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The Impact of Client's Gender and Culture on Service Providers Strategies in Diversion Programs

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The Impact of Clients' Gender and Culture on Service Providers Strategies in Diversion

Programs

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A thesis submitted to fulfill the requirements for a Master's Degree in Forensic Psychology

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Abstract

Despite the growing rate of adolescent girls in the criminal justice system, there has been little

institutional support for empirically supported programs tailored for girls (Matthews & Hubbard,

2008). There is a similar substantial lack of culturally specific programming. Problematically,

both constructs have been found to impact treatment (Bright & Jonson-Reid, 2010; Matthews &

Hubbard, 2008). This qualitative study utilized grounded theory principals to investigate the

impact of gender and culture on the therapeutic relationship for justice-involved youth in seven

alternative-to-incarceration agencies in New York City. Elicited themes focused on both

recommended strategies and continued challenges. Results indicated that while service providers

considered a gender and culture match to be advantageous for therapeutic relationships, a match

made it less likely that service providers would discuss the therapeutic relevance of gender or

culture, particularly in cases with a culture-match. A substantial portion of service providers

indicated that they treated all clients similarly, regardless of cultural background. This is

inconsistent with recommended practice. However, the service providers reported far less

negativity around working with girls than previous research has found. The results support the

need for formal training for service providers in empirically supported strategies for working

with diverse youth.

Keywords   Justice-Involved Girls • Therapeutic relationship • Programming • Adolescent •

                Qualitative Research

The Impact of Clients' Gender and Culture on Service Providers Strategies in Diversion

Programs

In the past two decades, adolescent girls have become one of the fastest growing

populations in the criminal justice system in the United States (Puzzanchera, 2009; de Vogel &

Nicholls, 2016; Pasko & Lopez, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, more than

29% of the 856,000 adolescents arrested in 2016 were female (Puzzanchera, 2018). The rate of

arrests for girls has almost doubled in the past 30 years (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014), and

has coincided with a decrease in male delinquency (Zahn et al., 2008).

Researchers have suggested that the increasing arrest rate for girls is due to changes in

enforcement policy and societal standards, rather than girls' criminogenic behavior. The criminal

justice system may be disproportionately punishing girls who exhibit behaviors characterized as

pathological and/or deviant (Javdani et al., 2011; de Vogel & Nicholls, 2016). In their 2008

report, authors from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

hypothesized that the increase in girls' arrest rates was influenced by members of the legal

system who were preoccupied with girls who exhibited behaviors outside of traditional gender

norms (Zahn et al., 2008). As a whole, girls and women are less likely to be incarcerated for

violent crimes, instead they are punished for crimes of "moral turpitude," including prostitution,

"lewd" behavior, and vagrancy (Pishko, 2015). This may generalize to broader attitudes. Spender

(1980) argued that boys who asked questions, protested, or verbally challenged their teachers

were often commended for their verbal facility and praised for demonstrating leadership. Yet,

girls who took verbal initiative were more likely to be viewed as ostentatious and were often

reprimanded by their teachers for being *loud* and *bossy*.

There are notable differences in the types of offenses that lead to detainment based on gender. Stevens et al. (2011) found that girls in 2000 were nearly twice as likely as girls in 1980 to report that they had been charged with a crime, despite not self-reporting an increase in violence in this timeframe. The offenses that bring many girls to the attention of the juvenile justice system have been hypothesized to reflect the system's unique and intense preoccupation with girls' sexuality and obedience to parental authority and immorality; concerns not equally demonstrated towards boys (MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001). More boys are arrested for violent offenses, whereas a disproportionate number of girls are arrested for non-violent offenses, such as curfew and loitering violations, acting "promiscuous" or sexually precocious, or underage drinking (Javdani et al., 2011; Ehrmann et al., 2019). These are acts that may not otherwise warrant detention, but girls and women who violate gender norms are often punished with infractions that do not match the severity of the offense (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). In a study that utilized staff members involved in juveniles' court decisions, probation officers suggested that girls become justice involved not because they are a danger or threat to their communities, but for their own safety (Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2004). The criminal legal system appears to be harshly penalizing and detaining girls for behaviors or offenses that were previously handled within a family or school (Zahn et al., 2008).

Girls Have Different Needs

In comparison to boys, girls were much older at the time of their first arrest, yet they were younger during their most recent incarceration or detention (Hockenberry, 2013). In 2013, 38% of girls in residential placement were younger than 16, compared with 30% of boys (Hockenberry, 2013). This suggests that courts are not as tolerant of girls' transgressions and

may be more willing to incarcerate boys later, and girls sooner, after their first arrests (Stein et al., 2015).

Girls who come into contact with the juvenile justice system have presented as more clinically complex in comparison to their male peers, and these difficulties appeared to be linked to the challenges that girls faced in their home environments (Gavazzi, Bostic, Lim, & Yarcheck, 2008). The extant literature has found that in comparison to their male counterparts, court-involved girls have experienced higher rates of victimization, mental health and substance use problems, required special educational programming, have poorer family and social relationships, and have experienced other family problems such as parent criminality and parent mental illness or substance use, consequently making them more prone to involvement in the criminal legal system (Bright & Jonson-Reid, 2010). Girls who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or intersex are even more likely to be overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, often due to higher rates of substance abuse, homelessness, and family and school problems (Curtin, 2002; Schaffner, 1998).

