

"I hate generalising, but...". Coaches' views on differences in treatment style for male and female clients.

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Abstract

Men are generally more reluctant than women to seek psychological help, perhaps because of negative preconceptions about therapy. We interviewed 20 life coaches to find out whether they had seen gender differences in expectations and outcomes regarding coaching in their male and female clients. Analysis of the interviews, using the *grounded theory* method, revealed that although almost all coaches described gender differences in help seeking and treatment preferences in their clients, most coaches demonstrated ambivalence about describing such gender differences. Findings are discussed both in terms of *cognitive dissonance* theory, and in terms of the *beta bias* hindering the recognition of gender differences. These findings have implications for how coaches (and psychotherapists, psychologists etc) can improve the delivery of their therapy.

Keywords: gender; coaching; generalisation; cognitive dissonance; beta bias.

Although men are at three times higher risk of committing suicide than women (Office of National Statistics, 2012), men tend to seek help for physical and emotional problems less than women do (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Although there are exceptions (e.g. Farrimond 2011), this gender difference in help-seeking might be related to men's preferred ways of coping with problems, with men generally being less likely than women to want to discuss problems with a therapist or seek emotional support (Tamres et al, 2002). This begs the question of whether, in general, men prefer different psychological treatments to women, but this question is relatively unexplored, and most studies don't even report the outcome of treatment by gender.

A review by Parker et al (2011) found a statistically significant gender difference in outcome in a third of studies of various types of psychotherapy for depression. The reasons for these differences remain to be explored, but other peer-reviewed studies demonstrate specific situations where men and women need different approaches to therapy. For example, faced with fertility problems, women often experience more infertility-related stress than men, and tend to seek emotional support from family and counselling whereas men tend to use problem-focused strategies (Peterson et al, 2012).

In support of the hypothesis of gender differences in treatment preferences, of the range of therapies assessed by the *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies* programme (IAPT) in the UK, men are least likely to attend counseling (30% of clients) and most likely to attend employment support (46% of clients) (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2014) the latter of which is relatively unchallenging emotionally. It is possible that men might be more amenable to coaching than to traditional psychotherapies because coaching is not generally considered an emotion-focused therapy on a par with counselling or psychotherapy. As such, coaching might be less a problem in terms of help-seeking,

especially for men with higher conformity to masculine norms (McKelley and Rochlen, 2010).

Coaching differs from therapy in several ways, including that coaching conversations are largely focused on future achievements, typically with only light delving into the past. The focus is less on emotional distress and healing and more on personal/professional development, with growth and progress being rapid and enjoyable rather than slow and painful (Williams, 2003). Positive dynamics and reduced stigma may be aspects that make coaching a more appealing option than therapy for men. Coaching provides space for problem solving and thinking through potential solutions, and although it may involve some exploration of feelings, there is typically less focus on feelings than one might expect in a therapeutic intervention. Research using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a personality assessment tool used by many coaches, has shown that men and women have different preferences for *thinking* and *feeling*, particularly as approaches to making decisions (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), lending support to the notion that coaching may be a more preferable intervention than therapy for men.

The present study aimed to find out the degree to which coaches believe that men and women differ in how inclined they are to seek coaching, and whether they have preferences for different approaches in coaching.

Method

Participants and Sampling

This qualitative study involved interviews with 20 coaches, five men and 15 women, most of whom were based in the UK. Interviews lasted roughly 20 minutes on average, and

were conducted by phone or Skype between Oct 2013 and Feb 2014. Skype allowed a number of coaches living abroad to be interviewed (two from Western Europe, two from the United States, and one from South America). Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The participants were includable if they had qualifications and experience as a practicing coach. Participants were recruited from a sample frame based on VE-D's network of coaches. VE-D emailed these coaches with an invitation to be interviewed by SR. Because of the importance of subtleties of language and meaning in qualitative research, participants needed to have fluent spoken English ability.

Coaches were contacted by Dr VE-D with an invitation to the study. They were informed about the topic in question, that their semi-structured interview would last between 20 to 60 minutes, and that their interview would be recorded for transcription and analysis. Interested coaches contacted the interviewer, SR, who sent the information sheet, and arranged the time of the interviews, which were recorded and conducted either by phone or Skype.

