Do males have advantages or disadvantages in the massage therapy industry?

- Southland male practitioners’ perspectives.

**Background**

Gender inequality, discrimination, and sexist perceptions have been observed historically within many occupations and several professions have displayed disproportionate representation of one gender.\(^{1,4}\) Whether females are more suited to jobs involving sensitivities, nurturantness, and beauty, and whether males are more suited to skill, strength, and labour related work has been speculated historically.\(^{4,6}\) Massage therapy is a profession with a workforce of around 80% females\(^{1,4}\) raising questions such as: are females more suited to the massage profession, and if so why? Massage is an intimate form of therapy requiring the removal of clothes and trust in ones practitioner. Public perceptions linking sex to massage therapy, male social stigma, and sexual identity of clients may all be variables that influence how clients choose their massage practitioners.\(^{1,4}\) With massage therapy comes a complex dynamic of gender relations and little corresponding specific research. The purpose of this research project was to examine perceptions of possible gender disparity for males within the massage therapy industry and to gain insight into individual strategies to negotiate such gender related issues.

**Methods**

- **Information sheets & consent forms** - full detail of procedures given prior to participation consent
- **One on one interviews** - semi structured, 20 to 30 minutes duration, audio recorded
- **Data analysis** - raw data transcribed semi-verbatim, thematic analysis (general inductive approach)
- **Ethics** - granted by Southern Institute of Technology Ethics Committee, right to withdraw or not answer questions, anonymity kept via pseudonyms

**Participants**

- **Inclusion criteria were:**
  - Must be male
  - Must have a minimum of 1 year’s experience in the Southland massage therapy industry
  - Must have a minimum industry qualification of diploma
- **Participant characteristics (n=5)**
  - Female age 45 (years): 20-29 (1), 40-49 (2), 50-59 (2)
  - Industry experience 9.4 (years):1-5 (1), 6-10 (2), 20+ (1)
  - Qualifications: degree (4), diploma (1)
  - Business situation: own business (4), joint company/partnership (1)

**Results**

**Physical Factors**

**Advantages**

- General strength advantage
  - Marcus said “males are probably better at doing the heavier work, just physically . . . but it would come down to the individual and how they apply themselves”. Jonathon said “there are some females that are a bit weak but not all. There are some that can get in there”.

**Disadvantages**

- Over use of pressure
  - Paul commented “a male can press too hard” and appropriate pressure is important. Marcus agreed saying “males would be worse at the softer side of it” and need to be “able to change to working in a gender manner”.

**Discussion**

It was agreed by all participants that while males in general have more innate strength than females, it in no way implies superior skill or application. Strength was viewed as something that needed to be combined with accuracy and competency. Skill was also seen as an individual trait and was not gender-based, leaving a conclusion that little disparity exists between the genders based on physically.

**Client Comfort Issues**

**Advantages**

- Sports massage niche
  - Mott suggested males may cause less distraction in male sports, such as rugby, where as females may be more susceptible to “male athletes pushing (sexual) boundaries”.

**Disadvantages**

- Homophobia
  - It was perceived that male clients often choose female therapists because of homophobia. Marcus quipped “men don’t like other men touching them . . . especially fellows that think they’re tough”. Mott suggested some females may not be comfortable with their bodies and “be self-conscious, feeling more comfortable with the same sex . . . female therapists possibly have a broader range of clients”.

**Discussion**

While a small niche may exist for males in certain sports areas, participants agreed that slight disadvantages exist due to a small number of clients choosing their therapists based on gender comfort or sexual identity. Males were seen to need good communication, draping skills, confidence, and a sound reputation to counter client comfort issues.

**Reputation Vulnerability**

**Advantages**

- Sexual harassment claims
  - Paul said men need “to be very weary and on guard . . . men can make a comment about a woman and its sexual harassment but a woman makes a comment and it’s acceptable. There’s a double standard”. Marcus agreed saying “it would only take one allegation and that would be your reputation out the window . . . find a new career”.

**Disadvantages**

- Public stigma
  - Jonathon felt males were more vulnerable to stigmatic maltreatment saying “there are males out there who will take advantage of (clients) . . . it only takes one person to do that and all male therapists are tagged”.

**Discussion**

It was felt that community perceptions of male massage practitioners could be easily influenced by ‘scandal’ reports, and historical misconceptions or sexist attitudes of the past\(^{6}\) may still exist to some extent today. The participants elaborated on key points male practitioners need to incorporate into their practice to maintain reputation integrity: keep immaculate professional boundaries, watch for transference or counter-transference issues, keep very high hygiene standards, and maintain a clean healthy work environment.

**Conclusion**

This research identified several advantages and disadvantages for male massage therapists, however the significance and implications upon their practice appeared minimal. A general strength advantage was agreed on by all participants but this did not imply superior massage application or greater industry success. Any physical ascendency that males may have seemed to be proportionately offset by a different, possibly smaller client pool due to gender/sexuality comfort issues. Additionally males may have to deal with collective gender reputation damage due to current or historical male practitioner transgressions and unfavourable residual public perceptions from the past. Strategic recommendations from the participants to counter male gender disadvantages included: sound professional boundaries, good communication skills, immaculate draping, and pride in personal presentation. Further research in this area could include: female client/therapist perspectives of therapist choices, strategies for managing gender issues, larger scale male perspective research, and wider practice pattern demographics of male massage therapist. Overall this research concluded that male massage therapists do have minor advantages and disadvantages in the massage therapy industry but practitioner success was not dictated by gender – rather by individual skill, professionalism, and reputation development.

**References**


**Limitations**

- Small number of participants
- Only a male perspective
- Only from a practitioner’s perspective
- Only a local perspective (cannot be generalised to NZ, or globally)
- Interviewer skill and experience
- Male researcher – impartiality could not be guaranteed due to possible underlying biases

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