Many girls who come into contact with juvenile justice agencies are survivors of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. "In a perverse twist of justice, many girls who experience sexual abuse are routed into the juvenile justice system because of their victimization" (Saar et al., 2015, p. 5). According to gendered pathway theories, girls who experience childhood trauma and victimization often experience depression and other internalizing concerns, which frequently leads to them running away, or self-medicating behaviors like substance use; behaviors that then lead them to have contact with the juvenile justice system (Lopez, 2017). Girls who are survivors of sexual abuse often develop a deep mistrust of adults, becoming protective of their self and

therefore closed off to service providers (Baines & Alder, 1996). This unfortunately impacts

rapport building for those girls or women who receive clinical services.

Culturally Specific Needs

The impact of gender cannot entirely be divorced from culturally based gender

expectations. Research has demonstrated that girls are much more influenced by family

expectations and family conflict than boys, and these experiences vary depending on race and

ethnicity (Gaarder et al., 2004). The discrepancy between girls of color commonly being sent

into the juvenile justice system, while their White counterparts are deinstitutionalized,

emphasizes the strong need for programs rooted in specific cultures (Chesney-Lind, 1999). Girls

who are institutionalized may differ based on their cultural background, particularly in criteria

associated with precursors to criminal behavior. In a study conducted by Stein et al. (2015), the

authors found that justice-involved White girls were more likely to report chaotic home

environments, began hard drugs at a younger age, showed higher rates of conduct disorder

symptoms, and more frequently experienced parental difficulty and abuse. In comparison to

Caucasian girls, non-White justice-involved girls presented with significantly more symptoms of

post-traumatic stress disorder. Notably, the research by Stein and colleagues found that White

girls were more likely to report factors associated with criminogenic behavior, suggesting that

the disproportionate rate of non-White girls in the criminal justice system (particularly those

without substantially at-risk backgrounds) may be a product of systemic bias.

A probation officer in the Gaarder et al. (2004) study stated that girls of color had a

"double whammy" (p. 571) due to the combination of their ethnicity and gender. There is an

increased willingness on the part of authorities to both police and punish girls who commit

violence, especially African American girls (Stevens et al., 2011). Since it is clear that girls of

color have different experiences of their gender, as well as different experiences from the

dominant institutions in the society, programs have an obligation to meet cultural needs just as

much as gender needs (Chesney-Lind, 1999). Despite White girls making up 65% of the relevant

at-risk population, the American and National Bar Associations (2001) found that African

American girls made-up half of the population of girls in detention (as cited in Stevens et al.,

2011). An analysis by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2007) reported that

African American and Native American girls were detained at three times the rate of White girls.

To achieve lower rates of recidivism, it is crucial that diversion programs examine social

issues like race and class to get a better-rounded understanding of girls' social and economic

realities (MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001). Without guidance, service providers could be led

by racial stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings (Gaarder et al., 2004). Service professionals

are entrusted with the responsibility of communicating cultural empathy, while also appreciating

the potential positive or negative impact any cultural differences between themselves and their

clients might have on the therapeutic process (Chung & Bemark, 2002).

Lack of Resources & Programming

The majority of programs that provide services and resources to justice-involved girls

have been normed with justice-involved boys (Chesney-Lind, 1999). Agencies took programs

initially created for boys and "paint[ed] the walls pink and [took] out the urinals" and deemed

them fit for girls (Chesney-Lind, 2000, p. 139). In 1992, it seemed like things were going to

begin turning around for justice involved girls. Hearings held in conjunction with the

Reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act addressed the

"provision of services to girls within the juvenile justice system," as well as the double standards

of the juvenile justice system (U.S. House, 1992, p. 1). Furthermore, the landmark legislation

required states to construct gender-specific services for the prevention and treatment of

adolescents to receive federal funding (Pub L. 102-586). However, these initiatives were short-

lived, as Congress soon overhauled the JJDP and refocused national attention on the violent and

repeated juvenile offender—essentially boys—which diverted attention from girls and the

services they could receive (Chesney-Lind, 1999). According to national data records, in the

1990s 60% of justice-involved girls were detained for more than seven days in San Francisco,

CA, compared to only 6% of boys, because the system could not find diversion programs with

available spots for the girls (Chesney-Lind, 1999). The 2018 Reauthorization of the Amended

JJDP Act restated the call for the development of gender-specific treatments for justice-involved

youth and increased awareness of the importance of addressing gender-specific needs. However,

girls are still largely ignored in the development of empirically supported juvenile justice

interventions (Goldstein et al., 2018).

The lack of suitable programing speaks to the unreliability of the legal system, which is

allowing girls to languish in detention centers, instead of appropriately servicing them and

finding suitable treatment options. Gender appropriate programs or training are necessary to

accurately address the needs of adolescent girls. Additionally, it is critical for programs to put an

emphasis on social issues like race and class to fully comprehend girls' social and economic

realities and ensure they are diverting them from the criminal legal system (Gaarder et al., 2004;

MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001).

In the Gaarder et al. (2004) study, most probation officers agreed that existing programs

and institutions did not have the resources to provide gender and culturally responsive

programming; additionally, they reported the inevitable outcome is that girls' needs persist

because they were not being met. Service providers who specifically work in correctional

facilities were often taught to avoid getting too close to the girls, which undermined the human spirit and the power of the helping relationship between people (Matthews & Hubbard, 2008).

