

The Impact of Therapist Sexual Orientation on Occupational Therapy Outcomes: A Focus on LGBTQ+ Therapists

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Abstract

Background: This study looks at the impact of therapist sexual orientation on outcomes in occupational therapy (OT), specifically for LGBTQ+ therapists. The research examines how therapists' sexual orientation affects the therapeutic relationship, treatment success and patient satisfaction.

Methods: Mixed methods design, 753 patient surveys and 20 therapist and 20 patient interviews. Quantitative analysis looked at satisfaction, quality of care and therapeutic relationship, qualitative looked at therapist experiences and patient perceptions.

Results: Treatment outcomes not affected by therapist's sexual orientation. LGBTQ+ visibility and supportive environments increase inclusivity, reduce stigma and build therapeutic alliance. LGBTQ+ patients felt more understood and connected when treated by LGBTQ+ therapists.

Conclusions: Sexual orientation doesn't affect outcomes but visibility and inclusion for LGBTQ+ therapists makes for a more accepting space. Diversity, cultural competence and anti-discrimination policies matter.

Keywords:

LGBTQ+ therapists, occupational therapy, therapeutic relationships, patient satisfaction, diversity, inclusion.

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Background

Occupational therapy (OT) is a client centred health profession that helps people to regain or develop the skills to do daily meaningful activities. The therapeutic process is dependent on the quality of the relationship between the therapist and client which can be influenced by many aspects of the therapist's identity such as race, gender and cultural background (1). While this has been researched, very little has been explored on how the therapist's sexual orientation affects OT outcomes especially for LGBTQ+ therapists.

Healthcare environments can be challenging for LGBTQ+ individuals including stigma, microaggressions and discrimination (2). These can affect LGBTQ+ therapists and their ability to build strong therapeutic relationships. For example, subtle biases or assumptions about a therapist's sexual orientation can influence perceptions of professional competence or the therapeutic dynamic.

Despite these barriers, LGBTQ+ therapists may bring unique benefits to clinical practice. Their shared experiences with LGBTQ+ clients can create understanding, trust and empathy and create more inclusive and supportive therapeutic environments. Existing research in broader healthcare contexts shows that patients value providers who are culturally competent and sensitive to LGBTQ+ issues (3). But this research often doesn't focus on OT where the role of the therapist's identity in client outcomes is under researched.

With the growing focus on diversity and inclusion in healthcare this study explores the effect of therapist sexual orientation on OT outcomes with a focus on LGBTQ+ therapists. It aims to provide an understanding of how personal identity influences professional practice, therapeutic relationships and patient satisfaction. It also aims to fill the gap in the literature by looking in depth at the experiences and contributions of LGBTQ+ therapists in OT.

Objectives

The study has three main objectives: to explore therapeutic relationship and treatment outcomes for LGBTQ+ therapists; patient satisfaction with OT from LGBT therapists; and managing personal and professional identities for LGBTQ+ therapists.

Methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach to answer all research questions. By combining both qualitative and quantitative data, all perspectives were covered.

Quantitative

The quantitative component was a survey administered to patients who had received OT in the last year. The survey aimed to capture patient experiences on satisfaction, quality of care and therapeutic relationship. 1,000 surveys were distributed and 753 were returned, 75.3% response rate.

The survey questions were from established instruments for patient satisfaction and therapeutic relationship (4). SPSS was used for statistical analysis, t-tests and ANOVA for comparing responses by therapist's sexual orientation.

Variables measured:

- Overall Patient Satisfaction: 1-5 scale (very dissatisfied to very satisfied)
- Perceived Quality of Care: mean score from patients' ratings of therapists' skills, communication and empathy
- Strength of the Therapeutic Relationship: Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) (5) (emotional bond between patient and therapist, agreement on therapy goals and tasks)

Data was collected robustly to enable comparison across therapists' sexual orientations.

Qualitative

The study concluded 20 LGBTQ+ therapists and 20 of their patients were interviewed in-depth. This was to get a deeper understanding of the therapists' experiences, the challenges they faced in practice and the strategies they used to manage their personal and professional identities. Patients' perceptions of care were also explored, with a focus on the impact of the therapists' sexual orientation.

Interview Design and Process

The interviews were semi-structured which allowed for flexibility while ensuring all key areas were covered. The therapist interviews looked at:

- Professional Life: Their clinical practice and how their sexuality affected interactions with colleagues and clients.
- Challenges: Discrimination, microaggressions and biases in the workplace and how they coped.
- Identity Management: Managing personal identity with professional roles and impact on client care.