The Research Team

As the lead author, I will use the first person to describe my background. I am a psychodynamic psychotherapist and integrative counselor with experience of working in emotional support services. I am currently undertaking a Psychology PhD investigating therapeutic approaches to men's psychological health. Becoming aware of differences in the way male and female service-users typically engage (for example that men typically took longer to emotionally disclose) spurred my interest in the impact that gender has on

treatment. The other team members have engaged in various types of ‘talking therapies’. JB was a clinical hypnotherapist in private practice for ten years. MS is a consultant clinical psychologist, recently retired from the National Health Service (NHS). Both JB and MS are interested in the question of whether men might seek therapy more readily, and have better outcomes from therapy if the therapies available to them were more male-focused. VE-D is a coaching psychology practitioner, lecturer and researcher. She has a particular interest in the use of cognitive behavioural approaches in coaching for improved performance and wellbeing in the workplace.

I conducted the interviews, did the transcription and did most of the coding and categorization. JB guided the coding and categorization process, having taught grounded theory analysis to undergraduate psychology students for several years. MS helped with the original conceptualisation of the project and the interpretation of the results. VE-D supported the recruitment of participants, provided background information on coaching, and contributed to the meaning making of the interview data. All authors contributed to the writing of the paper.

Grounded Theory Methodology

This study used semi-structured interviews, analysed using grounded theory (GT). GT is a sociological method designed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) to minimize subjectivity in interpretation of the interview material, thus avoiding preconceptions that might be imposed by the researcher. Despite some inevitably subjective aspects of the GT process, the aim of this method is to give the clearest possible voice to those being interviewed. This is achieved, in part, through the ability of the researchers to limit the contribution of their subjectivity to the interpretation of the transcripts. Thus researchers strive to be aware of their own subjective processes during the study, especially during data analysis. To aid this self-

awareness, SR kept notes ('memos') of his mental processes during key phases of the study (interviews and data analysis) in order to be able to reflect upon his reactions to the transcripts, and his decision making in the development of the codes and categories, thus minimising the effect of any expectations or biases brought to the analysis.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts analysed by the methods of GT as described by Strauss & Corbin (1990). This method involves identifying recurring themes or 'codes' in transcripts, and identifying where these themes cluster together as higher-order categories. Thus in each transcription the emerging themes were organised into descriptive line-by-line codes. These initial codes were then grouped based on their common themes into more abstract, higher order categories, or focused codes. These higher order focused codes were in turn grouped with other focused codes, resulting in the emergence of still higher order categories. Theoretical saturation was recognised to have been reached when the addition of a transcript to the analysis did not result in any change to the higher order categories. The organizing and sorting of codes into increasingly higher order categories continued over several iterations, until ultimately the core category emerged.

The research involved a semi-structured interview which asked several open ended a priori questions such as 'Some people say that men are less inclined to seek help than women are, including psychological therapies. What are your thoughts on this, based on your coaching experience?' and 'Some people suggest that say that men and women may have different preferences for modes of coaching. How much have you seen of this in your practice, if at all?' These questions served as a means of allowing the interviewee a starting point from which to share their opinions on the subject, with a minimum of steering from the interviewer, thus allowing the interviewee the maximum freedom in how they expressed themselves.

The study was approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee and the British Psychological Society code of ethics was followed. Informed consent was given by all participants.

Researcher Reflexivity

I went into the study open to finding differences in how men and women sought help and how they got the best from an intervention. Thus my first impression was puzzlement that many coaches appeared to state that gender had no impact. Then, on reading the transcripts, the emergence of a subtle ambiguity around gender-based generalizations was surprising and intriguing. It was not until carrying out post-analysis research that I came across work on beta bias and gender blindness which then made sense of these findings.

Results

Line-by-line coding of the 20 interviews yielded 71 open codes, from 602 line by line codes. These were grouped by meaning to form five subcategories, which were then combined to form two categories (see Table I). From these two categories, the core category of *Attitude towards making generalisations about clients based on gender* emerged. From this process, an empirically grounded theory of cognitive dissonance in coaching was derived.

Table I. Categories and subcategories that emerged from interviews with 20 coaches regarding gender differences in client needs and attributes.

