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*The Counseling Psychologist* 2002; 30; 630  
DOI: 10.1177/00100002030004008

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• PROFESSIONAL FORUM

**Sex Differences in Emotion:  
A Critical Review of the Literature and  
Implications for Counseling Psychology**

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*This article examines the findings of several reviews of the empirical literature on biological sex and emotion, focusing on the degree to which perceived sex differences in emotionality are, and in most cases are not, supported while at the same time addressing the implications this body of research has for counseling psychologists. This article also explores potential explanations, such as gender role socialization or situational influences, for the profession's continued acceptance of large innate sex-based affective differences. Finally, the third section discusses several concerns this continued acceptance raises for the practice of counseling, whereas the last section offers a research agenda building on the review presented herein.*

The purpose of this article is to explore the literature surrounding the sex-emotion debate, with a particular focus on the issues important to counseling psychologists. Emotion, defined as an individual's "experience and expression of [affective information]" (Greenberg & Safran, 1987, p. vii), plays a significant role in counseling, regardless of whether emotion is a fundamental part of the counseling psychologist's theoretical framework (e.g., Self Psychology: Kohut, 1977; Gestalt Therapy: Perls, 1969) or whether emotion is considered to be a significant, although not primary, element of the counseling process (e.g., Cognitive Therapy: Ellis & Grieger, 1977;

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The contribution of the first two authors was approximately equal. We would like to thank Elizabeth Skowron, Ph.D., in the Department of Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology, and Rehabilitation Services at Penn State University, Hanna M. Frost, in the Psychology Department at the University of Florida, and Dawn Marie Wester for their comments on earlier drafts. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stephen R. Wester, Ph.D., Department of Educational Psychology, Enderis Hall, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53154; phone: 414-229-4774; e-mail: SRWester@UWM.EDU.

THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST, Vol. 30 No. 4, July 2002 630-652

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630

Behavior Therapy: Skinner, 1974). Indeed, “emotion and emotion-related processes lie at the heart of counseling” (Heesacker & Bradley, 1997, p. 201), and, accordingly, counseling psychologists’ increased understanding of affective phenomena may increase their ability to facilitate certain therapeutic change processes (e.g., Greenberg & Safran, 1989). However, at the same time, less than 6% of the most popular counseling texts mention basic theory or research on emotion (Heesacker & Bradley, 1997). Our review confirmed these findings, suggesting that graduate instruction in emotion science tends to be reduced to generalist discussions of “a sentence or two rather than a full-length treatment” (Heesacker & Bradley, 1997, p. 202) or subsumed under courses reviewing theories of counseling, psychotherapy, or psychopathology. Unfortunately, such generalist training tends to “leave unchallenged conscious and/or unconscious biases which can be harmful to clients” (LaFromboise, Foster, & James, 1996, p. 49) who do not meet our ideals regarding emotions and emotional expression.

One example of an “unchallenged conscious and/or unconscious [bias]” (LaFromboise et al., 1996, p. 49) is the degree to which men and women are considered to be emotionally different. For example, there seem to be two distinct perspectives about the interaction of sex, defined as the “biological [categories] male and female” (Lips, 1997, p. 4), and emotion within the counseling psychology literature (see Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). The first perspective, traditionally informed by writings on counseling specific clients (e.g., see Brooks, 1998; Brooks & Good, 2001a, 2001b; Pollack & Levant, 1998) and reinforced by popular culture (e.g., see Farrell, 1999; Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990), tends to emphasize sex differences in emotion. It stems from the belief in “deep-seated and enduring differences between men and women in core self-structures, identity, and relational capacities” (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, p. 456). In contrast, the second perspective concludes that “[sex] differences [in emotionality] are not universal, dramatic, [or] enduring” (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, p. 456). Instead, if observed they tend to be either context dependent (e.g., Vogel, Tucker, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999) or of smaller magnitude than suggested by societal perceptions (e.g., Shields, 1995).

During the course of this article, we will clarify these two perspectives by identifying the degree to which each is, or is not, supported by empirical research. It should be noted here that we differentiate biological sex from gender, which can be defined as “the cultural expectations for femininity and masculinity” (Lips, 1997, p. 4). This is an important distinction to make, as counselors often see emotional differences between female clients and male clients stemming not from biological sex but rather from socialized gender roles. Research in the areas of male gender role strain (Pleck, 1981, 1995) and male gender role conflict (see O’Neil, Good, & Holmes, 1995, for a review),

for example, suggests that the socialized male role, coupled with situational factors, may influence how some men express their emotions. Our assertion, however, is that observations of these small, situationally influenced, learned differences in emotional behavior have become so ingrained in our professional consciousness that they may be masquerading as objective truths about women's and men's affective abilities (e.g., Heesacker et al., 1999; Kiselica, 2001). Therefore, whereas this article does explore the role of such factors as gender, it focuses primarily on biological sex and the degree to which it does or does not account for affective differences between men and women. Overall, we hope to facilitate the improvement of both the delivery and the outcome of counseling, as well as the training of counseling psychologists, by addressing an area of work not typically explored within most counseling psychology training programs (Heesacker & Bradley, 1997).

### REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON SEX AND EMOTION

To ensure that we surveyed all of the reviews in this area, we used PsycLIT, PsycINFO, and ERIC as databases. The search terms "sex," "emotion," and "sex and emotion" were employed. This resulted in 12 reviews of the empirical research on emotion: (a) Canary, Emmers-Sommer, and Faulkner (1997), who focused on emotion within personal relationships; (b) Brody (1996), who reviewed the empirical research on sex and emotion within a developmental framework that focused on parent-child boundaries; (c) Brody and Hall (1993), who conducted two reviews (Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000) on the sex and emotional experience literature; (d) Guerrero and Reiter (1998), who reviewed research on sex and emotion in the context of social skills and emotional communication; (e) Hall (1987), who conducted two meta-analyses (Hall, 1978, 1984) on sex and nonverbal communication; (f) LaFrance and Banaji (1992), who reviewed the empirical research on sex and emotion published through the early 1990s; (g) Manstead (1998), who reviewed the research on sex and emotion across several areas, including psychophysiology, facial expressiveness, and accuracy in perceiving others' emotional states; (h) Shields (1995), who reviewed sex and emotion research in the context of gender development; (i) White and Mullen (1989), who reviewed the jealousy research on relationship-related factors and processes; and (j) Ickes, Gesn, and Graham (2000), who reviewed research on empathic accuracy.

We summarize the key findings from these reviews using Lang's (1968, 1994) tripartite framework, which conceptualizes emotion across three dimensions: (a) *overt actions*, such as observable behaviors; (b) *subjective reports*, such as a client's description of his or her feelings; and (c) *physiolog-*

*ical responses*, such as heart rate or breathing. We chose this framework for three reasons. First, although emotion has been defined in many different ways and incorporated in various interventions throughout the counseling process, organizing this review with a unifying framework allows many relevant aspects of an individual's emotional experience to be addressed. Second, this perspective presents and encourages an examination of the relationships among its domains within client-specific affective contexts (Bradley, 2000). For example, whereas clients can verbally describe affective responses, counselors can nonverbally evaluate such descriptions through observation in session, behavior measurement, and/or a sampling of physiological responses. Such a "triangulation" approach, accounting for verbal, nonverbal, and physiological indicators of emotion, affords counseling psychologists a better chance of fully understanding the emotion being expressed and increases the likelihood that they will design more client-specific interventions. Indeed, disjunctions between the three dimensions are considered by some to be important indicators of psychological distress (Maxmen & Ward, 1995; Safran & Greenberg, 1991). Finally, Lang's (1968, 1994) framework allows for an easier translation of emotion science, therefore increasing scholarly exchanges between emotion researchers and counseling psychologists (e.g., Heesacker & Bradley, 1997; Heesacker & Carroll, 1997) and placing counseling psychologists in a better position to interpret and use the work of emotion researchers by "base[ing] [their] psychological practice on a body of scientifically attained knowledge" (Forsyth & Leary, 1997, p. 187).

### **Overt Actions**

Research in this area involves the use of actual performance measures, the assessment of observable facial expressions, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, and reaction time. We summarize the research under two subheadings: (a) verbal expression and (b) nonverbal expression. Overall, these studies suggest that in the absence of societal demands on affective presentations (e.g., Lips, 1997), women and men do not differ in their ability to process, understand, and express emotion. Indeed, the reviews we examined demonstrated few differences between women and men, particularly in the area of verbal expression. Furthermore, those differences that were found appeared inconsistently across studies and across reviews, suggesting that they were the result of situational factors rather than innate differences in affective ability.

*Verbal expression.* Empirical research does not reveal any consistent pattern of sex differences in the verbal communication of emotions. For example, the Ickes et al. (2000) review of men's and women's verbal expression of empathy showed no sex differences across 7 of 10 studies. They also noted

that results demonstrating differences in verbal expressions of empathy were due to participants' being motivated to present themselves in a stereotypical manner rather than biological sex (Ickes et al., 2000). Furthermore, although both women and men reported experiencing sadness at similar levels, women tended to show more behavioral displays of sadness (i.e., crying), whereas men tended to withdraw or participate in diversionary activities (e.g., Brody, 1996; Guerrero & Reiter, 1998). Hall's (1987) review demonstrated that although women's voices generally have greater variation in pitch than men's, potentially allowing more precise communication of emotions, women's overall ability to express emotions verbally is not superior to men's. Shields (1995), in turn, suggested little difference in emotional ability between men and women. She concluded that when sex differences occurred in emotional expression (e.g., sadness, anger), they tended to be more influenced by both the context of a situation and sex-based emotional stereotypes, rather than by innate differences in emotional ability.

