

## **Influence of Presenting Problems in Choice of Counsellor Gender**

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the influence of presenting problems in choice of counsellor gender among university students in Kenya. Due to changes in traditional social set up, individuals have been alienated from their extended family and community that provided the necessary support system, thus an increase in the number of people, both males and females seeking professional therapy. University students who are largely young adults experience emotional and psychological challenges that require counselling. The objectives of this study were: to determine the issues that are taken to men/women counsellors by either gender and investigate their influence on the choice of the gender of the counsellor. The study is guided by Person Centered and Social Learning Theories. The study applied descriptive survey research design using quantitative and qualitative data. Stratified, simple random and purposive sampling methods were used to sample three universities, 310 students and seven student counsellors. Data was collected using questionnaires, in-depth interview schedules and Focus Group Discussions Guide. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and is presented in Tables, Pie charts and Bar graphs. For qualitative data, emerging patterns of the content analysis is presented thematically according to research objectives. The study reveals that students are faced with many counselling issues such as academic, psychological, social, personal, economic, health, physical, vocational and spiritual. The study findings reveals that 54% of students prefer female counsellors as compared to 27% that prefer male counsellors. Issues that students discuss with university male counsellors include academic, family, personal, peer relationships, economic and physical problems. Issues that male and female students discuss with university female counsellors are psychological, social, spiritual, and education/academic challenges. Female students would not seek help from male counsellors for feminine issues like menstruation. Likewise male students will not seek help from female counsellors for masculine issues for example erectile dysfunction. This study concludes that presenting problems influence choice of counsellor gender. The study recommends that, Intake counsellors should be gender sensitive and allocate the preferred gender according to presenting problems.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Counselling is a suitable form of help for a variety of personal challenges for example depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; McLeod, 2003a; Palmer, 2010; Sommers-Flanagan, 2004). Counselling is mostly dedicated to boosting or re-establishing client's own self-awareness, decision making resources, risk-taking and individual growth. Counselling has existed in our societies for long, though it has adopted different forms as well as interpretations (Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan, 2004; Wango 2014). People in all societies and at all times have endured the misfortune of emotional or psychological distress and behavior problems. University students, mainly comprising of young adults experience emotional and psychological issues that need counselling. The utilization of counselling psychological services assists students individually and in groups to develop academic, social and personal competencies as well as cope with interpersonal issues (Frank and Karn, 2005; Sikolia and Lutomia, 2002).

Biswalo (1996) asserts that the need for counselling services today may be attributed to the ever-growing complexity of the society such that it becomes essential that people learn how to cope with the upcoming challenges. The difficulties of day-to-day living are encountered by all persons, both young and old, in developed and developing countries (Wango, 2014). There are increasing personal, economic, social, as well as educational problems in the contemporary society (Biswalo, 1996; Wango, 2014). The unprecedented development of learning institutions especially first generation students, produce various psychological issues that are personal, social and vocational, thus the need for counselling (Nyaga, 2011).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gilbert and Scher (1990) have questioned what they call the 'iron rule' that presumes gender differences within each sex. However, it is acceptable that differences have been noted between males and females in help seeking. Russell et al (2008) studied a sizeable sample of international students enrolled in an Australian metropolitan university to evaluate the dissemination of the issues for which they sought help. 76.1 % said they needed academic counselling, 60.1% vocational help, and 56% requested emotional counselling. Cheung and Liu (2005) found that adolescents have a tendency to seek help mainly for academic problems, choosing to focus less on interpersonal and emotional problems. However no reasons were given for this, hence this study

Blier and Atkinson (1987) examined potential clients' willingness to seek counselling based on their perceptions of various counsellor characteristics. Participants were asked to review descriptions of counsellors which identified the counsellors' gender and gender role (that is feminine, masculine, or androgynous) and then asked to indicate their willingness to seek services from each counsellor for a variety of listed problems. Results suggest that there was no difference in preference of counsellor's gender in regard to participants' willingness to seek counselling. However, results indicate that counsellor gender role was significantly influential in participants' preference, but this was dependent on presenting problem (Blier and Atkinson, 1987). More specifically, participants indicated that they would prefer to seek services from a feminine counsellor for personal problems, a masculine counsellor for assertiveness problems, and a masculine or androgynous counsellor for academic problems (Blier and Atkinson, 1987). A study by a male counsellor on the topic client preference for gender of health professionals, established that 25% of females had a preference for a female counsellor, 73% had no preference, whereas only 13% of males had a preference of female counsellors and 83% had no preference (Keeves and Lacomski, 1999). This shows that males and females have gender preferences. However, no reasons were given for the preferences, hence the need for further research.