Practitioner's Perception of Girls

Throughout the years, the limited research on the feelings of service providers has revealed a particular reluctance on the part of practitioners to work with girls. Several studies suggested that service providers find it more challenging to work with girls than boys, and therefore are less tolerant of their needs, and are more reluctant to provide services to girls (Lanctôt, Ayotte, Turcotte, & Besnard, 2012; Baines & Alder, 1996). Service providers have admitted to their own biases and downfaults. In a study conducted with Australian service providers, service providers admitted their professional experiences were primarily with boys and that they had developed a particular set of principles they unconsciously utilized when working with boys (Baines & Alder, 1996). They relied heavily on these principles and skills and when they did not work with girls, the lack of experience led them to view girls as more difficult.

A probation officer in the Gaarder et al. (2004) study stated, "Girls are much more difficult to case manage...They will make your life miserable—whereas boys will just sort of go along with the program" (p. 568). Daniel (1999) also stressed that case managers within the Department of Juvenile Justice in Maryland were willing to take on 10 cases involving boys just for the opportunity to transfer one case involving a girl to the Female Intervention Team. Service providers struggled to work with girls because they perceived them as particularly difficult and demanding (Lanctôt et al., 2012). Both female and male service providers stated that it is more difficult to establish a rapport and a helping alliance with girls because they are too emotional, dramatic, manipulative, and tend to be prone to verbal aggression and anger outbursts (Baines & Alder, 1996; Lanctôt et al., 2012).

These gender-based differences were not restricted to justice-involved youth. In a study that measured the feelings of staff members towards their adult female and male forensic psychiatric patients, the treating staff expressed more difficultly and reported feeling emotionally drained by their female patients, stating that female patients seemed more cunning and demanding than the male patients (de Vogel & Louppen, 2016). A qualitative study that explored the perception of 15 school staff members working with girls who presented with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD; Rice, Merves, Srsic, 2008) found that the professionals who perceived girls to act according to gender norms (e.g., quiet, following directions) considered girls easier to work with than boys. However, when girls acted in gender inappropriate ways (i.e., more like boys) or in extremely gendered ways (e.g., catty, manipulative, and mean) the staff members considered them to be more difficult (Rice et al., 2008). The staff members described the "hidden" nature of girls' needs and problems and how prone girls are to internalize and conceal their difficulties making it harder for staff to meet their needs. Service providers who worked with justice-involved girls reported similar feelings towards their clients, while those who worked with justice-involved boys perceived them as honest, open, and less complex (Chesney-Lind, 1999).

Some of the gender-based concerns that service providers reported are likely due to their lack of relevant training. In a study that explored probation officers' views of girls, they expressed their *distaste* for working with girls, but also recognized their lack of understanding in culturally or gender-specific programming (Gaarder et al., 2004). Researchers have repeatedly found that service providers who expressed reluctance to work with girls also acknowledged their lack of experience and knowledge of justice-involved girls' needs and experiences (Lanctôt et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2008). Those service providers who do have additional training might be

less likely to report these concerns, as one study found that service providers who held a

university diploma reported less reluctance working with girls (Lanctôt et al., 2012). Although

the actual therapeutic impact has not been studied, providers with a higher level of education

believed in their own abilities to successfully master the challenges that may arise when working

with justice involved girls.

Ways to Improve Programming for Girls

In the Lanctôt et al. (2012) study, both male and female service providers reported that

when they shared the same gender as their participant, they could easily identify the needs of the

youth and set intervention priorities, as they had a better understanding of the youth's

background and experiences. In a similar study, female service providers reported an advantage

when working with girls and building a helping alliance (Matthews & Hubbard, 2008). This

opinion may be shared by clients, although no research has examined a similar preference for

justice-involved youth. In a study that explored high school students' preference for

characteristics in guidance counselors, the students indicated a preference for someone of their

same race and same gender (Ester & Ledoux, 2001).

However, this should not be interpreted to mean that only service providers of the same

gender and race as the participant can connect with them, and appropriately meet their needs.

Johnson and Caldwell (2011) found that although clients reported significantly greater

satisfaction when matched with a therapist of the same gender, the significance was not great

enough to theorize that only same-gender therapeutic relationships were satisfactory to the client.

If programs could take what is known about girls' development, the influence of culture, and the

ways in which girls' problems evolve into delinquent behavior, perhaps they would be able to

craft appropriate services that can match girls' needs (MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001).

When creating a working alliance with girls, it is important that the practitioner identify strengths that can be used to empower girls towards adaptive ways of coping with a sexist society (Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2003).

Adolescents are able to connect with people they perceive to share their attitudes, values, and who respect their autonomy. There is particular support for using a cognitive-behavioral group approach to allow for girls to engage in more informal conversation, explore their feelings, and provide support to one another; which allows them to connect with other girls without sacrificing the directive, goal-oriented approach that has been associated with successful outcomes (Matthews & Hubbard, 2008). However, Kendall and Pollack (2003) argued that cognitive-behavioral approaches ignored the structural aspects of crime, and are oppressive in that they try to teach girls what and how to think. Instead, some researchers have asserted that the best approach for girls is a strengths-based approach, designed to empower females and help them gain control over their lives by allowing girls to explore common problems in their lives and develop a sense of self-worth through intimate communication with others (Covington, 2002). Due to the primary focus on boys, the literature regarding the most successful strategies for girls remains relatively sparse and inconclusive.

