Female or Male Psychotherapists for Women: New Formulations

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About the Speaker

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Abstract

New understandings of women’s psychological development shed light on the relationship between conditions that enhance women’s growth in psychotherapy and the sex of the therapist. Psychotherapy research suggests that the source of therapeutic gain is the client-therapist relationship, and that women tend to be more effective therapists than men, especially with women. Women’s core relational self structure attunes them to affective connections and to the primacy of mutually enhancing, reciprocal relatedness -- two crucial elements in a positive therapeutic relationship. Unfortunately, standard psychotherapy training does not focus sufficiently either on the process of building affective connectedness between client and therapist or on knowledge about women, both of which would enhance work with women clients. Consequently, men -- who share neither women’s core relational self structure nor their personal experiences get little professional guidance in developing the qualities that are most essential to optimal work with women clients.

Should women see only women therapists? This question is provocative: An affirmative answer threatens the livelihood of many practitioners; a negative answer intimates that the sex of a therapist is irrelevant to therapy. The question stirs personal and economic fears that lurk behind the more academic issue of "gender influences in the process of psychotherapy," for it potentially implies that the majority of practitioners (men) may be unqualified to treat the majority of patients (women).

To advance discussion of this issue, this paper will emphasize several points: First, the focus will be the actions of the therapist, not the decisionmaking process of the patient. No one theory can predict to the individual situation; the final selection is an agreement between two specific individuals, not between an abstract "woman" and an abstract Uman. Second, given the focus on the therapist, the question becomes not whether women or men offer the best therapy for women, but rather) "What
therapeutic conditions are most likely to facilitate women’s emotional growth, and how best can those conditions be established in therapy?” This loaded question in turn contains two sub-questions: (1) Are there specific conditions that especially facilitate women’s emotional growth? (2) If such conditions exist, how are they affected by therapist gender? To address these questions, I will integrate ideas from psychotherapy research and psychoanalysis with others from the study of women’s psychology and development.

**Gender effects in therapy**

Answers to the question of whether sex of therapist has an effect on clinical work can be examined within two related but distinct bodies of literature -- psychotherapy research and psychoanalysis.

**Psychotherapy research**

In psychotherapy research, there has been a fair amount of attention in recent years to the effect of patient* and therapist gender.’ The overall conclusion commonly drawn from studies of psychotherapy process is that there is yet no clear, replicable evidence of a strong and specific gender effect.2 3 Typically, this is explained by noting that sex of patient and/or therapist is but one of many factors which influence the process of therapy. Consequently, it is argued, research methods must improve to incorporate multiple factors; the answer, then, is to be found in increasingly complex multivariate analyses. But the reduction of therapy to its component variables, however carefully operationalized and analyzed, cannot capture the subtle realm of inner and interpersonal experience in which gender probably has its most profound influence. The absence of replicable gender effects in therapy, in other words, may be more a function of method than of a real absence of potentially discernible effects. More intense, thematic attention to interactional elements in the therapeutic process might be a more fruitful albeit more difficult -- way to discern gender effects in therapy.

**Psychoanalysis**

The second major body of literature which bears on the question of gender effects in therapy is that of psychoanalysis. Although Freud4 suggested that sex of therapist may influence the psychoanalytic relationship, psychoanalysts rarely have explored the full implications of this possibility. This neglect follows from the general character of psychoanalysis as an interpretive discipline. Thus, bringing infantile conflicts to awareness took precedence over analysis of the emotional interplay in the therapy hour. This pattern has been changing in the last few decades, however. Recent writings by Langs,5 Gill,6 and Stone7 highlight the critical importance for psychoanalysis of what can succinctly be called the “here and now.” Analysis, as Stone observes, is in part an “actual adult relationship between patient and analyst...” In that relationship the therapist, as experienced by the patient, plays a distinct role in influencing the transference that evolves.