Mezzano (1989) carried out a research on gender preferences as well as perceived problem areas of secondary school students from seventh through twelfth grades. Mezzano wanted to investigate the problem area and their associated gender preferences of each grade and changes that these preferences underwent while a student was progressing through high school. In the vocational problem areas both gender preferred the male counsellor across the six grades supporting Brown's (1956) gender role approach and Lee (2000). With regard to Mezzano's (1989) research on home and family problems, 57% males at the seventh grade level preferred the male counsellor but with each year the preference shifted to the female counsellor. These findings suggest that in the male pre-adulthood years, the gender preference for family concerns were for the male counsellor but as the students approached adulthood, gender preference shifted to the female counsellor.

Lee (2000) found that preference for counsellor gender was dependent on presenting problem of the clients. More specifically, Lee presented participants with videotaped sessions involving a client presenting with vocational concerns or a client presenting with child-rearing concerns. Each presenting problem was videotaped once with a male counsellor and once with a female counsellor (Lee, 2000). In addition, the participants were asked to complete an assessment regarding their views of the counsellors. The results indicate that there was no overall difference in perceived credibility of the counsellors based on counsellor's gender (Lee, 2000). However, the results also suggest that male counsellors were preferred for presenting problems regarding vocational concerns, whereas female counsellors were preferred for concerns dealing with child-rearing problems (Lee, 2000). The author seem to suggest the significant influence that presenting concerns appear to have on preference for counsellor gender. Just as Boulware and Holmes (1985) and Lee (2000) found, presenting problem appears to be influential in determining counsellor's gender preference hence this study.

A research carried out by Macharia (1991) shows that clients who received their preferred counsellor had more favorable outcomes as compared to those who received their less preferred assignments. Different types of problems are viewed as appropriate for different types of help providers. Macharia concludes that the nature of the client's issues affect his or her own help seeking propensities and that client's preferences depend on whether the problems are personal, social, educational or vocational. The theoretical orientation of a counsellor could also be important. Males are more likely to be referred to male counsellors and female counsellors get fewer referrals of male clients (Mayer, 1992).

The effect of gender and gender function can also affect family functioning and self as identity (McGoldrick, 1998). Many cultures throughout the world have also tended to place the male in higher status or prominence than the female despite the obvious bias (Gilbert and Scher, 1990; Lips, 1999; Wango, 2014) and though most of the gender stereotypes have been overcome, a lot of negative gender overtones still persist in traditional societies such as Kenya (Wango, 2014). Research also reveals some gap in factors that influence clients' choices of counsellor by gender. Preferences develop, evolve and change as time passes. Hence knowing a person's preference in time is not sufficient to fully understand one's choices throughout life (Gelso and Fretz, 1992). Consequently, this study investigates the influence of presenting problems in gender of the counsellor among university students in Kenya. Most of the studies cited were done in western countries, in

different settings, environments and culture. But this research sought to establish the situation in an African setting, specifically in Kenya and with University students

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey design that used mixed methodology that collected both quantitative and qualitative data. According to Kerlinger (1973), a survey can be utilized to study large or small populations by choosing and evaluating samples selected from the population, such as the vast number of university students involved in this study. This in turn allows one to ascertain 'what is', and the circumstances as they exist, for instance, issues that are taken to male/ female counsellors by university students, (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). Kothari (2004) postulates that a survey can be utilized to study sizeable or negligible populations by choosing and analyzing samples chosen from the population, such as the huge number of university students involved in this study. A survey allows one to dictate the state of affairs as they are, (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). In this study, the target population were the 65 universities in Kenya by 2015 (Commission of University Education, 2015). The accessible population was selected from three universities; Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology; Mount Kenya University and Kenya Methodist University. Simple random, stratified and purposive sampling methods were used to sample the participants from the three universities. The sample size used was 310 students and seven student counsellors. Research instruments included in-depth interview schedules, questionnaires as well as Focus Group Discussions. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was used to supplement presentation of quantitative data. The instruments were piloted at one private and one public university. Reliability of questionnaires was determined using test-retest method. Thereafter, the Pearson's Product Moment Formula was used to compute the correlation coefficient between the tests. The test-retest scores indicated a correlation coefficient of 0.89 for students and 0.93 for counsellors which shows that the instruments were very authentic. A major limitation of this study was that some of the participants of this research study had never previously sought counselling services and were thus not real clients in a pragmatic counselling session. However, responses were and collated with data obtained through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students who had sought counselling. Furthermore, information obtained from the students was collated with data from university students' counsellors who had been involved in practical counselling of students. Data from university counsellors was comprised of information on the prevalence of counselling services among university students as well as the gender of those who sought counselling and the rate at which they sought counselling. This was important to harmonize the data from students seeking services, as well as those who could have failed to seek help. Suggestions from the study could enhance interventions and promotion of students of counselling services in the Kenyan Public and Private universities.

