

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Ann M. Curl for the degree of Master of Science

in Psychology presented on July 8, 1996

Title: Perceptions of Therapist Competence as a Function of Therapist Age

Abstract approved: Cooper B. Holmes

A study was conducted to examine the effect of therapist age on ratings of a therapist's competence by undergraduate students. The participants were 77 female and 54 male college students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a midwestern university. Two groups of participants each viewed a brief videotape of a female therapist and a client in a counseling session. The video and procedure for each group were identical except for the description of the therapist's age: 45 years old and 29 years old. After viewing the videotape, students rated the therapist on 11, 7-point Likert-type scales designed to reflect the therapist's competence and credibility. A separate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on each of the 11 items measured by the rating scale. The results were broken down by gender of the participants. The results of the ANOVA for Item 11 (Likelihood of Subject to Consult the Therapist Personally) did produce a statistically significant difference for the main effect of gender with women being more likely to consult the therapist personally. No effect was found for the age of therapist for the remaining 10 items.

**PERCEPTIONS OF THERAPIST COMPETENCE**

**AS A FUNCTION OF THERAPIST AGE**

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**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**the Division of Psychology and Special Education**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Science**

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**by**

**Ann M. Curl**

**August, 1996**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Therapy has been conceptualized as an interpersonal influence process (Goldstein, 1979; Strong, 1978) in which critical attributes of the therapist enhance the positive impact of interactions with the client. Within the therapeutic setting, irrespective of any particular technique or orientation, there exist factors that can influence the efficacy of the therapeutic process. These therapeugenic factors were first identified by Bloom, Weigel, and Trautt (1977) and are thought to differ from placebo factors in that they are not inert or incidental in the treatment of psychological maladjustment. Bloom and his colleagues assert these factors have secondary, perhaps primary therapeutic effects by either increasing or decreasing the likelihood therapy will be effective.

#### Review of Literature

The effects of therapeugenic factors on client perceptions of therapists have been given much attention in the research over the past 20 years. Research carried out by Bloom, Weigel, and Trautt (1977) identified four major categories of therapeugenic factors that exist in: the client, the therapist, the client-therapist relationship, and the physical environment. Investigators have attempted to demonstrate the importance of such variables as therapists presented as experts (e.g., Spiegel, 1976; Strong & Schmidt, 1970a), trustworthiness (e.g., Strong & Schmidt, 1970b), pre-session therapist information

(e.g., Greenberg, 1969), gender (e.g., Lee, Hallberg, Jones & Haase, 1980), race (e.g., Watkins, Terrell & Miller, 1989), marital status (e.g., Simons & Helms, 1976), therapist tone of voice (e.g., Blanck, Rosenthal, Vannicelli & Less, 1986), office variables (e.g., Amira & Abromowitz, 1979; Heppner & Pew, 1977), therapist attire (e.g., Amira & Abromowitz, 1979; Thibodeau, 1988), and therapist title (e.g., Holmes & Kixmiller, 1989; Holmes & Post, 1986; Reed & Holmes, 1989). These studies and others have demonstrated certain therapeutogenic factors do have a direct impact on the perceptions of the client with regard to therapist attributes.

There is disagreement over how strongly therapeutogenic factors effect the counseling situation. Some investigators maintain factors such as therapist reputation and client's initial impression may not affect the client's choice of a therapist as some results have claimed. Johnson and Matross (1977) argue "subsequent progress is likely to depend more on the quality of the therapeutic interaction than on aspects of the therapist's reputation" (p. 401).

Previous researchers have addressed therapist gender as a factor in the determination of client preference for therapists. Hill (1975) compared same-gender and opposite-gender therapist-client pairs and found same-gender pairs were associated with greater degrees of empathy than opposite-gender. He suggested when female therapists are preferred, it may reflect an expectation for empathy and understanding. Carter (1978)



found female therapists received higher ratings than males on variables such as friendliness, trustworthiness, and competence, whereas Feldstein (1982) found male therapists were rated higher on expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

Scher (1975), however, found no significant contribution of therapist or client gender to the prediction of outcome. Similarly, Hoffman-Graff (1977) found interviewer-subject gender pairing had no significant effect upon the perceived therapist characteristics or client behavior. In a study by Orlinsky and Howard (1976) individuals completed a questionnaire assessing their reactions to various dimensions of patient experiences after therapy sessions. The results were interpreted as suggesting that therapist attributes may be less important than what a male or female therapist means to a patient, as young single females were most intensely reactive to male therapists. Tanney and Birk (1976) and Toomer (1978) reviewed the research on gender matching (client to therapist) and concluded that although gender similarity obviously plays an important role in psychotherapy, gender matching alone does not adequately predict a successful therapy experience.