*Nonverbal expression.* Research on the nonverbal expression of emotions has also produced inconsistent findings independent of situational factors. For example, Hall's (1978, 1984) meta-analyses indicated that women smiled and gazed at others more, had more expressive faces, and displayed more expressive body movements than men. Women have also consistently shown a slight advantage in encoding and decoding both nonverbal and verbal emotional expression (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993; Hall, 1987; Manstead, 1998; Shields, 1995). Specifically, women appear to be somewhat better at decoding surprise or indifference than men, whereas men appear to be somewhat better at encoding sadness than women (Brody, 1996; Manstead, 1998). Furthermore, one review indicated that men have an advantage in the control of nonverbal expressions of anger (Canary et al., 1997). On the other hand, several of the reviews suggested that these differences in the nonverbal expression of emotion were based more on situational influences than on fundamental sex differences in affective ability. For example, although women were somewhat more nonverbally expressive of sadness than men, this expression seems to be more context dependent than indicative of sex differences in emotionality (LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). Such inconsistencies have also led some researchers to speculate that any conclusions about sex differences in the encoding and decoding of emotion may be influenced by the affective valence or intensity of the situation (Brody & Hall, 1993).

*Implications of overt actions research.* This body of work has important implications for the profession and practice of counseling psychology. First, although counseling psychology has been demonstrated to view women as

hyperemotional (American Psychological Association Task Force, 1975; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Shields, 1995), and men as hypoemotional (e.g., Heesacker et al., 1999; Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000; Shields, 1995), the inconsistent findings (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993; Hall, 1987; Ickes et al., 2000; Manstead, 1998; Shields, 1995) suggest that any observed differences between men's and women's overt emotional behaviors are more the result of situational influences than innate emotional abilities. Counseling psychologists may therefore wish to widen their focus to include the situational influences on their clients' affective presentation, as well as the nonverbal and verbal expressions, rather than merely relying on biological sex as a heuristic for understanding client emotionality. For example, counseling's exclusive focus on verbal expression of specific emotions (e.g., sadness, anger) could influence clients' emotional presentation; women may feel supported and comfortable in being emotionally expressive, whereas men may feel forced to conform to socially determined self-presentation stereotypes. Indeed, such influences have been demonstrated in other areas of counseling psychology (e.g., Kelly, 2000; Snyder, 1987), and thus their role in determining emotionality should be considered. Such a shift in focus could also (a) communicate to clients both tolerance and acceptance, thus allowing clients to experience and express a wider range of emotionality, and (b) allow therapists to assess and understand a more comprehensive emotional picture.

In discussing the implications of overt action research, special mention needs to be made of the construct alexithymia, or the inability to verbally express emotions, as it applies to counseling male clients because of its increasing prevalence in the counseling psychology literature (e.g., see Brooks, 1998; Brooks & Good, 2001a, 2001b; Pollack & Levant, 1998). Despite the view that during development, men suffer from "deficits in the arenas of intimacy [and] empathy" (Pollack, 1995, p. 35), leading to their experiencing a "narrowing of [verbal] emotional expressiveness" (Pollack, 1998, p. 41), empirical research on the verbal expression of emotions in general (e.g., Guerrero & Reiter, 1998; Hall, 1987; Shields, 1995), and alexithymia specifically, do *not* demonstrate a consistent sex-based pattern of results (Heesacker, 2001; Kiselica, 2001). For example, two recent studies of college students revealed no significant differences in alexithymia between men and women (Levant et al., 2000; Mallinckrodt, King, & Coble, 1998). In fact, researchers have suggested that any sex differences in alexithymia must be understood in the broader context of research showing that those with lower verbal ability are more likely to be alexithymic (Lamberty & Holt, 1995). Indeed, it is possible that men's demonstrated lower verbal ability, and not emotional deficits, may account for the misperception that they experience greater levels of alexithymia.

### Subjective Reports

Most of the published research in the literature is subjective report research involving people's verbal descriptions of emotions and emotional experiences, as well as the descriptions of the type, nature, and intensity of those experiences. We summarize the research under two subheadings: (a) participants' self-reports of perceived emotional expression and (b) participants' self-reports of their subjective experience of emotion. Taken together, research in this area has produced either inconsistent findings or findings indicative of men and women presenting themselves stereotypically in reaction to situational demands or societal pressures (e.g., Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000; Canary et al., 1997). Indeed, LaFrance and Banaji's (1992) review of subjective report research demonstrated that sex differences in emotionality were evident only when (a) measures were indirect, (b) the emotion in question was perceptible by others, and (c) the situation was interpersonal. Thus, although men and women may respond to situational pressures by altering their emotional behaviors, the subjective report research fails to unequivocally support the idea that men and women are innately emotionally different.

