Aggression Replacement Training for At-Risk Youth: Will Gender Matching Help?

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Introduction

Therapist characteristics such as age, gender, and psychological language affect the way he or she is perceived by clients with gender being the most influential of these traits (Pierce, 1995). The question might then be asked, "Does a therapist’s gender (matched or not matched with that of the client) have an impact on the therapeutic relationship and eventual outcome of the therapeutic process?"

In his classic study, Festinger (1954) found that people are more likely to identify with individuals who are similar to themselves. This being the case, it is not surprising that clients prefer having therapists who’s gender matches their own (Fowler, Wagner, Lachini, & Johnson, 1992; Jones, Kupinski, & Kerpig, 1997). But meeting client preferences doesn’t automatically lead to better treatment outcomes.

In fact, the effect of gender matching on client outcomes is mixed. Based on a relatively small sample, Luborsky, Auerbach, Chandler, Cohen, and Backrach (1971) found that gender matching between therapists and adult clients resulted in better treatment outcomes. At the same time, others found that gender matching did not improve treatment outcomes (Cottone, Drucker, & Javier, 2002; Nelson, 1993; Sterling, Goff, Weinstein, & Serota, 2001; Zlotnick, Elkin, & Shea, 1998) or decrease treatment dropout rates (Cottone, Drucker, & Javier, 2002; Sterling, Goff, Weinstein, & Serota, 2001).

It is also unclear how gender matching might impact the treatment outcomes of adolescents navigating identity development (Erikson, 1980)—especially adolescents ordered to enter treatment by the courts. Although all court ordered adolescent clients experience some stressors in common, boys and girls face different gender role expectations, developmental processes, social circles, and other experiences affected by gender. Gender matching might lead to faster bonding with the therapists and make it easier for adolescents to discuss personal issues with their therapists.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate if gender matching in an Aggression Replacement Training (ART) program would lead to better outcomes for adolescent girls who were gender matched with their therapists over boys who were not gender matched with their therapists.

Method

Participants

Participants were 6 boys and 7 girls, ages 14-17, mandated by Napa County Juvenile Probation to participate in Aldeas’ 20 week ART Program.

Apparatus

The ART program consisted of 20 weekly sessions, each session being 45 minutes long. The intervention included: skills streamlining training (5 weeks), anger control training (10 weeks), and moral reasoning training (5 weeks). The participants were grouped according to gender and lead by one female therapist per group. The first intervention was the skills streamlining training. Participants completed a pre Skill Streamlining Questionnaire (50 multiple choice questions) that measured their self perception of social abilities. After completing the questionnaire the adolescents participated in role playing and group discussions to help prevent antisocial behaviors and thinking that could lead to aggression. They were also assigned homework to practice the skills and thinking patterns in their home environment.

The second intervention was the anger control training. Participants first completed a pre-Aggression Questionnaire (34 multiple choice questions) that measured the participant’s aggressive responses and their ability to express these responses in a safe and constructive manner. The participants shared anger arousing experiences that had happened recently and were trained on how they should respond when similar problems arise. Participants then completed a post Aggression Questionnaire.

The final intervention was the moral reasoning training. Participants completed a pre-A How I Think Questionnaire (54 multiple choice questions) that measured thinking on self centeredness, blaming others, mislabeling situations, and assuming the worst. Participants were then trained how to think from the perspectives of others when they confront morally problematic situations. Participants then completed a post How I Think Questionnaire.

Results

We used six paired samples t-tests to evaluate the relationship between participant/therapist gender matching (girls matched and boy not matched) and change resulting from the three ART interventions (skills streamlining, anger control training, and moral reasoning training). We predicted that girls would have better outcomes in all three interventions because they were gender matched with their therapist. Gender matched girls had outcomes equal to those of non-gender matched boys on all three intervention outcomes. In addition, unfortunately, none of the three interventions resulted in improved outcomes for participants.

Discussion

The present study was designed to assess the effectiveness of ALDEA’s ART program and the impact gender matching had on participant outcomes. We predicted that girls would have better outcomes in all three interventions because they were gender matched with their therapist. Gender matched girls had outcomes equal to those of non-gender matched boys on all three intervention outcomes. In addition, unfortunately, none of the three interventions resulted in improved outcomes for participants.

It is clear that the ART program is not producing the desired changes in participants’ ability to manage anger. One explanation for this negative result is that both groups experienced high absentee/dropout rates, which ironically, were caused by what got participants mandated into the program in the first place (i.e. being incarcerated). These absentee/dropout rates are a major limitation in the effectiveness of the program because they prevent many of the adolescents from benefiting from the complete intervention.

It is recommended that ALDEA finds ways to continue the intervention with adolescents who re-offend. Perhaps use of Skype, videoconferencing, or mandatory scheduled juvenile hall visits could be incorporated to keep participants active in the program. After attendance and completion rates improve, the program can be re-assessed.

Abstract

We evaluated the effect of gender matching therapists and participants on participant outcomes in the Aggression Replacement Training (ART) program. Participants were court-mandated adolescent boys and girls who had committed criminal offenses. Neither the boys nor girls showed improvement in their ability to manage anger following completion of the ART program.