Study Overview

Through interviews with service providers working with to justice-involved-youth in New York City, this study explored barriers and recommendations related to the successful completion of placements in diversion programs. Ultimately, the goal of the study was to understand whether service providers felt culture and gender affected the therapeutic relationship, specifically for justice-involved girls. We sought to understand service providers' opinions about best practices, common strategies and challenges when working with girls.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from 14 alternatives to incarceration agencies in New York City between Fall 2018 and Spring 2019. Only service providers who reported experience providing direct services to court-involved adolescent boys and girls and were involved in determining whether a client successfully completed programming were eligible to participate. All participants were required be over the age of 18. Of the 87 service providers who completed the screening interview, 30 (34.5%) were eligible for the study. Eight participants were unavailable due to scheduling concerns. Therefore, interviews were conducted with 22 participants. Data from one participant was not correctly recorded and therefore that participant's responses could not be coded. Study analyses were completed for the remaining 21 interviews. The participants were employed throughout 7 of the 14 eligible research sites. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 57 ($M = 32.5$, $SD = 8.84$). Approximately half of the sample identified as male ($n = 11$, 52%) and half identified as female ($n = 10$, 48%). The sample was comprised of the following racial/ethnic backgrounds: 29% ($n = 6$) Hispanic/Latino; 24% ($n = 5$) African-American/Black; 19% ($n = 4$) Multiracial; 19% ($n = 4$) White/Caucasian; and 9% ($n = 2$) Asian/Pacific Islander. Providers reported an average of 3.5 years of experience, ranging from less than 1 year to 16 years. The majority of the participants (43%) reported receiving a master's degree, 38% of participants ($n = 8$) reported receiving their bachelor's degree, 14% of participants ($n = 3$) reported some college education, and one participant (4.8%) reported receiving an associate's degree. The providers reported a variety of job titles: employment specialist, adolescent and family therapist, clinical supervisor, case manager, dean of students, program director, supervisor, community coordinator, internship liaison, mitigation specialist,

assistant teacher, primarily counselor, artistic director, and operations manager. However, all participants reported regular required meetings with youth and were directly responsible for ensuring that youth met the legally required goals within their diversion setting.

Procedure

The study utilized a grounded theory qualitative research design to examine barriers and best practices for service providers working with culturally diverse girls and boys in diversion programs. All eligible recruitment sites served justice-involved youth. The primary investigator emailed 14 agency directors with a link to a brief online pre-screening survey to be distributed to the sites' service providers. Interested potential participants completed the survey and included their contact information. Eligible potential participants were contacted by a research assistant who reviewed the study expectations, answered all questions and scheduled those who were interested and available.

To enhance participant confidentiality, all interviews were conducted individually and off-site, at John Jay College. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. The agency directors were not informed regarding whether or not their staff had completed the survey or participated in the study. At each interview, following informed consent, the researcher provided the participant with an intake form that included items relating to their demographic and professional status. Upon completing these forms, each participant was assigned a numerical code, by which they were referred to for the duration of the study. The researcher used a semi-structured interview, which included questions regarding participants' experiences and opinions about the strengths and challenges of working with youth, both generally and across gender and cultural boundaries. The purpose of using a semi-structured interview process was to ensure that the researcher elicited themes related to the primary research questions and would therefore be

able to contextualize relevant theory. Audio recorded interviews lasted between 20 and 74

minutes. All interviews were conducted by the principle investigator or a trained research

assistant. All participants in the study were compensated $100 for their time at the conclusion of

their interview. The study was funded by the American Psychology-Law Society, the Society for

the Psychological Study of Social Issues and John Jay College.

      The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded by four research assistants (who did

not conduct interviews to prevent unconscious biases). Each interview was transcribed twice and

examined for consistency. When inconsistencies occurred, a third transcriber listened to the

audio recording to resolve the discrepancy. The researcher and research assistants consistently

reviewed the coding and transcripts to ensure that the theories developed originated from the

participant data, and considered the impact of expectations developed through the interviews and

previously held opinions and biases. Potential biases were evaluated through consideration of the

memos written by the interviewers during the data collection process. Coders reread and recoded

transcripts of the interviews to ensure that all major themes and concepts that emerged from the

data were accounted for and were accurately reflected in the data. The study received

Institutional Review Board approval prior to the beginning of data collection.

      Analysis: Grounded Theory Principals. The researcher used grounded theory

principles to analyze the interviews. Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which

the researcher generates a theory of a process, action, or interaction through an inductive, rather

than deductive process (Creswell, 2007). The researcher utilized a constructive grounded theory

process (Charmaz, 2006), an approach which included: gathering data, coding, memo-writing,

theoretical sampling, saturation, and sorting. By using the *social constructionist* process, the

researcher constructed categories and theories by allowing theories to emerge from the data.