*Participants' self-reports of emotional expression.* The most common finding from this research was that women and men report sex differences in emotionality similar to the stereotypes about sex and emotion. For example, women rated themselves as more vocally expressive as well as better at emotional expression and decoding than men (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993; Hall, 1978). In turn, men described themselves as being more skilled at controlling their emotions than women (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993; Hall, 1978). At the same time, however, much of this literature was inconsistent. For example, whereas men perceive themselves to be somewhat more expressive of anger than women (Hall, 1978), other research indicates that men and women see themselves as equally willing to express anger depending on the situation (Allen & Haccoun, 1976). Indeed, some research even suggests that women report being more comfortable expressing anger to their romantic partners than men (Brody & Hall, 1993). Additionally, both men and women report expressing more emotion to people they know than to those they do not know, although women tended to report expressing emotions to more people than did men, who were more likely to report expressing emotion only in intimate relationships (Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000). Furthermore, with the exception of anger, both men and women report being more likely to disclose feelings to women than to men (Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000).



*Participants' self-reports of the subjective experience of emotion.* Few consistent sex differences were found in male and female perceptions regarding specific emotional experiences or the use of emotion language in conversations. For example, White and Mullen's (1989) review of self-descriptive research on jealousy revealed no consistent sex differences. At the same time, however, research also suggested that whereas women report experiencing both positive and negative affect more often than men, sex differences in self-report are greatest for negative affect such as fear (Canary et al., 1997; Manstead, 1998; Shields, 1995) and jealousy (Guerrero & Reiter, 1998). Additional research also failed to demonstrate consistent sex differences in either other negative emotions (i.e., contempt, guilt, loneliness) (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993) or in the experience of happiness (Canary et al., 1997). Findings also indicate that men and women report experiencing anger with similar frequency and intensity (LaFrance & Banaji, 1992), despite some work demonstrating that consistent with their traditional socialized gender role, men reported being more likely to experience anger in concert with jealousy, whereas women were more likely to report depression (Guerrero & Reiter, 1998). White and Mullen (1989), however, cautioned that these observed sex differences could stem from different definitions of jealousy held by men as opposed to women. Shields (1995) subsequently speculated that any *observed* sex differences might reflect cultural, social, or developmental factors rather than fundamental differences in affective ability. One review suggested that men reported experiencing more difficulty in expressing fear due to situational pressures to be masculine (Shields, 1995). Again, these findings have led some researchers to suggest that this effect may be more influenced by situational pressures than by sex differences in emotional ability (Canary et al., 1997).

*Implications of subjective report research.* The inconsistent nature of these findings supports the Ickes et al. (2000) position that sex differences in emotion may emerge only when individuals experience increased motivation to present themselves in a certain way as a response to normative pressure. The reviews of subjective report research also support LaFrance and Banaji's (1992) assertion that sex differences in emotion are present only under four conditions: (a) when the measure of emotion employed is indirect, (b) when the self-reported emotion is potentially perceptible by others, (c) when the context under scrutiny is interpersonal, and (d) when general rather than discrete emotion is examined. This is an important implication for the practice of counseling, because much of what occurs in therapy could fall under one or more of these four criteria. For example, counseling is an endeavor in which emotions are perceptible by others. Accordingly, male and female clients may exhibit or report more differences in their affective ability,

especially when talking to a counselor about interpersonal contexts and general feelings, perhaps to remain consistent with global stereotypes and to maintain a positive connection with the counselor (e.g., see Kelly, 2000, for a related discussion). Such a scenario meets three of the four criteria put forth by LaFrance and Banaji, suggesting that when working with clients, counseling psychologists may wish to pay attention to (a) the manner in which they are assessing emotionality; (b) the counseling context; and (c) the degree to which demand characteristics, rather than affective abilities, are potentially dictating their clients' emotional presentation, because these factors may play into socially sanctioned stereotypes (e.g., Heesacker et al., 1999) and overrepresent sex differences in emotional behavior.

### **Physiological Responses**

Research in physiological responses includes bodily processes that can be measured through psychophysiological methods, such as facial electromyography (EMG) and functional magnetic imaging of the brain (fMRI) (e.g., Bradley, 2000; Lang, 1968, 1994). Findings in this area have been inconsistent, primarily because of our technological inability to link specific emotional states (i.e., sadness, happiness) with specific and distinct physiological responses. Indeed, although some early research suggested that men experienced greater arousal than women on some physiological dimensions (e.g., blood pressure), those reviews addressing physiology (e.g., Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000; Manstead, 1998) indicated that sex differences were inconsistent. Women, for example, have been found to exhibit greater skin conductivity than men in certain situations (Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000; Manstead, 1998). Furthermore, Manstead (1998) reported three important findings regarding sex and stress: (a) women had higher resting heart rates than men, (b) men had higher resting systolic blood pressure than women, and (c) men had higher urinary epinephrine responses during stress. Additionally, research on physiological responses to emotional stimuli using EMG demonstrated that women exhibited more facial EMG activation than men. In contrast, reviews of physiological studies suggested that men and women tended to respond in ways that run contrary to the general stereotypes of sex differences in emotionality. In fact, the majority of research suggested that men showed more physiological signs of emotion than women (Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992; Manstead, 1998). In addition, some researchers have reported no significant fear-related differences in autonomic responses between men and women, suggesting that the stereotypical view of women as fearful and men as the "sturdy oak" (e.g., Brannon, 1985, cited in Thompson & Pleck, 1995, p. 142) may be incorrect.