### IV. RESULTS

#### Issues taken to Male / Female Counsellors by University Students

The first research question sought to find out issues that are taken to male/female counsellors by female or male students in the universities. The study sought to find out from students and counsellors whether there are issues students would prefer to discuss with a man or woman in counselling process. **Table no 1** summarizes this information:

**Table no 1** Occurrence of Issues Students Would Discuss with a Male or Female in Counselling Process

Issues	Counsellors		Students	
	M%	F%	M%	F %
Yes	28	58	39	52
No		14	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	

Majority of the counsellors (n=6, 28% males, 58% females) and students (n=166, 39% males, 52% females) were of the opinion that there exists specific issues that students prefer to discuss with either gender of the university counsellors. However, the converse is also true according to a section of the counsellors (n=1, 14% females) and students (n=18, 4% males, 5% females).

Information from some counsellors revealed that students will seek professional help for various issues such as personal, interpersonal, emotional or vocational problems, stress-related problems and relationship issues. However, they consult the counsellors depending on their gender and the nature of the problem presented.

Information from students revealed that a high percentage of students sought counselling for academic problems. The students identified academic problems such as: planning academic progress, orientation of new students on how to adjust to the university's academic and social life, guidance on choice of courses, decisions on interests and abilities, good study habits, learning techniques, gaining confidence, timetabling and examination techniques. According to Sikolia and Lutomia (2002), the problems often encountered by university students include: academics, sexuality, interpersonal relationships, family problems, financial challenges, self-identity issues, low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety. Students in the educational institutions search for values that can give meaning to life after college or training. Ndong (2004) notes that students can become frustrated when they have difficulty relating their education or training to the rest of their lives. Fuster (2000) contends that counselling helps individuals to understand and use personal opportunities that they have. This makes counselling services vital in educational institutions.

Vocational counselling services provided to students include selection of careers of their choice. The students are given the opportunity to choose their career wisely. One of the essentials of vocational counselling is that it enables students to interpret their training programs in terms of employment opportunities and draw up viable career development plans. A counsellor revealed that the counsellors can provide information on conditions of work, wages, benefits, contracts, and prospects for promotion or other advancement, employer demands, professional associations and workers' union.

In addition, students identified relationship and social problems as another potential counselling area. Students noted that they would all need social counselling to empower them gain comprehension of the root causes of their problems and to make rational decisions on how to solve or cope with them. The students can be encouraged to practice various social skills. These social skills can help promote good interpersonal relationships within the universities. Further, the students stated that in addition to social issues taken to counsellors for help, they also receive counselling on personal issues. They noted that they have problems related to their personal lives which interfere with their academic and social life. Psychological problems which are taken by students for counselling include lack of friends and loneliness. Other issues include: spiritual issues, health and physical issues and marital counselling.

**Issues Students Discuss With University Female Counsellors**

As earlier mentioned in a section of this study, there are specific issues which students discuss with university female counsellors. This study noted that students' preference for counsellor's gender can change depending on the problem type for which the individual student seeks help. A summary of the issues that students discuss with female counsellors is presented in **Table no2**.