Core Category	Category	N (%)	Subcategory	N (%)
Attitude towards making generalisations about clients based on gender	Ambivalence towards generalising	13 (65%)	"I hate generalising, but...": Ambivalence towards generalising while simultaneously describing gender differences	8 (40%)
			Gender blindness Not seeing gender differences, only individual differences / personality types	4 (20%)
			Reframing gender Recognising gender differences but only working with Myers-Briggs Personality Types	5 (25%)
	Features of clients	18 (90%)	Help seeking Men and women approach help-seeking differently	17 (85%)
			Client needs Men and women have different needs in coaching	18 (90%)

Notes: *N* = number of coaches who expressed sentiments related to this category or subcategory; ‘%’ indicates percentage of the 20 coaches who expressed sentiments related to this category or subcategory. In the third column, the ambivalence towards generalising *N* value is 13, while the *N* value of its subcategories is 17. This is because sometimes a participant gave responses that came under more than one sub-category. For example they may have at one point expressed ambivalence about generalising about gender, and also indicated gender blindness at another point in their interview.

Core Category: Ambivalence towards making generalisations about gender

The key theme to emerge was a sense of ambivalence on the part of many of the coaches towards making generalisations about clients based on gender. A dimensional range of ambivalence was found. At one end of the range, coaches expressed no ambivalence when speaking about gender differences when coaching male and female clients:

'I'm much in favour of coaching women than I I far far more en-, enjoy coaching a woman... 'cause there's not so much resistance, and...I can see the results in my coaching when I coach them...they take it very serious...' [C19]

At the other end of the range, coaches expressed great ambivalence while talking about gender differences. This arose mainly when they spoke about differences in treatment preferences and client needs for men and women.

Category 1: Ambivalence towards generalising

A theme throughout the three *Ambivalence* sub-categories was that acknowledging gender differences somehow diminished respect for the client as a person. Participant 17 highlights how it could be viewed that making gender distinctions might imply not treating men and women as equals:

'...I know we've been taught to make no no distinction between male and female and treat everyone equally' [C17]

There was a dimensional range with gender at one end and individual differences at the other. Some participants explicitly acknowledged the danger of ignoring sex differences:

'...there is a danger that we're saying that actually men and women aren't that different in

the in the corporate world and therefore we can put them together, use all the same competency frameworks and and they can sort of morph into some sort of homogenous group'
[C02]

On the other end of the range, coaches highlighted the danger of seeing men and women in gender terms only. For example:

'...I don't go in there and think 'Well they're a man so perhaps this is true', or 'They're a woman so perhaps this is true', because I think that's a bit dangerous' [C20]

Three subcategories emerged which were particular to clients who expressed ambivalence:

Subcategory 1: 'I hate generalising, but...'

The first category comprises instances where coaches expressed ambivalence about making gender-based generalizations (e.g. 'men are like....women are like...') while simultaneously describing gender differences. There were many instances of this in the interviews, for example:

'I hate generalising for lots of reasons, but women are more inclined to blame themselves. But I don't like generalising because I find men and women quite different...women will be a bit more thoughtful about it and less concerned about the status piece of having a coach. And again I hate generalizing, but that's sort of an instinctive response.' [C06]

'...terrible generalisations of course but there is a gender bias towards for men not to show that vulnerability...sounds awful but this is not what guys generally talk about' [C16]

Subcategory 2: Gender Blindness - not seeing gender differences, only individual

differences/personality types

A second category emerged at the extreme end of the ambivalence range: instances where coaches appeared not to see gender differences, only individual differences. They expressed ambivalence about generalising based on gender because they felt that by doing so they would not be respecting individual differences. Note that all four of the coaches who fell into this subcategory acknowledged that they might be 'blind' to gender.

It appeared to be difficult for Participant 6 to recognise gender as being at the root of gender differences:

'...it's not a gender issue, but I sort of observe, erm, men may want more a process result, a fast process result sometimes...I think it goes back to the whole gender issues, stop, let's stop talking about gender and talk about individual needs...I think men have a lot of issues that aren't named, that aren't spoken out loud, about how they might feel' [C06]

However, she acknowledges her difficulties about recognising gender:

'I feel I've rambled all over the place...I think it reflects it reflects my own confusion and my own questioning about gender issues at the moment' [C06]

Also, talking about gender stereotyping, Participant 6 reveals how this can mean not respecting individual differences:

'...they absolutely hate how men label women, and you know a real recognition actually it's about us all respecting each other individually.' [C06]