Data analysis and interpretation consisted of three stages of coding (initial, focused, and theoretical; Charmaz, 2006). In the initial coding stage, the researcher generated as many ideas as possible from the raw data to uncover participants views, actions and perspectives. Charmaz (2014) described initial coding as a detail-oriented process that often required word-by-word or line-by-line coding. In focused coding, the coder selected a set of central codes that would "make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Essentially, ideas or themes were identified to most clearly provide a general idea of what the participant was expressing. In the last stage, theoretical coding, the coder refined the themes, allowing for theories to develop. By following these three stages, the researcher did not make specific hypotheses regarding what types of strategies would be recommended by providers. In this study, the researcher focused on themes related to specific topics, including the recommended strategies, utilized strategies and reported challenges of working with youth relating to the gender and cultural background of the youth.

Saturation. The sample size of 21 was consistent with the 15-25 participants typically needed to reach theoretical saturation (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). After a first round of data collection, which included 10 participants, new codes continued to emerge. After completing a second round of data collection the researcher determined that further sampling was not necessary. We had reached a point where "additional data was not leading to any new emergent themes" (as cited by Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1895). Because no new codes occurred in the data, the researcher determined that further sampling was not necessary for theory development and theoretical saturation had been reached.

Measures

The semi-structured interview included ten interview questions relating to the following topics: strategies used to service male vs. female adolescent clients; the effects of gender or cultural differences on the therapeutic alliance between the youth and the worker; challenges faced when providing services to justice-involved girls vs. boys; and overall strategies that were helpful when working with justice-involved adolescents.

Prior to the data collection process, the interview questions were tested and refined with an eligible service provider to ensure the questions were clearly worded. The test data from the practice interview was not included in the reported analyses.

Results

Data analyses yielded 9 broad themes described below.

Culture Theme 1: Color Blind/No Strategy for Cultural Boundaries

Of the 21 participants in the study, 24% ($n = 5$) initially stated that when working with justice-involved youth they did not use any specific strategies based on the client's race or culture. Participants expressed using the same strategy for all their clients despite their race; they claimed that they did not treat anyone differently based on cultural identity. Others reported that their clients' identity as a member of the diversion program superseded other forms of identity.

Culture Theme 2: Encourage Discussion about Ethnicity

Although several participants described the importance of discussing ethnicity with their clients, these responses varied somewhat based on the ethnicity of the service provider. Participants who identified or presented as White/Caucasian stated that they discussed racial and cultural disparities with their clients, who are predominantly youth of color, but only on occasions when it was relevant and appropriate in the conversation. This theme was elicited from all four participants who identified as White/Caucasian and one participant who identified as

multicultural but presented as White. They discussed that talking about race and culture was part of building meaningful rapport with their clients. Furthermore, all participants who identified as White/Caucasian expressed being conscious and aware of racial power dynamics, and how this came into play when primarily working with youth of color, which is often why they felt responsible to talk about the effects of race and White privilege. On the other hand, participants who identified as sharing a similar cultural background to their clients reported that they did not feel it was necessary to talk about race because there was an underlying mutual understanding regarding similar life experiences.

Culture Theme 3: Breaking Language Barriers

Five of the six bilingual participants expressed that when they were able to communicate with a client who was primarily fluent in a language other than English this greatly benefited their relationship. The majority of the bilingual participants in the study spoke English and Spanish, and they expressed that communicating with a client and their family in Spanish aids in program engagement, as well as the trust and confidence that participants have with their provider.

Culture Theme 4: Benefits of Representation

The majority of our participants ($n = 13, 62\%$) agreed that having a similar cultural background to their clients positively affected their relationship. The male participants who also identified as men of color ($n = 10, 91\%$) expressed the importance their presence played at their organization. Many stated that they held positions that were generally occupied by women. It was their belief that as men of color who were directly working with primarily boys of color at these alternative-to-incarceration programs, they played a vital role in the engagement of youth in the program. Service providers felt that youth often found comfort in working with providers

who looked like them, possibly lived in similar neighborhoods, or perhaps were once impacted

by the criminal legal system. Similarly, the majority of women of color ($n = 4$, 67%)

acknowledged the benefit and importance their cultural identity played in establishing and

building a relationship with their clients, who for the most part are young people of color.

Gender Theme 1: Blanket Approach/Same Strategy

The majority of participants ($n = 13$, 62%) stated that gender was not relevant and did not

play a role in their practice. This theme was elicited by participants who described the need to

treat all participants similarly, or those who described the need to treat all participants

individually, without prioritizing any one aspect of their identities. However, after carefully

reviewing the transcriptions we found that 69% ($n = 9$) of the participants who stated that gender

was irrelevant later described feeling more comfortable with a client of the same gender or

tailoring their practice based on the client's gender.

Gender Theme 2: Lack of training and support for LGBTQI youth

Of the six participants who mentioned working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) youth, five (83.3%) of them specifically stated that they treat

these youth the same way they treat everyone else in the program. Participants did not describe

any needs that were particularly relevant to these participants. One participant stated that he

treated a transgender female participant like he treated everyone else by often making jokes that

were not likely to be appropriate or funny to the participant. However, he felt that it was better

for him to treat the participant like everyone else, so she would not feel different.

