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CLIENT PREFERENCE FOR WOMEN THERAPISTS: A REFLECTION OF OUR CHANGING ENVIRONMENT¹

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Do female clients prefer female therapists to male therapists? This paper reports the findings of a series of studies which we conducted to consider whether client preference for therapist gender might be a reflection of our changing environment.

In 1978, the Division of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA) approved the *Principles Concerning the Counseling and Psychotherapy of Women* as an official policy statement for the Division. In the discussion of these principles, Fitzgerald and Nutt (1986) noted that research on client preference for therapist gender is "sparse and inconclusive." They suggested that "[o]pen discussion with the client regarding her preferences, combined with professional judgment, appears to be the most appropriate course at present" (200).

An early investigation (1964) by Fuller was one of the few studies to ask clients prior to their own therapy about their preference for therapist gender. Fuller found that both female and male clients indicated a preference for male therapists. Fourteen years later, (1978) Walker and Stake found that half of the female clients in their study stated a gender preference, and significantly more of those preferred a female therapist. Conversely, male clients tended not to express a preference for therapist gender, but of those who did, half expressed preference for a female.

In response to the absence of recent studies of actual clients, we developed a series of studies to examine client preferences for therapist gender. The studies were conducted at universities in the United States, and, therefore, the clients were all university students, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds but primarily United States citizens of European descent.

The first study included all students seen at a large midwestern university counseling center during the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 1987. The total sample included 495 students. Students were routinely asked at the end of a one-hour intake session, "Do you have a preference for a male or female therapist?". Results indicated that female clients expressed a preference significantly more often than male clients did: 196 of 345 women; 55 of 145 men. Of those women who ex-

¹ This essay was adapted from a paper read at the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, San Jose, Costa Rica, February 1992.

pressed a preference, females overwhelmingly preferred to see a female therapist: 176 to 20. The men's choice of female therapist over male therapists was 38 to 17.

The second study was conducted at the same university counseling center the following year. This study eliminated the influence of the intake therapist and instead asked students to express their preferences on cards which are routinely completed before clients are seen by a therapist at the center. The results of this study are nearly identical to those of the first study: of 659 women, 279 expressed a gender preference, and 252 of those preferred a female therapist; of 353 men, 76 expressed a gender preference, and 39 of those preferred a female therapist.

The third study involved a national survey of 190 college and university counseling center directors. The results of this survey indicated that approximately half of the centers surveyed routinely ask clients if they have a preference for therapist gender. Most directors' impressions were that male clients tend not to express a preference but that female clients do and that when they do most prefer a female therapist. Approximately two-thirds of the centers indicated that they noticed a greater demand for female therapists and more than one-third indicated that this is a staffing problem for their center.

The results of these studies indicate that women are decidedly expressing a preference for female therapists. We are now looking at why they so choose. We sent questionnaires to all women who came to the Counseling Center at Grand Valley State University last semester and expressed a preference for a female therapist, asking them to tell us why they had expressed this preference. The most common response was that they felt that women would better be able to understand their concerns. They indicated that because women experience a greater range of emotions, they are more able to be empathic and to deal with issues in greater depth. A number of these students noted that previous experiences with men or male therapists had influenced their preference. Some felt that they could relate better to women and were less defensive with them, therefore, more honest. Some saw men as less trustworthy than women or noted that they felt more comfortable and secure with women. A few women indicated that they were afraid of male therapists and of how they might be treated.

Although ours is only preliminary data, it does begin to provide some information to help us gain a better understanding of why female clients are requesting female therapists. This information is interesting not only in our gaining a better understanding of these requests but also in suggesting a trend which reflects the broader issue of how many women currently view men in this culture—perhaps as less understanding, less empathic and less trustworthy than women.

Is this increasing preference for female therapists reflective of the changing environment for women in the United States? Kaplan (1984) noted that until recently, both men and women preferred male therapists, and that this preference appeared to be based on the belief that male therapists were more competent. Kaplan suggested that "[W]omen may be broadening their definition of competence to include empathy and are therefore recognizing the value of women therapists" (10).

The data from these studies support Kaplan's hypothesis and provide a basis for beginning to develop a greater understanding of how women, as well as men, in the United States may be broadening their definitions of competency for therapists and of the effect of this changing definition on the profession.

We are very interested in finding out how female and male therapists are viewed by other populations of women. For example, how do non-university women and men view female therapists? How are female therapists viewed by women and men of color or by other cultures? Are male and female clients expressing a greater preference for women therapists in other countries? Answers to these questions could help us gain a better understanding of how male and female therapists are being perceived in our changing environment.

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