Research concerning the salience of therapist age as a factor in client preference also has been somewhat contradictory. Clayton and Jellison (1975) and Furchtgott and Busmeyer (1981) found almost without exception individuals prefer older over younger therapists. Similarly, Donnan and Mitchell (1979) found age of therapist, age of client,

and the level of communication (information gathering versus facilitating) jointly affected older male and female clients' preferences for a therapist. Robiner (1987) investigated the effects of client age and therapist age on transference-like projection onto therapists in a younger and older age condition. This study concluded clients view therapists of similar age as peers. Further, the results of this study suggested that regardless of client age, older therapists are more likely than younger therapists to be viewed in parental roles. However, in a study which measured client satisfaction with the therapist and the therapy relationship, Robiner and Storandt (1983) did not find that client age and therapist age was a joint influence. Their research seemed to reject age in favor of individual differences in therapeutic skills as a basis for therapist preferences among clients. They found that specific therapists, irrespective of age, who were more facilitating were perceived more favorably. The variety of research strategies employed in the studies makes it difficult to integrate results of investigations assessing the impact of therapist age on a client's first impressions.

Other researchers conducted studies combining two or more therapeutogenic factors involved in client perceptions of therapists. Boulware and Holmes (1970) found male and female college students preferred older male therapists for obtaining help with vocational concerns and older female therapists for obtaining help with personal concerns. Simon (1973) asked college women to rank equally recommended 25, 40, or 55-year-old male

and female therapists for consultation regarding a personal problem. For two groups of female students, the 40-year-old female help giver was the first choice. In a study by Simons and Helms (1976) women students (ranging from 18 to 21 years old) and non student ( $M = 35.8$  years) women evaluated photographs and descriptions of male and female therapists represented in four different age groups. They found women students preferred female over male therapists in 35 to 45 and the 55 to 65 age ranges. Non-university women also preferred female over male therapists but generally rated the oldest therapists' age group more positively.

Researchers examining therapeugenic factors have varied their instrumentation in subtle but important ways. Investigations relying on photographs or written descriptions or both to manipulate counselor age (Boulware & Holmes, 1970; Helms & Rode, 1982; Helms & Simon, 1977) have suggested that in the case of female service providers, young-adult, female clients avoid very young therapists. This observation generates questions regarding a researcher's choice of media for presentation of the counseling analogue and leaves open the opportunity to experiment with alternate presentations, such as video.

The inconsistent results obtained in previous research regarding the therapeugenic factors of age and gender suggest the need for additional inquiry. Researchers have attempted to demonstrate the importance of various therapeugenic factors exist in the

therapist, the client-therapist relationship, and the physical environment. There is disagreement over how therapeutic factors effect the counseling situation. Some experimenters assert the quality of the therapeutic interaction is a much better predictor of positive client perception than a particular therapeutic factor's presence or absence.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHOD

#### Subjects

The sample in this study was 54 male and 77 female undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a midwestern university. The mean age of the participants was 20.37 years old ( $SD = 4.79$ ). Most of the participants were in their freshmen year ( $n = 78$ ). Also participating were sophomores ( $n = 27$ ), juniors ( $n = 14$ ), and seniors ( $n = 12$ ). To further enhance generalizability of any results obtained, the experimenter utilized only data gathered from undergraduate students. The experimenter did not request information on the students' ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

#### Instruments

A videotaped therapy session of approximately eight minutes was produced by the experimenter. Two case managers employed by a mental health center acted as the therapist and client (both seated, the therapist shown only from behind) where they improvised an unscripted session in which the client discussed an actual problem.

The Therapist Rating Scale developed by Holmes and Post (1986) was employed. This questionnaire was designed to reflect a person's view of a given therapist. Included are 11 Likert-type scales which enable the participant to rate the therapist along a 7-point scale. The 8 therapist qualities measured by the instrument were: Formality, Ability to

help, Willingness to help, Trustworthiness, Warmth, Genuineness, Understanding, and Concern. The other three items ask the subjects how comfortable they would feel with the therapist, how willing they would be to follow the therapist's advice, and how likely they would be to consult the therapist personally (see Appendix A). Students indicated their age, gender, and classification.