Gender Theme 3: Comfort with someone of the same sex

The majority of participants ($n = 17$, 81%) acknowledged feeling more comfortable

working with a youth of their same gender. Two female participants stated that they were more

mindful of their appearance (e.g., what they were wearing) when they were working with a male

client. Similarly, male participants stated that they were mindful of their relationship with female

clients. Although the majority of male participants ($n = 8$, 73%) stated that they felt more

comfortable being "rough" with male adolescents, they reported approaching female clients with

a higher level of sensitivity and professionalism. Female participants ($n = 6$, 60%) reported

feeling more comfortable self-disclosing with girls. This often translated to talking about

experiences that are common amongst females.

When it came to sexual impropriety, participants were cautious of their actions and how

it could be perceived by a client of the opposite sex. Both male and female participants ($n = 7$,

33%) said that if they had to have private conversations with a participant or client of the

opposite sex they make sure to leave their office door open or meet in an area that is visible to

other staff members. Lastly, participants ($n = 12$, 57%) acknowledged that if they needed to have

personal conversations with a client and were not getting through to them, they would often seek

a colleague of the same gender as the participant.

Gender Theme 4: Authoritative approach with boys

Both male and female participants ($n = 9$, 43%) expressed approaching boys in a slightly

more authoritative manner than girls. Although the male participants were more inclined than

female service providers to express some aggressive tendencies towards their youth male clients,

female participants also indicated being slightly more abrasive, straightforward, and taking a "no

non-sense" approach towards boys. Male participants acknowledged that sometimes their actions

or their tone of voice was more assertive when communicating with boys in comparison to girls.

Male providers also felt like they could joke around and take on a rather more aggressive form of

play with boys opposed to girls. Male participants believed that approaching their youth male

clients in this fashion was positively received and respected by their youth male clients.

Gender Theme 5: Sensitive and Cautious with Girls

Additionally, participants ($n = 10$, 48%) acknowledged the natural sensitivity in which

they approached girls in their program. Not only did male participants concede to being more

cautious and sensitive with girls because "girls are fragile," but they also treated girls in this

respect because they worried about sexual impropriety, and how their actions could be perceived

by a female client. Some female participants also recognized the maternal or big sister role they

take towards girls. They created an alliance with girls based on their gender, because female

providers "understand what it's like to be a girl in this society," causing them to be gentler and

more sensitive to their needs. However, it is important to note that not all female participants (n

$= 2$, 20%) felt this way about girls and take on this approach when working with them.

Table 1.

Theoretical, Focused, and Initial Categories for Strategies Across Cultural Boundaries

Theoretical	**Focused**	**Initial**
1. Color Blind/No Strategy	1. Ethnicity has no impact 2. Treat everyone the same 3. Identity as clients transcends	1. "No one treated him any differently because he was White." 2. "I think my strategy is just no strategy" 3. "I mean I treat all of them the same…My approach is always understanding and having empathy, and relating to them, I mean not judging…" 4. "We live in such modernized society, that…it feels like we are all part of the same culture." 5. "When you walk into this door, you're my student."

		cultural identity	
2.	Encourage Discussion about Ethnicity	1. Acknowledge differences	1. "Trying to maybe find some similarities but really acknowledging the differences too." 2. "Call myself out as like a White woman…because I think like it opens up both a conversation…of what is it like for you to be a young man of color in the justice system." 3. "I am more aware of anything that might say…like any generalizations or anything like that…" 4. "Acknowledge different ethnicities and 'let's be honest, I'm probably never going to know what you went through…'"
		2. Ask adolescents about differences	5. "If they say something that I don't understand like look I don't know you're the expert on this, like you tell me." 6. "What's it like to have this White lady up in your house asking all these questions?"
		3. Inclusion	7. "We don't have that many Asian students in our space, so I always make a point to ensure that they feel supported in our space. I think I go out of my way to introduce them to other students as well."
3.	Breaking language barriers	1. Speaking the language with which the client feels comfortable	1. "The language does help…it just impacts the relationship." 2. "With Hispanic families one thing I do find effective is the use of language, I think just being able to communicate with someone in Spanish and bringing that to the table automatically kinda creates a level of comfort for the families."
4.	Benefits of representation	1. Bond over cultural similarities	1. "A group of females students…they were all Dominican and I'm Dominican, so they definitely gravitated towards me." 2. "…Me being a man that mostly works with young men of color in relation to the like same culture whether that be sports, music, any type of pop culture reference. Also, being young...plays a part in connecting with them…"
		2. Unspoken connection	3. "…Actually, all of my clients have been people of color, and identifying as a person of color myself, I think there's like an unsaid connection." 4. "I was raised in the same neighborhoods that our young people are coming…I was one of the young people, I am a graduate of the program…that definitely helps a lot."

Table 2.

Theoretical, Focused, and Initial Categories for the Impact of Gender-Based Strategies

