

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

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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.

Introduction

Therapist characteristics such as attire, 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, Iachini, & Johnson, 1992; Jones, Krupnick, & Kerig, 1987). 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 Bachrach (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, Gottheil, Weinstein, & Serota, 2001; Zlotnick, Elkin, & Shea, 1998) or decrease treatment dropout rates (Cottone, Drucker, & Javier, 2002; Sterling, Gottheil, Weinstein, & Serota, 2001).

It is also unclear how gender matching might impact the treatment outcomes of adolescents navigating identity development (Erikson, 1968)—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 Aldea’s 20 week ART Program.

Apparatus

Three pre-post measurement instruments were used for the study. These included the Skills Streaming Questionnaire, the Aggression Questionnaire, and the How I Think Questionnaire.

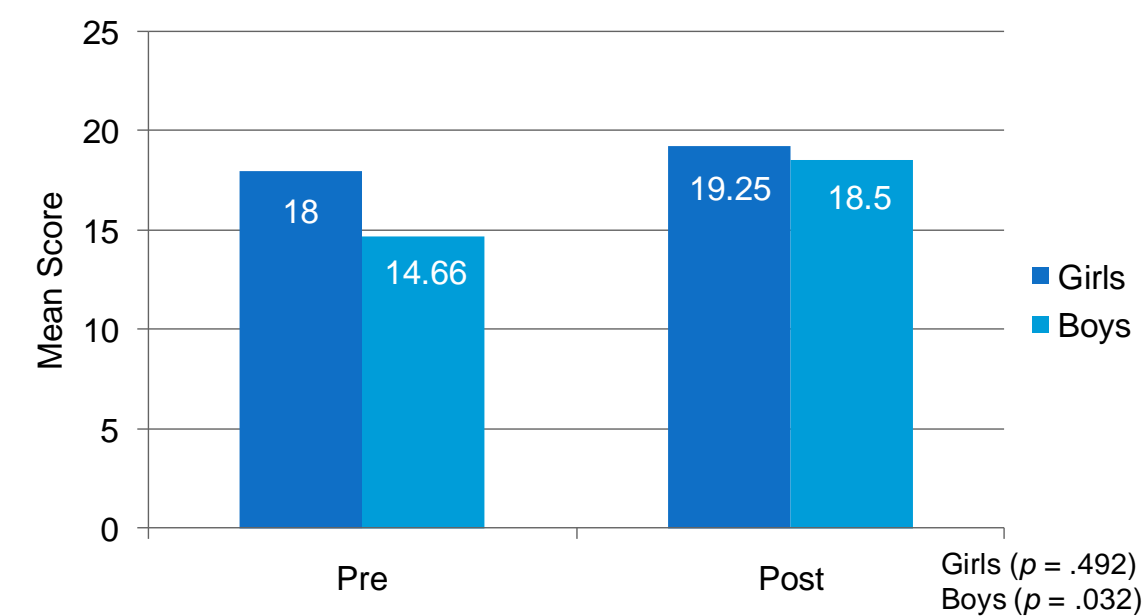
Procedure

The ART program consisted of 20 weekly sessions, each session being 45 minutes long. The intervention included skills streaming 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 streaming training. Participants completed a pre-Skill Streaming Questionnaire (50 multiple choice questions) that measured their self perception of social abilities. After completing the questioner 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.

