

TOPIC: Gender issues among male speech therapists in Italy

AIM:

In our culture, a doctor is often not considered as a gendered person, but that's not always true for speech and language pathologists, since about 90% of Italian SLTs are female. So people might have a culturally defined standard regarding these workers. The aim of the study is to investigate, from an anthropological and non-judgmental point of view, how male speech therapists feel about their job, in particular whether and why they think to be discriminated in their profession by the majority of female practitioners or, on the contrary, if they somehow have a head start because of their gender. Yet, to investigate if and why the patients feel that gender is relevant in building trust towards their therapist, and how this can affect their motivation to make efforts in improving their condition. This study will improve our understanding of how male SLTs live their profession, how patients see them and can also contribute to improving the knowledge about these figures.

METHODOLOGY AND TIMETABLE:

Speech and language therapists deal with 3 different kind of patients: children with communication or language issues, adults with voice problems and aged people with brain injuries. I tried to collect data from all 3 branches, because the approach to the job may substantially change and so does the perception about slts . Since there is no "list" of male speech pathologists, as they're no different from their females colleagues in doing their job, I asked technology for help to reach male slts who work in different locations around the country . In particular, I used a Facebook group, called "*male speech therapists*", that includes many SLTs (both male and female). I asked them to take part in this study with an informal telephonic interview and an online questionnaire. Lots of them accepted with enthusiasm, claiming that they would happily help since I was the first to investigate this field and since "*there's no literature on this topic*". Using the Facebook social network happened to be the best way to gain the most participants , but I must admit that generally only people of young or middle age use it, so the medium age of the sample wouldn't be high. On the other hand, the majority of male SLTs are young, since the number of male graduated SLTs has been increasing in the last 10 years; plus, I got to collect thoughts from some SLT students, who may see the dynamics from a different point of view.

These are some of the questions I asked , both in the interview and in the questionnaire:

- do you think that your gender could - positively or negatively - influence your professional performance?
- how are your relationships with female coworkers? How do you think they consider you?
- do you mind talking about your working group and its dynamics?
- have you ever felt discriminated against because of your gender?
- do you think that some patients may not feel comfortable in being treated by a female speech therapist? Or instead they don't like to deal with a male one? And if so, why and under which circumstances?

ETHNOGRAPHY:

I collected about 20 interviews and questionnaires, which I summarized below. 27 year old **Francesco** has been working with children for 5 years and he claims to be satisfied with his job. «People who deal with me – teachers, psychologists, parents – are genuinely curious about me; I know we're rare, they respect my job and we make a good team. My boss was happy to insert a male in the working group: a team formed by women only tend to be very competitive, a male figure can help to get the balance you need to be fully productive. I also think that in some cases being treated by a

male therapist might be better for the patients: I'm thinking about autistic children who can be violent and sometimes need to be physically restrained... You have to be strong enough or you may get harmed. Our low tone of voice can itself be of service to little patients. But I remember one therapeutic failure: the patient was this teen girl who stuttered, she quit after few sessions, I probably wasn't able to get in touch with her because of my gender. But on the other hand, I remember a young adult man of my age who was uncomfortable about showing his weakness (stuttering) to a female SLT, but when he started working with me he got better results. But there's one thing I really hate: the word "*logopediste*" (female speech therapists), which is found in every single document or book or study. They should use a more generic and impartial "*logopedisti*", because we do exist!».

Fabio is 31 years old and has been working with children for 6 years. «When I first told my friends I'd like to be a SLT, they were surprised: they thought it'd be a feminine job. Then when I got to start university, I was the only male student and the professors were very surprised. I remember that one of my tutors saved me on her phone as "*XY student*", she was very funny but I have to say that, all kidding aside, I've always been judged for my skills and not for my gender. Even later, when I got to work. I think that it doesn't matter if you're a male or a female, with children you have to be patient, trained and work hard to help them. Many of my colleagues are women, mothers, they may know better how to handle a tantrum, but that's it. In some cases being a male is an advantage: we can handle more easily aggressive kids who need to be restrained».

27 years old **Danilo** has been working with children for 5 years. «I've never felt discriminated against because of my gender, the lack of male SLTs instead pushed me to try my best. My first boss was very curious and during the interview told me: "*We need a man. Handling meetings with only women is exhausting*". My female colleagues were nice to me, and told me that sometimes parents did ask to send their children to a male SLT. For the world we're still "*le logopediste*", but I don't think that gender plays a role in your ability to interact with children. One of the most common preconceptions is that the women are patient, motherly and understanding while the men are more brusque and directorial».