Theoretical	Focused	Initial
1. Blanket approach/Same strategy	1. Same treatment 2. Strategies are tailored to each individual.	1. "Everybody kind of gets treated the exact same way." 2. "I don't think there really different strategies…I kind of cater to the person, what works best for that person."
2. Lack training & support for LGBTQ youth	1. Lack of understanding in issues pertinent to the LGBTQI community 2. Needs are not appropriately assessed	1. "Some young ladies who fall into that same category mostly like LGBTQ, we got a lot of young ladies who are kind of like on the lesbian end…they dress like dudes, but they are also having the same conversations as the women. So, they kinda get like the best of both worlds." 2. "No, for the most part we treat them the same…We don't even really ask about their sexual orientation or like their sexual preference." 3. "I'd say my approach has been the same. I've only, in this particular job, I've only had one client that identified as lesbian."
3. Comfort with someone of the same sex	1. Alliance and rapport based on gender-based experiences. 2. Clients prefer someone of the same gender	1. "I think I tend to use a little bit more self-disclosure with females." (female participant) 2. "Probably sympathize with the young ladies more, because I know what it's like to be a woman of color…and I wouldn't understand how a young man would process that versus a young woman." (female participant) 3. "The women in our staff have better time connecting with the young women that come through our doors…there is a different level of comfort." (male participant) 4. "If I have a male on my case load, but something is going on, but he's not trying to open up with me, I say you know what, go talk to the substance use counselor, because that's a male and you could probably open up to them." (female participant) 5. "Dean of students, he's a male and he's…really there for the guys so I feel like the guys…they come to me with what they need to. But like on a more personal level they'll go to him." (female participant)

	3. Aware of appearance and youth perception 4. Cautious with clients of the opposite sex	6. "I'm definitely more hesitate of like what I'm wearing in front of younger boys or younger men." (female participant) 7. "With a female I know…at least in my eyes I'm like more comfortable in a space…versus some males that give me some vibes…like I can't be in my office with you. We needa be where the camera is." (female participant) 8. "Working with the young women…I had to become aware of just my physical maleness and the gender kind of dynamic and so in a way I never had to do for the guys." (male participant) 9. "With the guys I feel like I have way more freedom to just be who I am. You know, and with the girls it's kind of …nervous and scary sometimes." (male participant) 10. "We never allow like the male staff to be alone with the female participants just for the precautions." (female participant) "I am more conscious of boundaries when it comes to the young women." (male participant)
5.Authoritative approach with boys	Take a more aggressive tone	1. "I'm more inclined to use colorful language to get my young men to kind of get to where they need to go." (male participant) 2. "With a lot of the boys I think like immediately the demeanor is very no nonsense…I think I was more like gentle you know…I think with her I didn't even wait. I was sort of immediately, 'oh like come here.'" (female participant)
6. Sensitive and cautious with girls	1. Paternalistic approach 2. Gentle approach towards girls	1. "We do worry more when a girl is missing…girls are seen as more vulnerable." (male participant) 2. "If I have a female client that's dressed inappropriately…I get a female staff to address the female client because it's a sensitive issue if I am telling a female that you're dressed too provocative." (male participant) 3. "I guess with the girls I might be a little more inclined to protect them." (male participant) 4. "With the young ladies, I speak more slowly and softly. I don't try to sound like I'm barking or like I'm aggressive." (male participant)

Discussion

The juvenile justice system has been inconsistent in its treatment of boys and girls. There are numerous social service agencies available and resources allocated towards reducing the number of justice-involved adolescent boys who are already within the criminal justice system or at risk of becoming justice-involved (Matthews & Hubbard, 2008). Since the peak of girls arrest rates in 1997, there has been an inconsistent period of decline and incline in their arrest rates. From 1997 through 1999 there was a decline in girl's arrest rates, then there was a slight increase through the late 2000s, it increased from 23% in 1996 to 29% in 2009 (Ehrmann, Hyland, & Puzzanchera, 2019). More recently, from 2009 through 2015, there was a stable 29% of girl's arrested each year (Ehrmann, Hyland, & Puzzanchera, 2019). However, during this same period, the arrest rates for boys fell more sharply, down to 57% since 2006 (Ehrmann, Hyland, & Puzzanchera, 2019). Despite the legal system's recognition that girls and women make-up a greater segment of the population since its peak in 1997, there has been a (slower) response for gender-responsive programming, however, the reality is that there is still a scarceness of programs that are specific to the needs of girls and women (De La Rue & Ortega, 2019).

The first step towards the development of appropriate gender-specific programs is to acknowledge that the needs of boys and girls are different, and that service providers need to be trained in specific communication styles that help address gender differences (Lewis, 2006). This acknowledgment appeared to be difficult for the participants in this study. Although more than half of the participants stated that gender was irrelevant, more than half of those later reported greater comfort resulted from shared gender, suggesting that the commonly reported theme of gender irrelevance may be superficial or might reflect a socially acceptable or required trope, rather than an internal belief. Despite these types of statements, almost all participants stated

feeling more comfortable with clients of their own gender. This reflects a possible lack of comfort or knowledge about the important of these factors, and ways to navigate them.

In addition to enhanced comfort when working with clients of the same gender, providers also described the strain that gender differences put on the therapeutic relationship. Providers expressed the caution with which they approached clients of the opposite sex. Service providers reported worry about the clients' perceptions of them, which did not allow them to have the same "freedom" and comfort they had with a youth of their same gender. Addressing gender directly appeared to be related to fears about the perception of sexual impropriety or about a lack of rapport. Service providers' concern about how their treatment of clients, and particularly girls, was perceived may reflect sensitivity to a current national focus on sexual harassment. The reluctance to discuss gender issues was heightened for participants working with girls who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

The reluctance to discuss gender-based differences was only somewhat replicated when participants discussed the impact of culture. Although White service providers described the importance of acknowledging cultural impact in treatment, it was notable that participants who shared a similar cultural background with their client appeared to refrain from discussing cultural and racial factors because of an underlying assumption that they've had the same experiences. Young people often struggle understanding the power and effect of race and culture in our society, and it is arguably ultimately the responsibility of a trained service professional to make space for these conversations. Service providers can model how to discuss the impact of culture on treatment. This is likely to be an effective skill, given that even individuals with similar cultural backgrounds exhibit some differences in lived experience.