### Procedure

Undergraduate students indicated their willingness to be contacted by the experimenter by signing up at the office for the Division of Psychology and Special Education. The experimenter contacted the students listed on the sign-up sheet to confirm their participation in this study, and notified them of the time and location of the experiment. Two groups of participants viewed the videotape separately, and the procedure for each group was identical with the following exception. The instructions (both verbal and written) given before playing the videotape and administering the Therapist Rating Scale described two age conditions: 45 year old female therapist and 29 year old female therapist. The experimenter distributed the instructions which were identical to those the experimenter read aloud. The following instructions were given:

Please read along as I speak. Today, with your consent, you will participate in a study looking at client-therapist interactions. First I will ask you to view a brief, videotaped therapy session. The video session will show a 29/45 year old therapist

counseling a female undergraduate student. After viewing the videotape, please complete the accompanying questionnaire. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Then the experimenter distributed the Informed Consent forms for the students to complete. The forms were collected, and the assigned videotape was played on a color television at the front of the classroom. The television was turned off after the group viewed the videotape and the experimenter then distributed the questionnaires.

Instructions for the completion of the questionnaire were given as follows: "Please fill out this questionnaire completely, including your age, gender, and classification. Please do not complete a questionnaire unless you have read and signed the Informed Consent Form" (See Appendix B). When the students were finished, the experimenter collected all questionnaires. Finally, the experimenter distributed the Debriefing Sheet (See Appendix C) to all students to explain the true purpose of the experiment in full.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

This study examined the effect of the therapeugenic factors of age of therapist and gender of participant on perceived therapist qualities. The independent variables in this study were age of therapist (29 years old or 45 years old) and the gender of the participant. The dependent measure was the rating given by the participants on each of the 11 items on the Therapist Rating Scale (Holmes & Post, 1986). This design was chosen to allow the researcher to assess any gender differences which exist in the ratings of therapist efficacy as assessed by undergraduates.

The scores were compiled by group and analyzed by a two-way factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) computer program for unequal group sizes. Each of the 11 characteristics measured in the Therapist Rating Scale were analyzed in this fashion. The mean ratings and standard deviations for each item by gender of participant are shown in Table 1.

The results of the 11, two-way ANOVAs are described below. On Item 1 (Formality), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.15, p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.94, p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .94, p > .05$ .

On Item 2 (Ability to Help), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1,$



Table 1

Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for Men and Women on Each Item of the Therapist Rating Scale

Item	Men		Women	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
1. Formality	4.13	1.40	3.92	1.26
2. Ability to Help	4.54	1.24	4.65	1.20
3. Willing to Help	5.22	1.18	5.55	1.20
4. Trust	5.39	1.16	5.39	1.22
5. Warmth	4.78	1.31	5.06	1.37
6. Genuineness	4.94	1.29	5.14	1.34
7. Understanding	5.09	1.23	5.40	1.14
8. Concern	5.07	1.21	5.38	1.17
9. Comfort	4.31	1.78	4.69	1.57
10. Follow Advice	4.44	1.50	4.74	1.36
11. Consult Therapist	3.94	1.82	4.61	1.63

130) = .21,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .17$ ,  $p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .001$ ,  $p > .05$ .

On Item 3 (Willingness to Help), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 2.10$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .21$ ,  $p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.19$ ,  $p > .05$ .

On Item 4 (Trust), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .002$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .08$ ,  $p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.14$ ,  $p > .05$ .

On Item 5 (Warmth), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .99$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 2.30$ ,  $p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 2.99$ ,  $p > .05$ .

On Item 6 (Genuineness), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .53$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .62$ ,  $p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.25$ ,  $p > .05$ .

On Item 7 (Understanding), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.82$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .72$ ,  $p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .61$ ,  $p > .05$ .

On Item 8 (Concern), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.87$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .11$ ,  $p > .05$ .

.05. The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .27, p > .05$ .

On Item 9 (Comfort), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.25, p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.02, p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.98, p > .05$ .

On Item 10 (Willingness of Subject to Follow Therapist's Advice), the main effect for gender was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 1.14, p > .05$ . The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .57, p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = 3.33, p > .05$ .