The other coaches who displayed instances of gender blindness had greater difficulty acknowledging sex differences. Participant 20 referred to the notion that men are less likely

to seek help as a “sweeping generalisation” and described few gender differences in help-seeking or client needs. However, she suggests at the end of interview that if she ignores gender it’s probably so that she can relate to the client as an individual:

'...you will have noticed by the responses I've been giving you that I'm clearly not very aware of them [gender issues]...and to be honest I probably try to ignore it and just relate to them as an individual...[C20]

Participant 5 also acknowledges how she might ignore gender by focusing on the whole personality:

'...it can get very politicised around it as well so I'm very sensitive to, to gender, but, I don't think I'd thought about that because I think I tend to think about it in terms of personality much more ... I don't find myself being aware, so aware of people's gender... which actually if I think about it, that's quite interesting really...so that's made me think a bit actually.' [C05]

Participant 4 expresses much ambivalence about making gender distinctions. For example, after talking about how the coach's gender could influence whether a client seeks their help, she suddenly dismisses this point:

'...I don't think I can actually go from that point of view because it's too generalised, it's very erm specific to to the coach and the client... ' [C04]

She later appears to take a ‘gender neutral’ position after highlighting the importance of respecting the individual characteristics of both the client and coach:

*'... it is dependent on the individual rather than the on gender...it's actually about the characteristics of the two coming together, erm, who can have mutual respect for each other...I sound very neutral in this case' *laughs** [C04]

Subcategory 3: Recognising gender differences but only working with Myers-Briggs

Personality Types

A third subcategory emerged whereby coaches did not directly express ambivalence when talking about gender differences. However, even after talking about the significant impact that gender has, they appeared to frame their coaching approach in terms of only working with the various Myers-Briggs personality type indicators.

Although Participant 11 refers to the 'utterly different' impact of gender on personality, he frames his coaching approach in terms of personality types:

'...how an NT [MBTI type] will play out in a woman is utterly different to how an NT plays out in a man, it's also coloured by their scripts and patterns that they've learned er to in childhood, so, the Myers-Briggs types I will automatically more define my approach depending on what type they are...I could get the whole variety inside any one sex you know.....I don't think there's a huge difference between the sexes' [C11]

Participant 15 provided many examples of 'general' sex differences which impact the coaching, such as women being more open to coaching than men, and men needing to be set homework more than women do. And he describes success initially in terms of gender:

'...I would describe success stories in terms of coaching, er I would immediately look to erm female clients... [C15]

However, he goes on to reframe this in terms of wondering if matching of MBTI types between coach and coachee determines successful outcomes:

'...some coaches er may be better at erm coaching certain type of clients...it's not a gender

issue in that sense it may well be that it's er it's matching the right coach to the right er to the right client' [C15]

Participant 10 acknowledges a number of sex differences, such as:

'...men are generally more reluctant to talk about, erm, their own their feelings er, perhaps feelings of not always succeeding...I think there's a great reluctance' [C10]

She also wonders about the relationship between gender and occupation:

'...I just wonder whether people get promoted in the police sector because they're male and they're very good at what they do technically.' [C10]

However, she later reframes both the client's coaching and occupational preferences in terms of personality:

'...I've never seen male-female differences [on the]MBTI, there's obviously a lot of preference difference among a group of people, I don't know if they'd be related gender-wise... I think there's a correlation of what jobs people go into, er, and certainly, OPQ32 the FHL, MBTI.....-, [C10]

Participant 17 described many gender differences, such as:

'Well men typically are more interested in er erm th- they present with the management issues at first and then it it turns into a a life coaching issue in the end...women will present more with a life issue and then er will would do the management issues...' [C17]

She also acknowledges the importance of the coach's gender identity:

'...I think female coaches typically that I know are more female-oriented, I might work very

well with males because of my tendency to be to see things as a male might...you have to be aware where you are in your head 'cause you have both capabilities male and female' [C17]

However, when later asked about gender preferences and differences in coaching, she reframes these in terms of personality differences:

'...I want to know typically what their personality style may be...I look for that personality style to approach but I also assess their learning and communication style... just boil down to their personality style and er preferences ' [C17]

Despite her dislike of putting people into 'boxes', C20 still referred to the usefulness of categorising behaviours using the Myers-Briggs personality types:

'To have some way of understanding individual differences... perhaps Myers-Briggs... it's really important to get out of the boxes and the labels but it is a good starting point.' [C20].