*Implication of physiological research.* Results from physiological tests have an important implication for counseling psychology, as the findings fail to unequivocally support the belief that sex differences in emotionality are innate and/or biological. Men, for example, seem to be no more able to control their autonomic fear response than women. Furthermore, women do not seem to be at the mercy of their autonomic responses. As a result, counseling psychologists may wish to reconsider the degree to which they subscribe to accepted truths about men, women, and emotion. They may also want to consider focusing less on their own expectations about how emotions “should be” exhibited by women or men and focusing more on their clients’ unique affective presentation.

### Conclusion

Reviews of research across all three areas of Lang’s (1968, 1994) tripartite perspective indicate that sex differences in emotionality are small, inconsistent, or limited to the influence of specific situational demands. These reviews do *not* support belief in sex-based affective differences. In fact, absent from situational demands, sex differences in emotionality tend to diminish and/or disappear. These conclusions challenge both the perception that men and women are emotionally different and the use of biological sex as a heuristic for understanding clients’ affective behaviors. They also pose an important question: Why does counseling psychology see men and women as emotionally different (e.g., see Heesacker et al., 1999, for a discussion) when empirical research does not support such a view?

*If not sex, then what?* One potential explanation for the continued acceptance of large sex-based emotional differences is that factors closely related to biological sex are being confused for biological sex. Such an effect would be understandable, given that most counseling psychologists are socialized within a dominant culture that views men and women as coming from different affective “planets” (e.g., Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990). Gender roles (i.e., socialization), culture, and context are three examples because as Lips (1997) noted, “cultural expectations for women and men (gender) are not separable from observations about women’s and men’s bodies (sex)” (p. 4). Research on socialized gender roles and emotion, for example, suggests that girls are encouraged to express emotions, with the exception of anger and contempt, through words and facial expressions. Boys, conversely, are discouraged from expressing emotions, with the exceptions of anger and pride (e.g., Brody & Hall, 1993; Levant, 2001; Levant & Pollack, 1995; Plant et al., 2000). Additionally, in Euro-American cultures, parents tend to discuss and express a greater array of emotions with their daughters as opposed to their

sons (e.g., Flannagan & Perese, 1998; Fuchs & Thelen, 1988; Kuebli & Fivush, 1992). In sum, empirical evidence suggests that girls are socialized to be emotional, nonaggressive, nurturing, and obedient, whereas boys are socialized to be unemotional, aggressive, achievement oriented, and self-reliant (Block, 1973; Levant, 2001). Peers continue this process as children develop and mature (e.g., Harris, 1995; Maccoby, 1998), in effect constraining how, where, why, and with whom certain emotions are expressed (e.g., Shields, 1995).

One related area, important to this discussion and prominent in counseling psychology, is the work of Gilligan (e.g., 1982/1993), Miller (1976), and the Stone Center (see Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991, as well as Jordan, 1997, for examples). Gilligan coined the phrase "in a different voice" (p. xi) to describe a woman's interpersonal style that she felt resulted from society's differing expectations of men and women. Specifically, society expects women to be attachment and relationship focused, whereas it expects men to be independent and achievement focused (Gilligan, 1982/1993). Miller (e.g., 1976) includes the role of inequality in this process, discussing how it structures the emotional socialization of the sexes. Indeed, "men are encouraged from early life to be active and rational; women are trained to be involved with emotions and with the feelings occurring in the course of all activity" (Miller, 1976, p. 39). All told, such different expectations, and the developmental experiences associated with them, can lead to men's and women's perceiving social pressure to express emotions differently despite the fact that their internal experience of these emotions is in fact similar (Miller, 1991). For example, even though anger serves as a natural resource for both women and men, one that helps motivate us to protect ourselves and stand up for what we need (e.g., Miller & Surrey, 1997), and despite the lack of consistent evidence supporting sex differences in the expression of anger (e.g., Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Brody & Hall, 1993; Hall, 1978), there is evidence that parents encourage anger expression in boys (Block, 1978) while discouraging the overt expression of other emotions (e.g., Brooks & Good, 2001a, 2001b; Miller, 1976). As such, "boys and men feel . . . many emotions . . . [but] few can be expressed for what they are" (Miller, 1991, pp. 191-192). Women, conversely, are encouraged to do the opposite and turn their anger into more internal expressions of sadness (i.e., crying). Overt expressions of anger by women are typically seen by society as pathological (Bernardez-Bonesatti, 1978; Miller, 1976, 1991) whereas men's overt expressions of anger are seen as normal and/or expected.

Culture is another potential factor that could account for any observed sex differences in emotion (e.g., A. Fischer & Manstead, 2000). Culture can be defined broadly as "behavior whose components and elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society" (Linton, 1968, p. 32).