Client interviews looked at:

- Care Experience: Quality of interactions, empathy, communication and cultural competence.
- Therapist Identity Significance: The importance of the therapist's sexual orientation in establishing trust and rapport.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, as per Braun and Clarke (6). The interview transcripts were coded and themes were identified. Common themes were:

1. Visibility and Advocacy: LGBTQ+ therapists said visibility was key to creating a safe and inclusive space for their clients. Therapists who were out were seen as role models and advocates and strengthened the therapeutic relationship.
2. Cultural Sensitivity and Competence: Clients valued therapists who had a deep understanding of LGBTQ+ issues and the unique challenges of this population. Cultural competence was especially important for transgender clients and those going through big life changes.

3. In the Workplace: Therapists experienced subtle and overt bias, such as assumptions about their professional ability based on their sexual orientation. This led to feelings of loneliness and stress.
4. Strength of Therapeutic Relationship: LGBTQ+ clients preferred therapists who were out, citing comfort and mutual understanding as key to their satisfaction with care.

Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent and the study was approved by the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects (7). Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, interview data was stored securely and only accessible to authorized personnel.

Results

The results are divided into two sections: quantitative and qualitative, to give a full picture of the impact of therapists' sexual orientation on occupational therapy outcomes. The quantitative analysis found no significant difference in patient satisfaction between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ therapists. LGBTQ+ therapists' patients scored an average of 4.2 on a 1-5 Likert scale, non-LGBTQ+ therapists' patients scored 4.1. So all patients were very satisfied regardless of the sexual orientation of their therapist.

In terms of quality of care, LGBTQ+ therapists scored 4.3, non-LGBTQ+ therapists 4.2, so both groups of therapists were highly rated by their patients. The strength of the therapeutic relationship was measured using the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI), a validated measure of emotional connection, agreement on therapy goals and alignment on therapeutic tasks. LGBTQ+ therapists scored 5.8, non-LGBTQ+ therapists 5.7. Patients felt highly connected to their therapist across both groups. But LGBTQ+ patients treated by LGBTQ+ therapists scored 6.0 on the WAI, non-LGBTQ+ therapists 5.5. So shared identity may be important in building deeper understanding and support in the therapeutic relationship.

The study also looked at clinical outcomes by measuring functional independence and occupational performance. On a 10 point scale, patients of LGBTQ+ therapists improved 3.8 points, patients of non-LGBTQ+ therapists 3.7. And occupational performance was similar, LGBTQ+ therapists' patients improved 4.0 points, non-LGBTQ+ therapists' patients 3.9. So objective treatment outcomes, measured by functional and occupational performance, were not affected by the therapist's sexual orientation.

While the objective measures were consistent, the qualitative feedback was that LGBTQ+ patients felt more connected and comfortable when treated by LGBTQ+ therapists. This was especially true when patients had challenges related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, so shared identity may be important even when it doesn't impact measurable outcomes. Overall the results show that treatment is not compromised by the therapist's sexual orientation, but having LGBTQ+ therapists creates a more inclusive and supportive environment that is especially important for LGBTQ+ patients.

The qualitative analysis further provided insight into the experiences of LGBTQ+ therapists and their patients. One of the significant findings was that being visible and supportive to LGBTQ+ therapists mattered. They said visibility allowed them to be a role model, as well as an advocate for their clients, thus fostering safety feelings and acceptance.

In addition, LGBTQ+ therapists also noted that there are various issues they face at work including discrimination and microaggressions. Among others, subtle forms of bias were experienced like assumptions about sexual orientation based on their professional competence or competency. Mostly these things made them feel lonely and put under pressure. However, it was also observed by some therapists that this problem could only be solved with the help of strong networks or policies that encompass diversity as well as inclusion.

The interviewees were also asked about how they perceived their care considering about cultural competence of therapists caring for transgender patients who have had sex reassignment surgery. Patients valued clinicians who showed cultural sensitivity and understanding toward LGBTQ+ issues. Therapists' self-disclosure helped gay patients feel connected with them because they were sharing the same sexuality. LGBTQ+ patients especially valued therapists who were gay like them because it brought about common understanding and validation. Patients found it easier to talk about personal issues and challenges with therapists who seemed to understand their experiences.

The qualitative analysis provided a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ therapists and their patients, highlighting several critical themes. One notable finding was the importance of visibility among LGBTQ+ therapists. Many participants emphasized that being open about their sexual orientation allowed them to serve as role models and advocates for their clients, fostering an environment of safety, acceptance, and mutual respect. Visibility was seen as a way to empower patients, reduce stigma, and create more inclusive therapeutic spaces.

However, LGBTQ+ therapists also reported facing significant challenges in their professional environments. Discrimination and microaggressions were recurring issues, often manifesting in subtle ways such as unfounded assumptions about their competence or professional capabilities based on their sexual orientation. These experiences frequently led to feelings of isolation and heightened pressure to prove themselves. Therapists noted that addressing these challenges required the support of strong networks and institutional policies promoting diversity and inclusion. Policies encouraging equity and belonging were viewed as essential to mitigating bias and fostering a supportive work culture.