On Item 11 (Likelihood of Subject to Consult Therapist), the main effect for gender was significant,  $F(1, 130) = 4.27, p < .05$ . The women ( $M = 4.61, SD = 1.63$ ) were more likely to consult the therapist personally than the men ( $M = 3.94, SD = 1.82$ ). The main effect of therapist age was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .50, p > .05$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .28, p > .05$ . In summary, the only significant effect demonstrated was on Item 11 (Likelihood of Subject to Consult Therapist) for the main effect of gender.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest the therapeugenic factor of therapist age did not significantly influence college age subjects' perceptions of therapist qualities. These results support Robiner and Storandt's (1983) findings that individual differences in the therapeutic skills of a counselor may create more of an impact on client perceptions than counselor age.

In the present study it was hypothesized males and females may have different age preferences for a therapist. Although the results of the ANOVA for Item 11 (Likelihood of the Subject to Consult the Therapist Personally) were significant, the actual difference between the means was small. Women's mean ratings on this item were higher than those of the men. Eta squared was calculated to explore the magnitude of the difference detected in Item 11, but only 4% of the variance was accounted for by the independent variable.

The lack of a significant difference between students' ratings prompts several speculations by the author. One might suggest that the instrumentation (video augmented by written and verbal instructions) chosen to present information about the therapist may not have provided adequate age cues to the participants. Or perhaps some quality related to therapist age may be influential, but not sufficiently measured by the Therapist Rating

Scale. Finally, the ages chosen by the experimenter (29 years of age and 45 years of age) may not have been deemed conspicuously "Old" or "Young" enough to elicit a significantly different perception. Future research may provide further information about therapeugenic factors by varying instrumentation to better capture the quality of age in a therapist.

In summary, therapist age and gender of participant were not significant factors in therapist ratings given by undergraduate students. These results suggest that the age of a therapist is not a determinative factor in creating a successful match between therapist and client. While this study does lend support to the individual differences perspective, further investigation is required.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

Classification: FR SO JR SR Sex: M F Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Therapist Rating Scale

Please respond to the following questions by circling the appropriate response.

1. How formal do you see the therapist?

Very Informal							Very Formal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

2. How would you rate the therapist's ability to help someone?

Not At All Capable							Very Capable
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

3. How would you rate the therapist's willingness to help someone?

Very Unwilling							Very Willing
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

4. How well could you trust the therapist to keep your discussions with her confidential?

Completely Untrustworthy							Completely Trustworthy
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

5. How would you rate the therapist's personal warmth?

Very Cold							Very Warm
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

6. How would you rate the therapist's genuineness or sincerity?

Not At All Genuine							Very Genuine
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

7. How would you rate the therapist's understanding of people and their problems?

Not At All						Very
Understanding						Understanding
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

8. How much concern for people do you feel the therapist has?

Not At All						Very
Concerned						Concerned
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

9. How comfortable would you feel with this therapist?

Very						Very
Uncomfortable						Comfortable
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

10. How willing would you be to follow the therapist's advice?

Very						Very
Unwilling						Willing
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

11. How likely would you be to consult this therapist if you felt a need to?

Very						Very
Unlikely						Likely
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

## **APPENDIX B**



## Informed Consent Form

I, Ann M. Curl, am conducting an experiment which looks at client-therapist interactions. Participants in this study will view a 5 minute videotape depicting a counselor and a client discussing a therapy issue. Participants will then complete a brief questionnaire which consists of questions regarding the videotape. There will be no risks involved at any time. Participants may drop out of the experiment at any time. All information will be maintained with strict confidentiality, and the participant's name will not be attached to a score.

-----

I, \_\_\_\_\_, confirm that I have read and understand the above statement and have had all of my questions answered.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### Debriefing Sheet

The true purpose of this study was to assess the effect that a therapist's age has on a client's view of the therapist. You viewed a videotape in which the therapist was 29/45 years of age. You completed a questionnaire which addressed several of the therapist's characteristics. You were chosen to participate in this study because undergraduate students are thought to be representative of a more general population of potential clients.

Please do not discuss the nature of this study with anyone until Friday, March 1, 1996. There will be another group of students participating in this study and prior knowledge of the true nature of the study will bias their opinions. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding the study, or if you are interested in the results.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Ann M. Curl

(913) 438-4676

I, Ann M. Curl, hereby submit this thesis/report to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available for use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author.

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