Some examples of cultural factors include ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, and sexual orientation. Indeed, society's overrepresentation of cultural differences has been well documented. For example, the construct of machismo is often used to describe the emotional passion, sexuality, and strength of *all* Latino males, despite evidence of large within-group differences (e.g., Arcaya, 1996; Lazur & Majors, 1995). Furthermore, Euro-American culture values emotional control on the part of African American men (e.g., Kochman, 1981; see Lazur & Majors, 1995, for a review), despite the fact that their own cultural background values emotionality (e.g., Majors & Mancini Billson, 1992). In addition, gay men are stereotypically considered more emotionally expressive, despite documented within-group and identity-development differences (e.g., Cass, 1979). Thus, it is possible that counseling psychologists' concern about the degree to which these cultural characteristics affect client functioning is influencing their perceptions of how men and women experience and express emotion.

Additionally, gender roles are powerfully influenced by culture (Fagot, Rodgers, & Leinbach, 2000), and the degree to which their interaction dictates perceptions of men's and women's emotionality cannot be underestimated (e.g., Fagot et al., 2000; Grossman & Wood, 1993; Hall, 1987; Lips, 1997). For example, the emotions Euro-American women are thought to express more than Euro-American men (e.g., fear, guilt, happiness, nervousness, warmth, shame) are stereotypically associated with their traditional gender roles (e.g., child care, social bonding) (see Lips, 1997, for a review). Conversely, the emotions Euro-American men are thought to express more than Euro-American women (e.g., anger, contempt, pride) are stereotypically associated with their traditional gender roles of strength, leadership, and control (e.g., Brody & Hall, 2000; Levant, 2001; Lips, 1997; Scher, 2001). Thus, although there is no specific gender role for either men or women, society's stereotypical assumptions about men, women, and emotion may guide our understanding of observed affective behavior (Lips, 1997). Indeed, because counseling may unintentionally reinforce such traditional gender roles (e.g., Enns, 2000), it may be that counseling is structuring men's and women's emotional expression accordingly (e.g., Heesacker et al., 1999; Shields, 1995).

Situational context is another variable potentially being confused with biological sex (e.g., Shields, 1995; Vogel, Tucker, et al., 1999; Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999). In fact, it has been suggested that sex differences in emotionality must be understood only in relation to the complex contextual influences present in everyday life (e.g., Aries, 1996; Deaux, 1984). For example, Vogel, Tucker, et al. (1999) demonstrated that the pattern of behavior known as demand/withdraw (i.e., women emotionally expressive whereas men emotionally avoidant) within interpersonal relationships occurred most

often when the couple discussed an issue they felt was difficult. When the conversation turned to neutral or easy topics, sex differences in communication styles vanished. Similar results have been found with newlyweds (e.g., Vogel & Karney, in press) and dating couples (e.g., Markman, Silvern, Clements, & Kraft-Hanak, 1993; Vogel, Wester, et al., 1999). Therefore, given the emotional and often interpersonally difficult nature of expressing oneself in counseling (e.g., Heesacker & Bradley, 1997; Lott & Cohen, 1999), the role of context must be understood prior to making any judgments regarding innate sex differences in emotionality.

Still another potential explanation for the continued acceptance of sex differences in emotionality is that the empirical research on sex and emotion does not accurately capture sex differences. According to this explanation, sex differences in emotionality exist and researchers have failed to demonstrate them because of problems with (a) the research environment and/or (b) the populations sampled. For example, findings from basic emotion research may not be generalizable to real-world experiences because research has been conducted in contrived, artificial situations, with homogeneous groups. Such research artificially suppresses the moderating influence of biological factors, gender roles, culture, and situation. However, our review of the empirical literature failed to reveal a pattern consistent with either a lost-in-sterile-lab-environments perspective or an overly homogeneous perspective. Research has been conducted in a wide array of contexts, with a wide variety of populations. Indeed, those studies finding sex differences do not appear to have been conducted in contexts having either greater "mundane realism" (e.g., Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991, p. 149), that is, increased correspondence between experimental events and real-world situations, or decreased homogeneity than those studies failing to find those sex differences. Therefore, although they are certainly worthy of additional exploration, at present these critiques of emotion science cannot readily account for the differences between widely shared perceptions of sex differences and the empirical findings.

### COUNSELING CONCERNS

As previously stated, two distinct perspectives about sex and emotion have emerged in the counseling psychology literature (see Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). The first tends to emphasize sex differences despite the lack of unequivocal empirical support, whereas the second concludes that any observed sex differences tend to be more situation dependent than indicative of innate affective abilities. Although there are counseling-relevant concerns inherent to both of these, we are most concerned with the overemphasis of sex

differences in emotion, because this view may perpetuate overly limited notions associated with traditional masculinity and femininity (Shields, 1995; Vogel, Epting, & Wester, in press). This, in turn, risks establishing a “one-size-fits-all mentality” approach to therapy, similar to what Heesacker and Prichard (1992, p. 282) called the “affective version of the uniformity myth” (Kiesler, 1973; see Heesacker et al., 1999, for related discussion). Such an approach may also reinforce sex stereotypes, rather than empowering both men and women to transcend socialized limitations (e.g., Vogel et al., in press); and it is increasingly becoming associated with poor psychological adjustment (see Egan & Perry, 2001, for a recent example). Focusing on sex differences also ignores both within-group variability and the overall complexity of emotional processes. Indeed, viewing the emotional restriction of men as always problematic may ignore the fact that for some males such behavior serves an appropriate and adaptive purpose (e.g., Heesacker & Prichard, 1992; Wilcox & Forrest, 1992). Lazur’s work (see Lazur & Majors, 1995, for a review) dealing with the “cool pose” of African American males is one example; emotional restriction is a reaction to racism and an attempt by African American men to straddle the demands of both African-American and Euro-American cultures.

