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To cite this article: Karin Macke & Gabriele Hasler (2019): Why should person-centered facilitating be gender-sensitive?, Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies, DOI: [10.1080/14779757.2019.1650810](https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2019.1650810)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2019.1650810>



Published online: 23 Oct 2019.



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Why should person-centered facilitating be gender-sensitive?

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ABSTRACT

Human beings do not *have* a fixed sex/gender but everyone is constantly (re)creating the concepts of femininity and masculinity. But gender still functions as a basis for discrimination in the existing social order. The authors point out the importance of knowing about and reflecting gender prejudices as well as gender stereotypes, forms and mechanisms of discrimination being at work in order to not reproduce gender inequalities in facilitated groups. This article summarizes principles and present insights into gender-sensitiveness that might be important for person-centred encounter-groups.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 March 2019

Accepted 17 June 2019

KEYWORDS

Gender-sensitive; facilitating;
person-centered; male/
female; communication

Pourquoi la facilitation centrée sur la personne devrait-elle être sensible au genre ?

Les êtres humains n'ont pas de genre/sexe fixe mais chacun est constamment occupé à (re)créer les concepts de féminité et de masculinité. Or, dans l'ordre social établi, le genre continue de fonctionner comme une référence de discrimination. Afin d'éviter de produire des inégalités liées au genre dans les groupes facilités, les auteurs pointent l'importance de connaître et de réfléchir autant les préjugés liés au genre que les stéréotypes rencontrés ainsi que les formes et les mécanismes de discrimination à l'œuvre afin d'éviter de reproduire les inégalités de genre dans les groupes facilités. Cet article résume des principes et des réflexions actuels sensibles à la question du genre, qui peuvent s'avérer importants dans la facilitation des groupes de rencontre centrés sur la personne.

Warum sollte Personzentriertes Facilitating hellhörig für Gender sein?

Zusammenfassung: Menschen haben kein festgelegtes biologisches oder soziales Geschlecht, aber ständig schaffen alle die Konzepte von Femininität und Maskulinität neu. Aber soziale Geschlechterrollenzuschreibung funktioniert in der existierenden sozialen Ordnung immer noch als ein Grund zu Diskriminierung. Die Autorinnen weisen auf die Wichtigkeit hin, sowohl Gender-Vorurteile als auch Gender-Stereotypen, Formen und Mechanismen der Diskriminierung, die aktiv sind, zu kennen und zu reflektieren, um keine Gender-Ungleichheiten in begleiteten Gruppen zu reproduzieren. Dieser Artikel fasst Grundsätze und aktuelle Einsichten zur

Beachtung von sozialen Geschlechtsrollen zusammen, die für person-zentrierte Encountergruppen wichtig sein könnten.

Porque deveria a facilitação centrada na pessoa ser sensível ao gênero?

Os seres humanos não têm um sexo/gênero fixo, mas toda a gente insiste em (re)criar constantemente os conceitos de feminilidade e de masculinidade. O gênero continua a funcionar como base para a discriminação na ordem social vigente. Os autores assinalam a importância de conhecer e reconhecer: as manifestações de preconceitos; os estereótipos; as formas e mecanismos de discriminação ligados ao gênero existentes, com vista a não reproduzir desigualdades ligadas ao gênero em grupos facilitados. Este artigo resume princípios e insights atuais relativos à sensibilidade de gênero e que podem ter relevância nos grupos de encontro centrados na pessoa.

¿Por qué la facilitación centrada en la persona debe ser sensible al género?

RESUMEN: Los seres humanos no tienen un sexo / género fijo, pero todos constantemente (re) crean los conceptos de feminidad y masculinidad. Pero el género todavía funciona como base para la discriminación en el orden social existente. Los autores señalan la importancia de conocer y reflejar los prejuicios de género, así como los estereotipos de género, las formas y los mecanismos de discriminación en funcionamiento para no reproducir las desigualdades de género en los grupos facilitados. Este artículo resume los principios y las ideas actuales sobre la sensibilidad de género que podrían ser importantes para los grupos de encuentro centrados en la persona.

*Psychotherapeut*innen haben die Verantwortung, soziale Strukturen und deren Konsequenz für die psychische Gesundheit von Frauen* und Männern* zu reflektieren und in Theorie und Praxis ihrer Arbeit mitzudenken.¹*

The aim of this paper is to present principles for and insights into a gender-sensitive approach in person-centered facilitation derived from a critical and creative reflective inquiry into the authors' theoretical concepts and personal experiences. Facilitation in person-centered encounter groups focuses on enabling personhood and on the flourishing of self and others, i.e. developing connected relationships in which both facilitators and those facilitated feel acknowledged and respected as persons who are able to develop and grow. This in turn implies that facilitators are also in a constant state of being and becoming. Thus, in a genuinely person-centered approach, therapeutic support is provided through engagement in the process, rather than exclusion or withdrawal (Rogers, 2000).

In a group, the facilitator is responsible for setting up boundary conditions such as time of meeting, place, duration and membership, and makes other important contributions (...), but the responsibility for the process of the group is distributed among all the members, who jointly contribute to the creation of an enabling climate of trust, acceptance and caring (O'Hara & Schmid, 2013, p. 228).