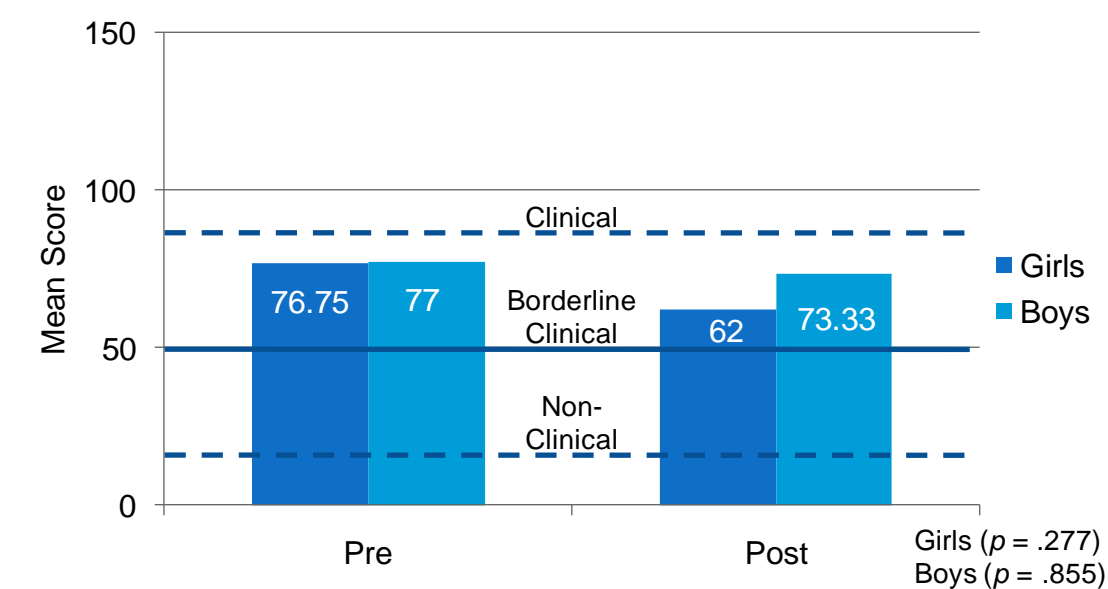
The second intervention was the anger control training. Participants first completed a pre-Aggression Questionnaire (34 multiple choice questions) that measured the participant’s aggressive responses and their ability to express these responses in a safe and constructive manner. The participants shared 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-How I Think Questionnaire (54 multiple choice questions) that measured thinking on self centeredness, blaming others, mislabeling

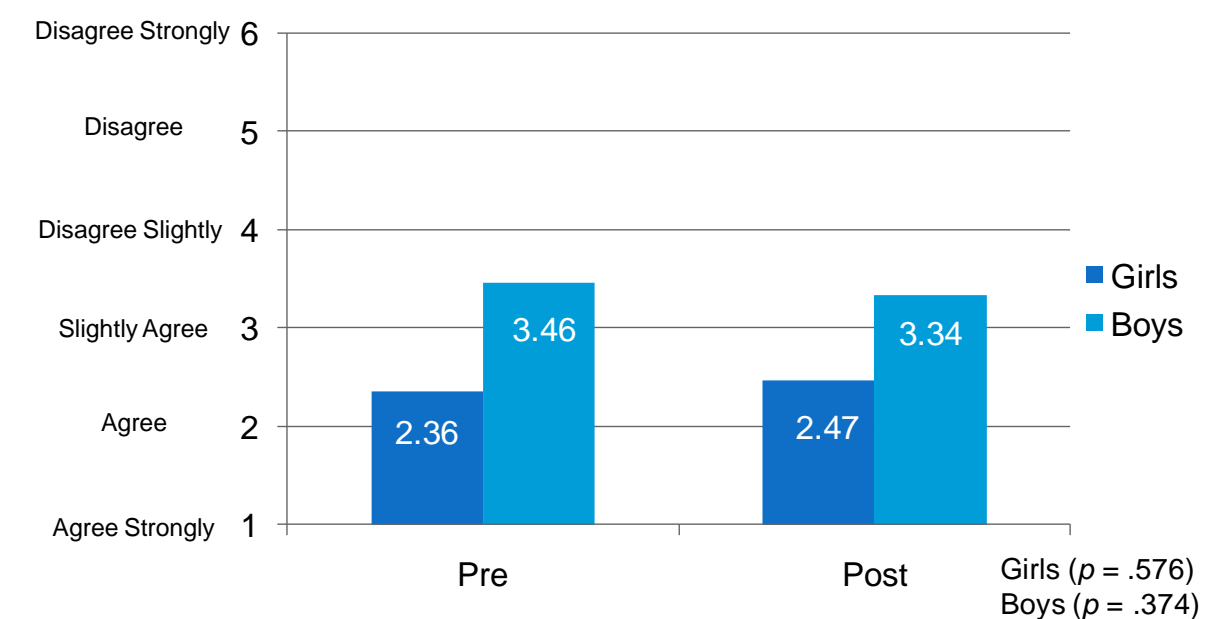
Skill Streaming



Anger Control



Moral Reasoning



situations, and assuming the worst. Participants were then trained how to think from the perspective of others when they confront morally problematic situations. Participants then completed a post-How I Think Questionnaire. If participants missed more than 2 sessions in an intervention they did not pass that section and would need to repeat it later.

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 streaming, anger control training, and moral reasoning training), controlling for Type I error across tests using the Holm’s sequential Bonferroni approach. The results indicated that mean post-test scores were unchanged from pre-test scores (see charts).

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 benefitting from the complete intervention.

It is recommended that ALDEA find 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.