**Table no2** Issues That Students Discuss With University Female Counsellors

Gender of Students	Issues to Discuss With Female Counsellors	Counsellors		Students	
		M (%)	F	M (%)	F
Male	Economic Issues	18	25	14	19
	Social Issues	24	33	25	33
	Psychological Issues	30	41	29	38
	Spiritual Issues	14		10	12
	Physical Issues		14	5	7
	Academic Issues	37	49	26	33
Female	Economic Issues	30	41	21	27
	Social Issues	37	49	40	52
	Psychological Issues	43	57	34	45
	Spiritual Issues	24	33	20	27
	Physical Issues	30	41	25	33
	Academic Issues	37	49	39	52

**Table no2** categorizes the issues students presented for counselling to female counsellors as psychological, social, vocational, physical, spiritual, and education/academic problems.

Koile and Bird (1970) identified eleven types of problems ranging from psychological and physical development concerns, through finance concerns to issues regarding adjustment to university work. The study findings reveal that both female and male students have faith in female counsellors to handle their counselling issues. Further, Chi-square test of independence shows a highly significant relation at .05 between gender of students and issues students discuss with university female counsellors ( $\chi^2= 3.095$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.00$ ). More females than males present more issues to female counsellors. Information got from counsellors attributes the failure of

males from seeking counselling from female counsellors as a function of men's stereotyping as 'being strong' and 'able to cope' with problems. Among the social issues highlighted by both students and counsellors which are presented to female counsellors are sexual relationships among students which could result into unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Poor relationships among university students are also noted to be prevalent and needed counselling. The psychological issues identified by the respondents include:

- a) Health problems as a result of HIV/AIDS as well as stress resulting from isolation from peers and family, stigma and discrimination;
- b) Bereavement through death of significant members of the family such as parents and other family members.
- c) Drug and substance abuse;

The trend in academic performance for some students keep on declining. Students who are affected tended to show signs of despair and withdrawal and hence consult female counsellors for further guidance. Female counsellors are considered for academic-educational counselling, career-vocational help, and personal-social-emotional counselling.

Information from a section of students revealed that both gender prefer seeking assistance from same-gendered counsellors for vocational problems. This study further noted that for personal and emotional problems, majority of female and male students prefer seeking help from same-gendered counsellor. These findings have been explained in terms of the belief that same-gender counsellors better understand gender-specific problems as a result of having been through the same difficulties themselves. The findings indicate that same-gender preferences are particularly improbable with females seeking help for educational and financial concerns. This concurs with Boulware and Holmes (1985). However, whereas most female students preferred seeking help from same gendered counsellor for their personal issues, some male students prefer seeking help from female counsellors for their personal and academic problems.

According to Feltham (1996), individuals want help from counsellors who are warm and supportive. This is in line with Person Centered Theory adopted in this study. Female counsellors are perceived to have these characteristics. Male students perceive female counsellors to be less judgemental. Male students agonize that male counsellors will accuse them of defy masculine ideologies if they were to seek help. Consequently, the degree of importance male students assign to academic problems, their perceptions of the functions of counselling services, attributed characteristics of university counsellors and threats to masculine ideology encourage males to have more positive attitudes towards seeking help for academic problems and to build more confidence in female counsellors. This diversity in responses exposes a rather complex scenario in counselling processes.

According to this study's findings, university counsellors advocate for same-gender pairings in counselling, particularly for female clients, since female counsellors are much more able to fully understand and empathize with women's feelings about such topics as menstruation, pregnancy and rape. However, it is important to note that counselling processes associated with gender are influenced by the types of personal problems discussed between clients and counsellors. The counsellors suggested that females were more willing than males to discuss highly personal relational information with female counsellors. Boulware and Holmes (1985) noted that female clients, almost invariably, prefer a female counsellor for discussing personal concerns.

### Issues That Students Discuss With University Male Counsellors

Counsellors and students in this study reported that university students seek help from counsellors for a variety of reasons such as personal problems, family problems, academic problems, socio-economic problems and peer relationship problems. These are the issues presented for counselling depending on the gender of the counsellor. This section presents a summary of these issues as indicated in **Table no 3**.