Elvio is 26 years old and works with children: «Being a male SLT is a resource, especially in the private sector : I often get to see a kid because their parents (should I say mothers?) want to give a male reference model to their son. I've never felt discriminated against. I think that gender differences produce wealth, we complete each other».

28 year old **Francesco** has worked in Sicily with children since 2011; he's happy and he doesn't feel discriminated against , but he says he would really like to work with other male SLTs, with whom he could have more interests in common. «I don't think that my gender influences my job. A patient looks for empathy and trust, regardless your gender. I don't like to be in the spotlight so I get embarrassed when at meetings they say: "*Good morning ladies... wait there's also a boy!*" and everyone turns to me! But looking at the bright side... I have a bathroom just for me!».

Antonio is 28 years old and works both with children and adults: «I believe that patients tend to give more authority to a male therapist rather than a female one; sometimes children's parents can be indiscreet with young female SLTs. When I work with kids, they compare me to their father, a beloved but dreaded figure, so they are maybe less inclined to throw a tantrum; adult men too are less embarrassed to talk with a male rather than a female, especially if the girl is young. Generally speaking, children don't show preferences, but sometimes their mothers prefer a male because they think he would be more catching compared to a girl who would be seen as mother/teacher. One last thing, I hate the term "*logopediste*"!»

53 years old **Decio** is probably one of the most experienced SLT in Italy, he has been working both with children and adults since 1986. «Male SLT are much-valued in this job because children (and their parents) look for a male reference model and adults look for affinity and common interests. But if you look for *maternage*, then a female therapist would work better».

Paride is 32 years old and works with adults. «After suffering brain damage, you might become uninhibited and inappropriate: my boss assign these patients to me, since I am the only male SLT and I can handle it better. My female coworkers are happy to have me in the team, we are complete together».

Gabriele is a SLT student: «During my apprenticeships, I noticed that I was more easily remembered than my female classmates, plus I tend to be more considered by female and male teen patients. On the other hand, I don't feel 100% comfortable with very little children, who need cuddles and hugs and all that singsong voice...».

Mirco, another student, wants to talk about his apprenticeship: «One of my tutors once said to me, before approaching a little girl, to wait, to take it easy, because she might be scared of me, because of my beard and everything... But actually this happened only once, with a severely autistic child».

I also got the chance to attend some sessions of therapy conducted by a male speech pathologist in Bologna: he works with autistic children in his own ambulatory, which is cozy and colorful, full of toys and books but still tidy and well organized. The room doesn't look very different from the next one, in which works a female SLT, except for the pink wallpaper. I spent a morning there, behind a fake mirror that let me observe him working, without intruding the therapy. Then I got to talk with some of the parents, who shared with me their thoughts about taking their kids to a male therapist. All the little patients seemed to have a positive relationship with **Franco**, and the parents looked happy too. One of them said to me: «We live in 2015, it's anachronistic to believe that gender would make any difference, your passion does! We like Franco, my daughter is getting better, and I hope to see more male SLTs just like in any other profession!».

DISCUSSION:

It looks like there's a gap between theory and reality: male SLTs, even if they're few and far between, do exist, are valued and well integrated with patients (both young and old), colleagues, working groups, teachers, and they seem to be happy and satisfied with their job. Many of the SLTs interviewed, though, report feelings of "surprise" or "curiosity" towards them, at least at the beginning. The "theoretical world" instead, and by it I mean universities, academic community, books, articles, seem to hardly adapt to the presence of male SLTs: a prime example of this is the use of the word "logopediste" instead a more correct "logopedisti" during talks and even in publications. It also looks like some patients would benefit from being treated by male SLTs: in particular, aggressive children who need to be physically restrained and uninhibited adults after brain injuries. On the other hand, little children under 3 years old may need a more maternal approach which comes better with a female therapist. All those differences though are not strict, things are much more variegated and it all depends on the knowledge, the skills, the empathy, and the passion of the practitioners. Hopefully, the number of male SLTs will keep growing in the coming decades, and it is reasonable to suggest that we won't be talking about "gender issues" for much longer. The majority of people interviewed think that a stronger and more balanced presence of male and female SLTs would increase the prospects of therapy and the quality of treatments and at the same time would help spread knowledge about this topic.

CONCLUSIONS:

When we talk about SLTs, most of the people, including patients, teachers, and colleagues, think of a female practitioners, because they make up a majority of SLTs. But male SLTs don't feel discriminated against. Mixed-gender rehabilitation contexts seem to be able to better fit every patients' needs. We believe that things will gradually get better in the coming years and the culturally defined standard of "female SLT" will also become outdated.