How reflected, open-minded and enthusiastic do facilitators have to be in order to co-establish such a climate? Can this be achieved by being an active group member and by showing trust in the group process at the same time? In an atmosphere of freedom and connectedness, encounters and positive growth are possible. The facilitators' attitude of being congruent, deeply empathic, authentic, non-judgmental and unconditionally acknowledging the individual otherness of the group members, i.e. taking the experiences of individuals seriously and expressing/verbalizing sincere sympathy is therefore crucial for success (Schmid, 1996, p. 243).

Following the statements above, the authors deduce, facilitators have to be aware of group processes and have to display profound theoretical knowledge at the same time. In order to understand the individual otherness of human beings, a deep understanding of intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual development is required. People grow up and live in certain societal systems that shape their characters and behavior. They are mostly born into a binary sex/gender surrounding, which not only expects them to behave in accordance with certain gender assumptions but also to submit to patriarchal hierarchy. Cultural norms dictate how to be and deeply affect our actions, behavior, opinions, our self-perception and the perception of others. The established social order based on a hetero-normative binary gender hierarchy holds everyone captive. Being a person also means being socialized as a woman or a man in a certain culture at a specific time. Persons who do not fit into this binary system are subjects to special discrimination. In 'The Second Sex', Simone de Beauvoir (1949) claims that gender is socially constructed; 'one is not born a woman but becomes one' i.e. one is under cultural pressure to become one. Judith Butler takes her idea one step further and postulates that sex is a construction and a term in progress, too.

And clearly, the compulsion does not come from 'sex'. There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the 'one' who becomes a woman is necessarily female. If 'the body is a situation', as she claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a pre-discursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 12).

If this is true, we do not *have* a fixed sex/gender but everyone is constantly (re)creating the concepts of femaleness/femininity and maleness/masculinity inherent in their culture. Yet the idea of doing gender implies that, 'as an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification' (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 12). This is good news and might also be very helpful in the context of facilitating as discussed in more detail below. In addition we should be aware of the fact that being labeled as female or male is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 6).

Social dimensions are subject to historical changes; they are interwoven and reinforce or affect each other. Intersectionality is a set of overlapping social identities we all have, and the related systems of privilege and oppression that impact our lives (see Barker, 2017). Yet gender modifies other intersectional modalities as Brigitte Schigl (2012) claims. Gender still functions as a basis for discrimination in the existing social order.

Any social encounter can be pressed into service in the interest of ‘doing gender’². (...) In this way, new members of society come to be involved in a self-regulating process as they begin to monitor their own and others’ conduct with regard to its gender implications. (...) In doing gender, men are also doing dominance and women are doing deference (...), the resultant social order, which supposedly reflects ‘natural differences’, is a powerful reinforcer and legitimator of hierarchical arrangements (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 146).

Sabine Scheffler and Agnes Büchele point out the importance of knowledge and reflection about gender prejudices and stereotypes, about forms and mechanisms of discrimination and intersectionality in order to not reproduce gender inequalities in counseling situations. They claim that gender order is at play not only on an individual level but also on organizational, cultural as well as on institutional levels, which include counseling and psychotherapy institutes (see Büchele & Scheffler, 2014).

We can assume that such underlying mechanisms are always at play, i.e. also in person-centered encounter groups. The question arises whether we can create spaces that are free of discrimination and provide freedom for everyone? Can person-centered encounter groups be such emancipatory places?

Bettina Zehetner states that feminist approaches seek to change society by aiming to overcome patriarchal social models and do away with any form of discrimination in order to enable every human being to live an autonomous life. Individual and societal emancipation go hand in hand. Being offered the chance/option to reflect on current concepts of (fe*)male*ness and contemplate about the ways we are doing gender would help to enhance individuals’ competence and range of behavioral repertoire toward greater creativity and freedom. ‘What kind of alternatives are there?’ – is the most important question that arises (see Zehetner, 2015). Non-gender conforming behavior is healthy, according to outcomes of scientific studies (see Schigl, 2012, and Zehetner, 2015). At the same time, one of course should not forget about significant within-gender-group differences. In fact, it is all about differences and accepting them (see Barker, 2017, p. 22).

Incorporating social analysis will help the facilitator clarify the political nature of some of the therapeutic issues and result in the addressing of gender stereotypes which otherwise might contaminate the process. We should be aware of the fact that the wider cultural assumption of binary gender rooted in binary biological sex may well leave some with insecurities and shame around perceived difference, and/or fear of stigma. A feminist approach, which includes a commitment to facilitating equality and personal power between *any genders*, is helpful in establishing a constructive facilitating style. Meg-John Barker adds that it is important to reflexively engage with your own assumptions – and cultural norms – about love, relationships, and sex work in order to engage in a culturally competent way across not only gender diversity but also relationship diversity (see Barker, 2017, p. 56). As a facilitator you should become aware of your own biases and reflect on structural inequalities in your wider society (see Barker, 2017, p. 57)

Peter Schmid states that ‘gender-specific aspects in therapeutic and psychosocial relationships enrich and differentiate the understanding of person-centred practice and theory.’³

The art of communication as an example

Living in a world that systematically devalues women’s knowledge also has an impact on the way people communicate with each other. Asymmetries in the social structure are

reproduced in the content and the structure of language as well as in actual conversations (see Macke, 2010). Linguists like Deborah Tannen or Ruth Wodak investigated behavior of persons socialized as women and men in different settings and found out mechanisms at work we as (group) facilitators should be aware of. One example is the phenomenon of interruption in group conversations, which is associated with dominance and subordination. Studies prove that women are far more often interrupted than men regardless of their status in cross-gender conversations. “Men subordinates interrupted higher status women more often than the reverse” and ‘men succeeded in gaining the floor by this means 85% of the time, compared with 52% for the women’ (Wodak, 1998, p. 90).