**Table no3**Issues That Students Discuss With University Male Counsellors

Gender of Students	Issues to Discuss With Male Counsellors	Counsellor (%)		Students (%)	
		M	F	M	F
Male	Economic Issues	18	25	14	19
	Social Issues	24	33	25	33
	Psychological Issues	12	17	15	19
	Spiritual Issues	6	8	10	12
	Physical Issues	18	25	23	30
	Academic Issues	37	49	26	33
Female	Economic Issues	30	41	28	36
	Social Issues	12	17	10	14
	Psychological Issues	18	25	20	26
	Spiritual Issues	12	17	20	27

	Physical Issues	30	41	25	33
	Academic Issues	37	49	32	42

As depicted in Table 4.3 and in contrast to the responses in **Table no 3**, both the counsellors and students presented varied views concerning the issues presented to male counsellors by both student genders. According to a majority of students (n=144, 32 %male, 42% female) and counsellors (n=6, 37% male, 49% female) female and male students had confidence in male counsellors handling academic issues. Due to their masculine nature, male counsellors are believed by female students to offer informed counselling on physical issues. This assertion was informed by a majority of students (n=112, 23% male, 30% female) and counsellors (n=6, 18 % male, 25 % female).

These findings show that problem type greatly influences attitudes towards seeking help among males than as compared to females. The first principal reason is that male students perceive academic problems as being more ordinary than personal problems. These findings agree with Mahalik (2003) who contends that males are more willing to seek help if their problems are perceived as common and ordinary. This researcher's counselling experience concur with the findings of this study, and with Mahalik (2003) that males share problems that are common for example academic and will share personal problems rarely and only after establishing trust.

Moreover, Mansfield and Addis (2003) assert that the ego-centrality of the issue plays a fundamental role for males. Mansfield and Addis (2003) contend that people are less likely to concede that they need help for problems that reflect an important quality about themselves. If academic problems are seen as less ego-central for males as compared to personal problems, then males will be more willing to talk through issues of an academic nature with a professional, and less likely to share personal problems (Mansfield and Addis, 2003). This agrees with the findings of this study that male students are more likely to seek professional help for academic problems as said by 37% of male, 49 % female counsellors and 26% of male, 33% female students. Male students in this study contends that disclosing personal-emotional problems will threaten the image of their masculinity among male students. This concurs with the social learning theory adopted in this study.

According to the students who participated in this study, female students prefer male counsellors actively for problems involving only academic (74%), physical (58%) and economic issues (64%). Both male and female students present the following for counselling; financial problems, academic issues, psychological, social, family, relational and physiological issues. For academic issues, a male counsellor is preferred by both male and female clients, the study further notes. Female clients, on the other hand, almost invariably prefer a female counsellor for discussing personal concerns as earlier noted. According to the students, for academic problems, gender pattern is inconsistent. Again for economic issues, the students noted that male counsellors are preferred by both female and male students.

**Table no 5** Relationship between Gender of the Counsellor and Issues Discussed with Male/Female Students

		Issues discussed with university male/ female counsellors						
		Gender	Social		Academic		Psychological	
Respondents			Male counsellor	Female Counsellor	Male Counsellor	Female counsellor	Male counsellor	Female counsellor
<b>Students</b>	Female		14%	52%	42%	52%	26%	38%
	Male		25%	25%	26%	26%	15%	29%
<b>Counsellors</b>	Female		12%	49%	49%	49%	25%	57%
	Male		24%	33%	37%	37%	12%	43%

A cross tabulation of issues discussed with male/female counsellors by male and female students shows that 52% of female students would discuss academic issues with a female counsellor while 37 % of male counsellors contend that students would discuss academic issues with a male counsellor. Also 15% of male students were of the opinion that they would discuss psychological issues with a male counsellor while 57% of female counsellors said that students would discuss psychological issues with female counsellors. In addition, 52% of female students said that they would discuss social issues with a female counsellor while compared to the male students where 25 % would discuss social issues with either male of female counsellor. This researcher concurs with Lee (2000) and Boulware and Holmes (1985) the nature of presenting problems plays a great role in determining counsellors gender preference.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the findings it can be concluded that both male and female students are faced with numerous counselling problems namely psychological, academic, social, economic, personal, physical, health, work-related and spiritual. It can be concluded that threat to masculine ideology tends to encourage males to have a more optimistic attitude towards looking for help for vocational and issues and that female students pursue social psychological counselling to help them gain comprehension of the root cause of their problems.

## VI. RECOMMENDATION

In addition, client preferences for counsellor gender varies across problem types. Therefore, this study recommends that when assigning clients to counsellors, counselling center staff persons should consider clients' preference for a specific counsellor gender according to the intimacy level of self-disclosure and the emotional level of presenting issues. Counsellors should also discuss with the clients, or at least be aware of, in what ways clients' potential gender preference might influence the therapeutic relationship.

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