This quote also suggests gender blindness (Subcategory 2, above).

Category 2: Features of clients

The two subcategories of *Features of clients* were *Help-seeking* and *Client Needs*. Regardless of where responses fell within the dimensional range of ambivalence (from no ambivalence to great ambivalence about making gender distinctions), coaches expressed opinions which fell into two main categories: gender differences in client needs, and gender differences in help-seeking behaviour.

Subcategory 4: Help-seeking

The majority of coaches reported a sex difference in help-seeking. Some said that men find it more difficult than women to accept themselves as needing help:

'...I think men think they don't need it they are the strong masculine you know warrior and that they can solve all the problems they don't need help' [C14]

Women were generally seen as being able to make use of their larger social networks to help themselves:

'...women tend to have a network [of] other women that they are accustomed [to] talking to' [C13]

Most of the coaches expressed the opinion that men need encouragement from others before they will seek help,:

'...men will tend to go if, if they are nagged about it' [C01]

'...it's their wives who have or very close friends who have suggested that they engage in coaching, so it hasn't ever been a direct, erm, direct meeting with the client straight away...' [C04]

However, the coaches highlighted a range of triggers to help-seeking, with men seeking help mainly in response to 'big triggers':

'...when we had the World Trade Centre disasters, er, I, I had more men after that come to me and say...I'm depressed, I need to talk to somebody...I think those big triggers in our country they brought more men to seek help than I'd ever seen in my entire life' [C03]

Help-seeking for men was also associated with business rather than personal issues, with men being more likely to speak about personal issues only when it affects work:

'...if they feel that erm the separation has an effect on their work also yes they do address it but if that's not the case men mainly don't talk about their private life.' [C14]

Some coaches also suggested that framing personal issues in terms of business might make it feel safer for men to seek help:

'...[men] make the thing masculine to make it fit and to give them the cover of being there and that they are about business.' [C13]

Subcategory 5: Client Needs.

There were many examples from coaches of gender-based differences in what male and female clients want and need in coaching. Coaches spoke about the difficulty men have with displaying emotions in coaching:

'...women are more willing to be vulnerable and willing to talk.....I've only coached one man who really got into deeply personal issues' [C07]

'...now with women I don't tend to get such an eruption you know the, erm, there's a lot that, the emotional depth seems to weave in and out of every session more evenly' [C02]

Coaches spoke about the importance of giving men permission to emote in coaching:

'...with a man it seems to be, erm, almost like erm, giving, helping the man to have permission to have a wider range of emotions' [C02]

'...I have to explain to them oh that's good, it's good that you can show your feelings and then we can work with it' [C19]

Although women sometimes got bogged down in irrelevant detail, they sometimes were able to start dealing with important material quicker than men:

'...women get to the nitty gritty a lot quicker than men do...women actively speak out that deeper conversation, right from the outset.' [C07]

Men preferred to break issues down and deal with each piece separately; women tended to like to keep their experience whole. Women were thus often seen to take a broader approach to their problems:

'...some male situations seem quite comfortable in breaking the mirror down into different component parts and then working with a number of different smaller mirrors, erm, a female perspective would often be to maintain that mirror at almost all costs because the linkages between different facets are critical and crucial.' [C12]

Men were generally described as seeing themselves as the director of change, whereas women would turn more to their relationships:

'...women tend to erm be thinking about other people can do or what other people are doing...men are more I can do this or I want to do... they're more, looking at themselves as the director of change...' [C01]

Women were seen as more self-critical and prepared to see their own flaws:

'...they have a better understanding and er a grounded reality of their own strengths and weaknesses...they can be perhaps erm, er an over-focus on the weaknesses...' [C15]

'...this is erm horrible generalisations that men will often look changing their face to the world and woman will often look more closely at their own self-image as a starting point for improvement' [C12]

On the other side of this, women were also generally seen as needing to develop their confidence, and were lacking a 'cutting edge':

'... women have erm a very strong inner critic, for them to stand up to say what they mean, which is totally different from men, you know they really have this capacity to fight for their own opinion...' [C19]

Men were commonly seen as wanting quick solutions:

'... it's a bit well hang on slow down you don't necessarily have to just go away and it's not instant this is not instant...for men it's well...let's get solutions let's get on with it let's do it let's... and I'm you know I will say it's a-, it's about let's win' [C16]

Many coaches also talked about needing a different way of presenting coaching to engage males: men are put off talking if it is seen as weak or 'fluffy'. They prefer to frame talking as problem solving and prefer factual, goal-directed language:

'...I think once if you speak their language...with men more so because it's the nature is and certainly in my world is it's about solution finding, project managing, delivering timelines, delivering milestones, erm, everything is measurable...it needs to be up front because if it's not it will be dismissed as well this is the fluffy stuff...' [C16]

Modelling (observational learning) was seen as important for encouraging help-seeking in men. It appears to be important that treatment is endorsed by men higher up the workplace hierarchy, but this kind of endorsement didn't happen as much as it might:

'...I think that there are times when our male culture of ignoring the emotional side of it, is erm quite dangerous, and the role models in business of erm keep-, keeping calm and carrying on or trying to avoid the emotional side of things...we could find a way of erm role

modelling or making it OK for men to feel... [C12]

Discussion

This interview study, which asked 20 coaches their views on the influence of gender in their practice, found that male and female clients were different in many ways. Interestingly, the coaches often appeared to speak about these differences indirectly, and tended to attribute such differences to individual differences or personality differences rather than gender differences. Possible theoretical explanations for these findings are explored below.

Cognitive dissonance: respecting gender versus respecting individual differences

The *'I hate generalising, but...'* subcategory describes an ambivalence towards generalising about men and women, while simultaneously describing gender differences in various ways. Although it is not unusual for people to express contradictory ideas in interviews, the almost apologetic way many coaches described their experience of gender differences suggests a certain amount of what Festinger (1962) might call cognitive dissonance: the difficulty of simultaneously holding contradictory beliefs or values. In many instances it appeared that it was both felt to be true that there are gender differences, but also that there was something wrong about having this belief. Cognitive dissonance theory explains that when a person has two conflicting beliefs or attitudes, one of these has to be modified to avoid unbearable emotional tension and discomfort. Thus a person who holds the cultural belief that 'men and women are the same' and that 'generalizing about differences between men and women is nothing more than crude stereotyping' will find it hard to endure the tension caused by specific observations that clearly show evidence of such apparent stereotypical differences. This means, in terms of cognitive dissonance theory, the observation of gender differences has to be disqualified or 'toned down' to fit with prevailing

cultural beliefs. This dissonance appeared to be demonstrated in the way that coaches in the 'gender blind' subcategory seemed conflicted about acknowledging gender differences, and felt more comfortable talking of individual differences; it seemed difficult for them to own both these views simultaneously. Indeed, all of the coaches whose responses fell in the gender blind category emphasised the importance of seeing the client as a unique person rather than a man or woman. This might reflect broader cultural pressures regarding the promotion of gender equality in the workplace and elsewhere, resulting in an aversion to what might be seen as the stereotyping that might come from acknowledging gender differences in coaching clients. The power of this cognitive dissonance might also explain the ability of some of the coaches to say that there are no gender differences, while then going on to describe specific gender differences. One way for coaches to reduce this cognitive dissonance could have been to reframe gender differences as something less threatening e.g. individual differences or differences in personality types. It might be much easier to say that 'some people have a higher feeling score on the MBTI than others' than to say 'on average, women have a higher feeling score on the MBTI than men do'.

Beta bias and male gender blindness

Hare-Mustin & Marecek (1988) identify the tendency to ignore or minimise gender differences as 'beta bias'. It could be that those coaches who could not acknowledge gender differences had received a training which is gender blind. This would not be at all surprising in a culture in which it is deemed more accurate and acceptable to focus on gender similarities rather than gender differences. Indeed, citing Hyde (2005), Magnusson and Marecek (2012) suggest that to focus on sex differences in research findings "invites researchers, policymakers, and others to make claims that go far beyond what the data justify" (Magnusson and Marecek 2012, p,171). This assumption may stem from a fear that

highlighting gender differences is automatically ‘disempowering’ for women, and might explain why the four of the coaches in the *Gender Blind* subcategory were women.