It may also be that emphasizing sex differences in emotionality imposes a psychological liability on both women and men (e.g., Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1990; Shields, 1995). Indeed, counseling typically explores relationship development, expression of feelings, and discussion of emotional problems in a manner that some suggest is more congruent with women’s affective characteristics than men’s (Gilligan, 1982/1993; Kiselica, 2001; Wood, 1986). Men may be forced into a set of gender role-prescribed behaviors, rather than being granted the freedom to explore and expand their abilities (e.g., Brooks, 1998; Pollack & Levant, 1998). Conversely, women may have their affective behaviors dismissed as being the result of female hyperemotionality (e.g., Shields, 1995), rather than as actual psychological distress. Thus, we propose that counseling psychologists who are committed to fostering egalitarian, therapeutic counseling relationships (Morrow & Deidan, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1990) consider the following suggestions. Although these recommendations still need additional empirical investigation, we believe that they represent an important, beginning move toward facilitating effective counseling relationships as well as an informed understanding of the existing literature.

First, although emotion plays a pivotal role in counseling, it is unclear whether counseling psychologists are generally aware of the scientific theory and research on emotions and emotion-related behavior. Therefore, counseling training programs and continuing professional education programs should provide the field with current theory, research, and practice implica-

tions related to emotions, rather than allowing such topics to be subsumed under other class headings (Heesacker & Bradley, 1997; Heesacker & Carroll, 1997). For example, the tripartite model of emotions (Lang, 1968, 1994), which we used to organize our review of the sex-emotion literature, may constitute a more useful taxonomy for the assessment of clients' affect-related behaviors than does biological sex. Also, given the suggested negative therapeutic consequences of continued subscription to the view that men and women are innately emotionally different, what Heesacker and colleagues (1999, p. 484) termed "emotional stereotypes of men and women" (see also Shields, 1995), it seems important to include a discussion of sex-based emotional stereotyping in counseling psychology graduate training. Such a discussion may serve to increase counselor trainees' awareness of (a) the existence of sex-based emotional stereotypes, (b) their socialized origin, (c) the degree to which the trainees themselves subscribe to them, and (d) the possible negative impact such stereotypes could have on their counseling relationships. Furthermore, such a discussion may enlighten students as to the effects of socially dictated stereotypes and the degree to which they impose a normative pressure on our clients to behave in a sex-specific fashion.

Second, counseling psychologists are encouraged to examine carefully their own personal attitudes, beliefs, values, and biases regarding men's and women's emotionality. For example, counseling psychologists may wish to consider the following questions derived from research on perceptions of counselors (e.g., see Shields, 1995): (a) Do I have different beliefs about what is emotionally healthy for men and women? (b) Do I see male and female clients who do not conform to traditional gender roles as more pathological than those who conform? (c) Do I use different emotional standards, and hold different emotional expectations, when diagnosing and treating male and female clients? (d) What are the aspects of the client that I believe are reflective of emotionality, and do these aspects change as a function of client sex? (e) Do I make sex-based attributions for the emotional behaviors of my clients? and (f) Do I overlook emotion-related sex similarities, and magnify emotion-related sex differences, in emotion (see, e.g., Shields, 1987)? Recognition and awareness of one's own sex-based emotional stereotypes may stimulate self-development and reduce biased cognitive processing.

Thirds, counseling psychologists may also need to expand the range of affective responses they consider healthy and appropriate for each sex (e.g., Heesacker et al., 1999; Shields, 1995). These responses should reflect the full range of affective variability demonstrated in the emotion science literature, rather than merely reflecting societal perceptions of men, women, and emotion (e.g., P. C. Fischer et al., 1993; Heesacker et al., 1999). In addition, counseling psychologists should be aware of large within-group differences in



emotional behavior, regardless of biological sex. This would allow counselors to recognize and work with the normative pressures influencing their clients' affective presentation. Through increased education in the science of emotion, for example, counseling psychologists may become better equipped to understand how their own sex-based emotional stereotypes can adversely affect the accuracy of diagnoses, treatment plans, counseling expectations, and the counseling relationship for both male and female clients.

Fourth, in the areas of prevention and psychoeducation, it is important to educate the general public regarding (a) the apparent inaccuracy of commonly held perceptions about sex differences in emotion and (b) the potentially detrimental impact of subscribing to them. The long-term effect of this preventive measure might include improved intergender communication and a potential reduction of conflict between the sexes, as people begin to accept and even encourage a greater range of affective behaviors for men and women.

## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This section provides recommendations for future research that reflect both practice-related questions and existing methodological challenges in the sex-emotion literature.

1. Research has often relied exclusively on subjective reports to measure and assess emotions. Future counseling psychology research should use more observational and physiological measures to enhance the results of self-report research. For example, researchers should use direct observation, the reports of peers and significant others, and behavioral records to substantiate self-report measures of emotion. Also, when designing research studies, counseling psychologists may wish to consider the following elements of emotion measures: (a) directness, (b) degree to which the emotional behavior being reported can be assessed by observers, (c) inclusion of the emotional context, and (d) how emotion is defined (LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). Additionally, researchers may wish to heed the suggestion of Heesacker and Carroll (1997) and "focus on the kinds of emotion-related concerns faced by practitioners" (p. 176) in conducting their scholarship. Doing so may allow future studies to increase the profession's understanding of potential sex differences in emotional behavior because counseling psychologists will be able to generalize the results to the populations they work with and the problems their clients bring to counseling.
2. Future studies should explore emotional experience and expression in a variety of contexts (e.g., P. C. Fischer et al., 1993). For example, given that

situational context may influence both the presence and magnitude of sex differences in emotionality (Vogel et al., in press; Vogel, Tucker, et al., 1999), researchers may want to consider factors such as (a) the nature of the relationship between the people being studied (e.g., counselor vs. client, friend vs. stranger, friend vs. significant other); (b) the sex composition of the dyad (e.g., same-sex vs. opposite sex); and (c) the setting (e.g., professional, domestic, leisure) as they conduct their scholarship. Furthermore, longitudinal studies of sex differences and similarities in emotion may provide the profession with additional information about developmental and socialization influences (Brody & Hall, 1993).

3. Future research should begin to explore the overall role emotion plays in human functioning (e.g., Isaacs, 1998; Izard, 1991). For example, the degrees to which the material discussed under the three rubrics of Lang's (1968, 1994) tripartite perspective (e.g., overt behavior, subjective report, physiology) serves human beings as information, behavioral triggers, or essential aspects of communication have not been fully explored. For example, are emotions the cause of, or the reaction to, a situational stimulus (e.g., James, 1890; see also Hergenhahn, 1997, for review)? Furthermore, how humans make use of emotional information, and how that usage links to various psychological disturbances, remains an area important to counseling psychology and ripe for empirical exploration.
4. Because questions regarding the interrelationship between sex, emotion, bias, and the performance of counseling psychologists remain largely unresolved (see Heesacker et al., 1999, as a recent exception), researchers may want to consider several issues relevant to counseling psychology. For example, does a counseling psychologist's age, education level, or counseling experience influence her or his perceptions about sex differences in emotionality? In addition, researchers may wish to examine the role of client and counselor variables such as race, ethnic background, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation in either moderating or mediating (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986) perceptions of sex differences in emotion. Furthermore, research should explore how, and under what conditions, sex-based emotional stereotypes affect the process and outcome of psychotherapy (e.g., Aspel, Willis, & Faust, 1998). Finally, future research should investigate whether, and to what extent, sex differences in certain disorders (e.g., Conduct Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder) reflect actual sex differences or result from incorrect perceptions about men's and women's emotionality (e.g., Kupers, 1997).
5. It is important for future research to identify methods that are most effective for challenging and overcoming society's subscription to the idea that men and women are emotionally different. Indeed, because of the importance of emotion and emotional processes to counseling, such research is particularly important as applied to counseling psychologists, counselor trainees, and other mental health professionals. For example, we have advocated the inclusion of emotion science in general, and Lang's (1968, 1994) tripartite model

specifically, in graduate training (e.g., Heesacker & Bradley, 1997). However, it may be the case that additional, more challenging methods akin to those employed by feminist and multicultural educators (e.g., "Multicultural Counseling Training," 1998) may be required to overcome the socialized view that men and women possess vastly different affective abilities.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to explore the literature surrounding the sex-emotion debate, while addressing the implications this body of research has for counseling psychologists. It appears that "[sex] differences [in emotionality] are not universal, dramatic, [or] enduring" (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, p. 456). Rather, when observed, such sex differences tend to be either context dependent (e.g., Vogel, Tucker, et al., 1999) or influenced by learned gender roles (e.g., Brooks, 1998; Gilligan, 1982/1993), rather than reflective of basic, innate differences in affective ability. This suggests that counseling psychologists may wish to devote more attention to the role of factors such as these, rather than relying exclusively on biological sex as a heuristic for understanding client emotionality. Counseling psychologists may also wish to pay increased attention to (a) the manner in which they are assessing emotionality; (b) the counseling context; and (c) the degree to which demand characteristics, rather than supposedly innate affective abilities, are potentially dictating their clients' emotional presentation. Indeed, emotion plays a significant role in counseling, and counseling psychologists' willingness to expand their understanding of the factors influencing their clients' emotionality may facilitate client development rather than strengthening clients' adherence to stereotypical modes of behaving.

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