twice as many females sought female therapists over male therapists but that this choice was significantly influenced by education and marital status (Fenton et. al. 1987); Women disclosed more personal problems to older female therapists (Boulware & Holmes, 1970); Both males and females report receiving more empathy from, and having greater satisfaction and improvement with female therapists (Kaplan, 1985; Kirshner, 1978). However Kaplan (1985) and Kirshner (1978) also found that patients preferred more experienced therapists of either gender, and success rates did not differ between these male and female therapists.

In examining therapist variables Bilker (1993) noted that much of the research has focussed on the differences between men and women with regard to sex role stereotyping and the possession of skills associated with good therapy. Once again results are inconclusive and Tanney and Birk (1976) stated that sex bias occurs in career counselling on the part of both male and female counsellors. With regard to clinical skills there does not seem to be any empirical evidence indicating one gender to be better than the other and a more salient variable appears to be therapist experience. A review of sixteen outcome studies by Luborsky et al. (1988) concluded that there was a trend toward successful outcome correlating with therapist experience level and that more experienced therapists facilitated a positive helping alliance.

Bilker (1993) also suggested that the issue of choice itself rather than the gender of the therapist may be an important variable in the process if not the outcome of therapy. This choice applies both to patient choice of therapist and therapist choice of patient. Luborsky et al. (1988) found that patients 18 and older benefited from being able to choose their therapist. Conversely he also found that therapist-selected patients had a significantly higher correlation with outcome

than patients who had been assigned.

Taking into account all of the various findings and variables involved Bilker (1993) agreed with the conclusion of Tanney and Birk (1976) that “it is impossible to describe clearly the impact of the gender of the therapist on women clients”, and concluded that “the literature suggests that therapist competence and personal qualities that facilitate the therapeutic alliance are of greater importance than gender match” (p.409).

More recent research on this topic has focussed on specific populations (eg. sexually abused adolescent girls) and is divided between studies of actual client populations and analogue studies examining subjects’ stated preferences. These research studies will thus be addressed under the headings of client studies and analogue studies.

CLIENT STUDIES

Stamler, Christiansen, Staley and Macagno-Shang (1991) investigated adult clients' expressed preference for gender of counsellors following an intake interview. The clients were students requesting therapy at a large midwestern American university. Results indicated that female clients were more likely to express a preference for counsellor gender than men and that this preference was for a female counsellor. In addition, irrespective of the sex of the intake counsellor females still preferred a female counsellor. The authors concluded that male and female clients differed in their expression of a preference for counsellor gender and called for further investigation with more representative samples including cross-cultural settings.

Using a more specific client sample Fowler and Wagner (1993) examined the preference for sex of counsellor in sexually abused girls aged 7 - 15 years before and after a treatment program. Results indicated that, although all (100%) initially stated a preference for a female counsellor, following a six session treatment program females treated by male counsellors showed a significantly higher interval scale preference for a male counsellor than did girls who were treated by female counsellors. These authors were also particularly interested in testing the assumption that sexually abused girls would feel more at ease with female counsellors. To this end ratings of anticipated and actual comfort levels with male and female counsellors were obtained. Findings showed that the girls assigned to a male counsellor subsequently reported being as comfortable with their counsellor as did those assigned to female counsellors. Furthermore, girls treated by male counsellors anticipated being more comfortable with a male counsellor should the need arise in the future. These results were interpreted as this situation offering the opportunity for an in vivo desensitization of girls= fear of interacting with a male counsellor and highlighting the therapeutic potential of employing male counsellors with this population. Further research with this population also supported these previous findings showing no evidence of a detrimental effect for assigning male counsellors to treat sexually abused girls (Wagner, Kilcrease-Fleming, Fowler & Kazilskis, 1993). In this study there were no significant effects for sex of counsellor with respect to measures of participation in the counselling process or to post-abuse adjustment as measured by the girls' report of changes in

self-concept and depressive symptomatology.

ANALOGUE STUDIES

Various studies of non client populations have also investigated the issue of gender preference for counsellors.

Snell, Hampton and McManus (1992) asked university students to rate the degree to which they would be willing to discuss a number of aspects of their intimate relationships with a female or male counsellor. They found that in general women had a greater willingness to discuss these topics and that both women and men indicated a greater willingness to discuss information about their intimate relationships with female counsellors. Additionally this study highlighted the issue of how personality factors may mediate the type and amount of information disclosed.

De Heer, Wampold and Freund (1992) were interested in examining the degree to which subjects (undergraduate students) used the dimension of gender and effectiveness in forming their preferences for counsellors. Adult subjects were classified as either sex-typed or androgynous according to a schema developed by Bem (1984). It was found that when information regarding a counsellor's effectiveness was available both groups of subjects ignored the gender information.

To present a cross-cultural perspective Soliman (1993) also investigated whether college students preferred different helpers for different problems. Using a sample of Kuwaiti university students he found that for a majority of problems males and females chose a same-sex helper, with friends of the same sex emerging as the most preferred helper. Professional counsellors were nominated least as preferred help givers. Results of this study were interpreted as reflecting the expectations of an Arab culture and the notion that personal problems are considered a family affair. However, the potential benefit of training peers as helpers for university students was noted given the preference for same sex friends as helpers.

In another cross-cultural study Turner and Manthei (1986) found that although initially not expressing a preference for counsellor sex or race, 15-16 year old students chose a counsellor of the same race and sex as themselves when asked to select one. Females showed a stronger tendency to select a same sex counsellor than males.

However, when offered a second choice these preferences were not maintained except for Maori students. The effect of the type of problem on these preferences was minimal.

Extending the cross-cultural research a study with Israeli junior high school students indicated that girls expressed a preference for a female counsellor for personal/social and educational problems while boys preferred a male counsellor for personal/social problems and a female counsellor for educational issues (Rick, Brook & Yechieli, 1989). The authors interpreted these results as reflecting the greater access to female teachers in the education system and to the sex role development of young males leading them to feel more at ease with same sex counsellors for personal social issues.

As can be seen from this brief review of the literature the issue of whether female clients require counselling by female therapists is a complex one and one in which many other variables besides the clients preference for a certain therapist gender are operating. The bulk of the evidence tends to suggest that at the outset female clients will indicate a preference for a same sex counsellor although this may change after treatment by a male (Wagner and Fowler, 1993) or if given a second preference (Turner & Manthei, 1986). Furthermore if given information about other salient therapist variables (eg. expertise) the gender information may be ignored altogether (De Heer et al., 1992). The type of problem being presented may influence choice of therapist gender (Fuller, 1964; Rick et al., 1989) and personality characteristics of clients may influence their willingness to disclose certain information to therapists of a particular gender (Snell et al., 1992).

Because of the many interacting variables and the varying populations on which research has been conducted, results have been contradictory and inconclusive. What is still clear as it was to Tanney & Birk, (1976) twenty years ago is that sex of therapist is no longer the main independent variable in research of this type. Variables such as race, age, and expertise may be equally important and have as much an influence on determining clients' preferences for therapists as does gender.

It seems likely that the majority of clients seeking therapy especially in

university settings will continue to be female and that because of resources constraints much of the counselling will be provided by male therapists. However in light of the discussion above perhaps the issue of granting client preferences for counsellor gender need to be viewed from a different perspective. Both Bilker (1993) and De Heer et al. (1992) have concluded that having access to a skilled and competent counsellor with the ability to create a therapeutic alliance may be more important than gender match.

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