Almost all participants described the importance of a shared cultural background. According to our study, cultural similarity between professional providers and adolescent clients plays a vital and positive role in the therapeutic relationship. Although they did not report a need to discuss culture or race with their clients, participants who shared a similar culture to that of their clients expressed the role this factor played in rapport building. Participants described the importance of sharing the same race/ethnicity, speaking clients' primarily language, living in the same neighborhood, listening to the same music, and even participating in the program where the youth was now receiving services. These commonalities helped build trust with the youth and their families. Participants who did not share cultural commonalities with their clients were still able to build rapport with their adolescent clients but reported additional effort (e.g., "It's important to acknowledge the differences, while also acknowledging the similarities"). Providers can still engage in meaningful work with adolescent clients by building a trusting relationship where both parties are working together towards the same goals, and the adolescent is viewed as the expert in his or her life.

Our findings are in alignment with previous recommendations and observations regarding the need to improve training and supervision of service providers who are assigned cases involving girls (Baines & Adler, 1996; Lanctôt et al., 2012). When differences between girls and boys were acknowledged, they related to stereotypical factors such as the level of emotionality or aggression in boys and girls. Differences based on cultural or ethnic backgrounds were verbally acknowledged based on the race of the provider. Service providers did not identify differences between gender or cultural groups that related to clinical or demographic factors that would be relevant for forensic treatment, such as psychiatric symptoms. Treating all clients similarly regardless of gender and sexual identity is inconsistent with recommendations, which include

avoiding language and assumptions that present alternative sexual orientations as pathological

states, provide visible role models, familiarize themselves with resources for girls that have

alternative sexual orientations, and perhaps match them with staff who are comfortable and are

able to appropriately support girls who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Hubbard &

Matthews, 2007). Still, one notable and hopeful discrepancy between this study and prior

research was the lack of negativity expressed by the service providers in this study in response to

questions about working with girls. This may reflect evolving societal standards or growing

reluctance to admit to biases.

However, the study findings must be seen in light of its limitations. This study only

explored the perspective of service providers from a limited number of agencies in New York

City. It is hoped that this research will be replicated in other metropolitan and rural areas so we

have a better understanding of this issue and can start working towards initiatives that will help

programs meet the needs of justice-involved girls. Also, there were two researchers in the study

who conducted the interviews, and due to a slightly different approach or style this could have

potentially influenced the responses of the service providers. However, both investigators made

significant efforts to ensure that both interview styles were maintained as consistently as

possible. Additionally, the themes did not appear to vary based on the interviewer. Another

limitation relates to the breadth of participant backgrounds. We interviewed service professionals

from various practices, different backgrounds, and with different responsibilities. For instance,

although a lead teacher and a social worker's responsibilities at an agency may look similar, their

practice and education are different, and this could have affected the information we received.

The diversity in professional status relates to the variety of program types and format, which also

limits the generalizability of these results.

Another limitation related to the potentially mediating influences of practitioners'

personal and professional characteristics, which are rarely considered in studies. In the future it

would be helpful to investigate the impact of practitioners' age and gender on their perceptions

of clients. Also, it would be appropriate to consider how a service provider's level of education

and training has influenced their perception of the general needs and challenges of justice-

involved youth. In previous studies, practitioners who had a university diploma were much less

reluctant to work with girls due to their educational training and experience. Taking this

information into consideration and the responses we received from participants who did not

receive their college degree, it would be prudent to assume that participants with a higher level

of education would be able to effectively meet their client's gender and culturally specific needs.

Unfortunately, the sample in this study was too small to suggest differences in participants'

educational backgrounds.

This study benefited from a qualitative approach as information on this topic is scarce,

however future research will be required to further explore and validate the developed themes.

Additionally, this area of research cannot end with service providers. Understanding the

motivations, perceived successes and challenges of service providers is an important first step.

This must be followed by a consideration of the themes that youth themselves found to be

helpful or detrimental. A qualitative approach could then support whether techniques deemed to

be successful by youth and/or providers are associated with lowered rates of recidivism.

Without appropriate resources and programming, diversion programs are likely to have

difficulty appropriately meeting the needs of and engaging girls. Juvenile courts and other

community stakeholders would benefit from developing a coordinated response that includes

self-study of forces that may drive harsh responses to girls (and underrepresented groups) and a

development of checks, balances, and alternatives that promote positive outcomes for girls

(Stevens et al., 2011). The major challenge to those seeking to address the needs of girls within

the juvenile justice system remains the "invisibility" of girls (Chesney-Lind, 1999).

Identifying the strengths and challenges in the therapeutic relationship is one way to

increase the visibility of the needs of justice-involved girls. Once girls come in contact with the

juvenile justice system and are mandated into diversion programs, providers have the

responsibility of providing these girls with a safe space to unpack all the social constraints and

life issues. It is crucial that programs take the research on the gender disparities, incorporate the

importance of culture, and implement trainings and resources for their staff that can assist in

appropriately servicing their adolescent female clients.

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