The findings of the present study suggest that to ignore sex differences in research findings – and indeed to fail to assess sex differences at all - may have the effect of encouraging people to make the questionable assumption that men and women can routinely be treated without reference to their gender. Indeed it seems likely that taking a ‘gender neutral’ stance runs the risk of depriving both men and women of being given psychological treatment that is best meets their needs (Kingerlee et al, 2014). For example, if we treat men and women as being equally open to talking about their emotional problems, then we may not be sensitive to signs that important emotional issues are not being raised by the male client.

Similarly, Seager et al (2014a) discuss ‘male gender blindness’, which describes a lack of attention to men as gendered beings. This type of blindness can be seen as an offshoot of beta-bias that relates specifically to how the needs of the male gender can be overlooked in therapy and other contexts. Although this issue was not overtly raised by name in the interviews, it is apparent as a logical consequence of ignoring gender-related needs. It also underlines how men’s needs in psychological therapy may be more likely to go unseen than women’s needs (Seager et al, 2014b). Given that most people working in psychology are working in an environment that favours beta-bias, it is understandable that psychologists are motivated to see things in a gender-neutral way. If we are asked to think about experiences we have had to the contrary, thoughts of such evidence may cause cognitive dissonance, as demonstrated above.

Gender and the MBTI

The *reframing gender* sub-category described how many coaches recognised gender differences, with a number of these coaches reporting using the MBTI with their clients as an

assessment tool. As was apparent in the interviews, it is important that the use of the MBTI does not cause the coach to ignore other aspects of client's individual differences (e.g. around their gender identity) by focusing solely on the client's psychological type.

While the MBTI is in popular use amongst coaches as a means of identifying clients' personality preferences, it is not widely known amongst coaches that the MBTI detects sex differences in preferences. For example, Furnham and Stringfield (1993) found that men showed greater preferences for thinking, sensing and introversion than women, whilst Hammer and Mitchell (1996) reported that a higher percentage of women than men have a preference for feeling. In order to be truly sensitive to gendered needs of clients, it seems important that coaches are conscious of the sex differences that have been identified by the MBTI in the same way that any other information that might improve the outcome of therapy is of importance too.

Help-seeking and Client Needs

The *Help-seeking* subcategory describes how men and women approach help-seeking differently. 17 (85%) coaches said that men are less inclined to seek help than women are. This was explained partly because in general help-seeking is an admission of vulnerability, and men do not like to admit to vulnerability. There is evidence that men are significantly more invested in the notion of mastery and control of their emotions than women are (Seager et al, 2014b) and therefore a useful strategy in health promotion aimed at men, and in setting the context for interventions for men, might be to reframe help-seeking as a means of taking control of one's problems.

The *Client Needs* subcategory describes how men and women have different needs in coaching. In many ways the descriptions of gender differences are unsurprising, and familiar, even to the point of being stereotypical. However we might ask ourselves whether these

descriptions are any less true or clinically useful even if they appear to be stereotypical and therefore trigger dissonance in many people. Indeed the information cited by the coaches might be considered extremely useful. For example, coaches indicated that it was helpful to give men permission to express emotions during coaching interventions, and clearly this might be extremely helpful in creating a successful therapeutic outcome.

Many of the codes in the *Client Needs* subcategory overlapped with the *Help-Seeking* category. Possibly men have difficulty expressing emotion and thus need encouragement to do this in coaching, and this is an important contributor to their help-seeking behaviour (perhaps connected to the difficulty men have showing vulnerability). The suggestion that men see the director of change as themselves rather than those around them also appears connected to their help-seeking behaviour, perhaps connected to not having the breadth of supportive social networks that women were said to have. The importance of having visible and appropriate models of male help-seeking may also encourage men to take up coaching.

Strengths and Limitations of Findings

A criticism of the *Help-seeking* category is that it is somewhat an artefact of the research process rather than something spontaneously suggested by the interviewees, in that this was a topic that we specifically asked about. However this is not unusual in interview-based research, and can be difficult to avoid.

Implications

This study has vital implications for the training of coaches and possibly for others working in related professions (psychotherapists, psychologists etc.). Taking account of gender as one of a range of important features with implications for client needs is potentially important to the delivery of a successful intervention. It is therefore of greater importance

ethically, we suggest, for gender differences to be recognised in talking therapies than for gender to be ignored out of fear of stereotyping.

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