The interviews also explored patient perceptions, particularly in the context of cultural competence in treating transgender individuals who had undergone sex reassignment surgery. Patients expressed a strong preference for therapists who demonstrated cultural sensitivity and a deep understanding of LGBTQ+ issues. The ability of therapists to engage with these topics empathetically and knowledgeably was highly valued. In many cases, therapists' self-disclosure of their own

LGBTQ+ identity helped to establish a stronger therapeutic bond. LGBTQ+ patients reported feeling a heightened sense of connection, trust, and validation when working with therapists who shared similar identities or experiences.

For many patients, having an LGBTQ+ therapist provided a unique sense of understanding and mutual recognition. Patients felt more comfortable discussing personal challenges and experiences, as they believed their therapists could relate to their struggles on a deeper level. This shared identity often facilitated more open and meaningful communication, enhancing the overall therapeutic experience.

The findings underscore the dual role of LGBTQ+ therapists as both caregivers and advocates, demonstrating the significance of cultural competence and shared identity in improving therapeutic relationships and outcomes. These insights highlight the importance of fostering inclusive environments in healthcare settings to support both therapists and patients in achieving the best possible outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that while a therapist's sexual orientation does not directly influence measurable treatment outcomes, it significantly affects the therapeutic environment and the overall patient experience. The presence of LGBTQ+ therapists contributes to fostering inclusivity and reducing stigma within therapeutic settings. These benefits extend to both patients and practitioners, creating a more supportive and accepting clinical environment. Patients treated by LGBTQ+ therapists reported high satisfaction levels and perceived the quality of care as compassionate and effective, underscoring the vital role these therapists play in delivering equitable healthcare.

The importance of incorporating training and education on LGBTQ+ issues and cultural competence into occupational therapy programs cannot be overstated. Equipping therapists with the skills to work effectively with diverse populations is crucial for fostering inclusivity and optimizing patient outcomes. Additionally, healthcare institutions have a responsibility to support LGBTQ+ professionals by implementing and enforcing policies that promote diversity and inclusion. Such policies should include anti-discrimination measures, the establishment of support networks, and opportunities for professional development focused on cultural competence. These efforts can create workplace environments that are more welcoming and empowering for all employees, including transgender and gender-diverse individuals.

Further research is needed to examine the long-term impacts of LGBTQ+ therapists on patient outcomes and to identify best practices for supporting these professionals in their roles. Future studies could expand on this work by exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ therapists in various healthcare settings and geographic regions to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities they encounter. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of investigating how intersectionality influences the experiences

of LGBTQ+ therapists. Factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status may intersect with sexual orientation, shaping their professional and personal experiences in unique ways.

In conclusion, while the findings demonstrate that sexual orientation does not affect the effectiveness of treatment, it plays a critical role in enhancing the therapeutic relationship and patient satisfaction. Promoting diversity and inclusion within healthcare settings benefits both patients and practitioners, creating environments that value and respect all individuals. Continued efforts to support LGBTQ+ therapists through education, policy, and research will further enhance the quality and equity of care in occupational therapy and beyond.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of recognizing and supporting therapists' sexual orientation within occupational therapy (OT) practice. The findings reveal that while sexual orientation does not directly influence clinical outcomes, it plays a pivotal role in shaping the therapeutic environment and patient experience. LGBTQ+ therapists contribute significantly to creating inclusive, safe, and stigma-free spaces where patients feel valued and understood. This is particularly important for LGBTQ+ patients, who often benefit from shared identity and cultural competence, leading to stronger therapeutic relationships and improved overall satisfaction.

An inclusive environment within the OT profession not only enhances the quality of patient care but also promotes the well-being and professional fulfillment of LGBTQ+ therapists. Supporting therapists' identities through institutional policies, anti-discrimination measures, and the promotion of diversity helps ensure that all practitioners feel respected and empowered in their roles. Such measures also foster a culture of acceptance and understanding, which is crucial for delivering client-centered care that addresses the unique needs of diverse populations.

The study emphasizes the continued necessity of integrating education and training on LGBTQ+ issues and cultural competence into OT programs. Equipping therapists with the skills to address the complexities of diverse patient identities is essential for advancing inclusivity within the profession. Moreover, healthcare organizations have a responsibility to implement frameworks that support LGBTQ+ therapists, including mentorship programs, support networks, and opportunities for professional development.

These findings point to the broader need for systemic change within healthcare settings to prioritize diversity and inclusion. By ensuring that all therapist and patient groups feel respected and supported, the OT profession can cultivate an environment where therapeutic relationships thrive and care quality reaches its highest potential. Moving forward, a sustained commitment to these principles is essential for fostering equitable healthcare practices that meet the needs of all individuals.

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