Another interesting fact is that mens’ utterances tend to be assessed more relevant than womens statements. Women as well as men tend to refer/relate to statements produced by males rather than to females.

Also communication styles seem to be gendered, women tend to use a facilitative, personal style, men an assertive, authoritative style. Men maintain status distinctions and women try to minimize them.

In summary studies that focus on how men enact authority in professional positions suggest that women tend to expend linguistic effort to minimize status difference between themselves and their subordinates or patients (or as Tannen puts it, to save face for them), whereas men tend to use strategies that reinforce status differences. Thus, the women and men in these studies tend to create and maintain different alignments between themselves and their subordinates or patients. Women exercise their authority by using language strategies that create a symmetrical alignment (that is they downplay their authority). Men use language strategies that create and maintain an asymmetrical alignment, the alignment that is traditionally associated with authority (Wodak, 1998, p. 91).

Speech styles also influence the way people are appreciated;

ratings that women received for competence, likeability, and/or femininity depended on their language behaviour and the sex of the rater, but the ratings men received did not. Assertive women were perceived as more competent but less likeable, less influential or less feminine. These studies suggest that women must choose between being ‘assertive’ or being likeable and feminine (Wodak, 1998, p. 92)

Examples like the above are also likely to appear in person-centered cross-gender encounter-groups as mentioned before. Yet person-centered psychotherapists (as well as feminists) are interested in creating a society that is neither patriarchal nor discriminating in any way. They share a sociocritical and emancipatory attitude in order to create a fair, inclusive world, socially just, equally welcoming all genders. As the famous Austrian feminist Johanna Dohnal put it: ‘Die Vision des Feminismus ist nicht eine ,weibliche Zukunft’. Es ist eine menschliche Zukunft. Ohne Rollenzwänge, ohne Macht- und Gewaltverhältnisse, ohne Männerbündelei und Weiblichkeitswahn.’⁴

Couldn’t the effective force of client-centred therapy be channelled more directly toward facilitating social justice and constructive growth? (...) There is an intimate connection between realizing human potential and being a responsible and active member of a real community in an actual place (...) (Wood, 2006, p. 278)

Our experience and conviction is that it requires not only theoretical gender knowledge and knowledge of gender research (see Schigl, 2012), but also reflection on female socialization and its often contradictory and discriminating consequences, as well as an

understanding of social relations and power dynamics and insight into socio-political conditions for *any gender* (see Winkler, 1992). We are convinced that the self-reflective experience should be introduced in psychotherapy training. As facilitators we have to be aware of ourselves as ‘gendered persons’ and reflect our own biases. We have to understand the importance and relevance of gender-topics and gender-related forms of discrimination that might be at play in encounter groups in order to deliberately uncover those mechanisms and create places enabling freedom for any human being.

“If the approach is taken seriously as an ‘approach’ and not as a ready-made doctrine, ‘not as a school or dogma but as a set of tentative principles’, to quote Carl Rogers and John Wood (1974), then it still is the emancipatory approach par excellence” (Schmid, 2002, p. 4).

Notes

1. “It is the responsibility of psychotherapists to reflect social structure and its impact on the mental health of women* and men* both in theory as in practice.” Hasler and Macke (2012): Braucht Psychotherapie geschlechter-differentes Wissen? In: WLP 1/2012, p.19.
2. “Doing Gender” is a classic sociological concept developed by Candace West and Don Zimmerman. It means that gender is a routine accomplishment in everyday life and an ongoing activity. We can’t avoid doing gender. We do gender in interaction with others. It is a product/construction of social interaction.
3. Schmid (2004) p.3 As an example he analyzes the view on the actualizing tendency which has been developed from an androcentric idea of a “directional, forward striving, expanding, transcending, increasing force, a force towards autonomy” to a feminist view of it “as the force of the individual embedded in interconnectedness. Consequently, this would stress the social nature of the person much more than it was originally conceptualized in Rogers’ anthropology.” Even though it is beyond the scope of this article we would like to Stern’s illuminating insights into the dilemma of separating self and relationship and its consequences for adolescent girls and women (Stern, 1991, p. 112ff).
4. “The feministic vision of a better world is not the idea of a ‘female future’ but of a human future free of the constraints of gender, free of violent relationships, male cohorts and ‘feminine mystique’.” Johanna Dohnal, first Austrian minister of women’s affairs in a lecture at the Technical University of Vienna in 2004.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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