



Short Report

Identifying the roles of occupational therapists among the LGBT community: An analysis of a panel discussion

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Abstract

Occupational therapists are known to be holistic practitioners who facilitate occupational performance and promote occupational justice. However, limited literature explores the role of the profession for members of the society who identify themselves as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBT). This paper analyzes a panel discussion at an international event hosted by a university in the Philippines regarding gender and sexuality. This short report aims to identify the roles of occupational therapists among the LGBT community through the lens of professionals. Upon thematic analysis of the transcription of the discussion, five roles of occupational therapists were identified. These are (1) navigators on the complexity of gender and sexuality, (2) researchers on evidenced-based and practical practices toward the LGBT community, (3) enablers of gender expression among the LGBT community, (4) allies of the LGBT community, and (5) advocates of inclusion in all spaces. It provides actionable approaches for occupational therapists to facilitate gender-affirming healthcare for the LGBT community. Moreover, these findings hold the potential to influence forthcoming policies and educational initiatives for both occupational therapists and allied professionals.

Key Words: *LGBT, panel discussion, roles, occupational therapy*

Overview

The fundamental goal of the occupational therapy profession is to rectify inequalities in order to promote justice and occupational participation.¹ In fact, occupational therapists deal with the intricacies of various lifestyles and routines of varied individuals, as well as with vulnerable populations that struggle with occupational opportunities and social involvement.² Individuals who identify themselves as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBT) can be considered as a vulnerable group since they experience a great array of discriminatory practices not only in their personal lives but, more importantly, in their workplaces and healthcare. The limited protection across societal segments, unequal distribution of opportunities, and violence only

serve to exacerbate the discrimination³. Hence, as an occupational therapist, who is prompted to advocate and eliminate health disparities among minorities such as the LGBT community, one is expected to take action and assume roles for the LGBT community. However, there is still limited literature clearly depicting the roles of occupational therapists among the LGBT community.

Moreover, occupational therapists use the concept of occupational justice to understand its position regarding its function on inequalities. Occupational justice is a powerful idea, bridging the gap between people's well-being and harmful social conditions that restrict what they can do and be.⁴ The role of healthcare professionals in occupational justice is emphasized to propose

human wants and needs to be engaged in valued occupations of choice for the promotion of health and life quality.⁵ According to the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework,⁶ occupational justice is “a justice that recognizes occupational rights to inclusive participation in everyday occupations for all persons in society, regardless of age, ability, gender, social class, or other differences.” Making reference to utilizing this understanding of occupational justice, members of the LGBT community are usual victims of prey to a great multitude of injustices, and when these members are unable to engage in occupations due to their gender expression and identity, and sexual orientation, they “experience occupational injustices which can negatively impact health and wellbeing.”⁶

It is imperative to highlight the level of significance of occupational therapists in occupational justice because it has been established that productive and meaningful engagement in occupations is vital for health and well-being.⁷ Therefore, the primordial responsibility of occupational therapists is to acquire knowledge about the occupational needs of the LGBT community in order to ensure that they can fully participate in their lives. In a study that explored various literature on the relationship between gender and occupational therapy, there are some actions occupational therapists can do, such as assisting in promoting gender-affirmative practices when accessing healthcare, maximizing strengths and resources, and thinking of the possible adjustments in occupational therapy managements due to gender and sexuality.⁸ In another study, the primary task of an occupational therapist is to facilitate engagement in meaningful activities, the core of the profession.⁹ Nevertheless, these do not provide a clear and comprehensive roles for occupational therapists. The need for an explicit and complete list could be helpful in establishing accountability and training points for occupational therapists.

Hence, this short report aims to identify the roles of occupational therapists among the LGBT community through the analysis of a panel discussion.

APPROACH

This short report utilized a qualitative approach through an analysis of a panel discussion at an international conference entitled “Global Assembly on Everyday Life, Gender and Sexuality” held in October 2021 via an online platform hosted by a Philippine university and an international occupational therapy organization.³ The two-day conference aimed to enable an international platform for information exchange across the globe on the different intersections of gender and sexuality in various fields, such as but not limited to arts, health, policies, and other sciences. For this study, only a segment of the event was taken into consideration, which was the panel discussion during the first day. Panel discussions share common features as focus groups utilized in most qualitative research but still have distinct characteristics¹⁰. Such analysis of panel discussion was also done in a study of Hatani.¹⁰

THE PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel discussion is entitled “*Activating the role of occupational therapists and other professionals for the LGBT community.*” The panelists included three occupational therapists and one speech and language pathology student. See the profiles of the panelists in Table 1. The panel discussion was facilitated by the first author, who is a Filipino occupational therapist with at least five years of professional practice and is a strong advocate of gender equality. It lasted for approximately 60 minutes and yielded a lot of data. Questions revolved around the following: difference of gender and sexuality, the importance of gender and sexuality in everyday life, actual and perceived roles and practices of occupational therapists and other healthcare professionals towards the LGBT community, and allyship. Each panelist was provided with two to three minutes to answer each question and prompted to add some more insights from the sharing of the other panelists.

The authors were able to seek consent and approval from the panelists and the organizers of the event to utilize the panel discussion segment for this current study through informed consent when they agreed to be members of the panel.

The video recording of the segment was downloaded and transcribed by the second author with permission from the organizers of the event, even though the event was open to the public. All of the authors did thematic analysis through a manual method incorporating at following six steps:¹¹ 1) familiarization, 2)

generation of initial codes, 3) theme generation, 4) review of themes, 5) definition and naming of themes, and 6) report production. During the whole process, all authors agreed on the decisions before moving to the next step. Document audit trails were also noted and kept to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.¹²

Table 1. Panel profile

	Profession	Country	Identity	Practice/Position
Panelist A	Occupational Therapist	USA	Member of LGBT+ Community	Academe/ Assistant Professor
Panelist B	Occupational Therapist	Ireland	Member of LGBT+ Community	Government/ Health Service Executive
Panelist C	Occupational Therapist	Philippines	Cisgender Female	Mental Health/ Occupational Therapist III
Panelist D	Student	Philippines	Cisgender Female	-

Findings And Discussions

After thematic analysis of the transcription of the panel discussion, five themes emerged. The identified roles based on the analysis, along with its explanations supported by literature are explained in this section to have a more cohesive and clear understanding. Occupational therapists may act as 1) navigators on the complexity of gender and sexuality, 2) researchers on evidenced-based and practical practices towards the LGBT community, 3) enablers of gender expression among the LGBT community, 4) allies of the LGBT community, and 5) advocates of inclusion in all spaces. See Figure 1 below for the summary of the roles of occupational therapists and other healthcare professionals for the LGBT community. Figure 1 suggests the transactional relationship of each role to each other, where one is inseparable from the others and roles mutually influence each other. All are suggested to be fulfilled by a professional as each are explicit roles one can fill in to support and enable meaningful participation in the everyday life of the LGBT community.

Navigators on the complexity of gender and sexuality. In a healthcare team, there should be the presence of a navigator, especially when it comes to understanding multifaceted cases and stories. A navigator, based on varied definitions, basically means an individual who leads the

position of a craft towards its destination by being aware of its relationship in different places, understanding the engines or parts of the craft to find its opportunities, and so on. Hence, for occupational therapists, as navigators, they should help an individual determine and describe their gender and sexuality as they relate to their occupational choice and engagement.

These claims were further explained as Panelist A said that gender and sexuality are largely socially constructed concepts that are composed of sociopolitical and community-level facets. Hence, helping one to grasp these concepts is a role of an occupational therapist. In a description by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment,¹³ health navigators are commonly the trusted healthcare team member that help clients overcome barriers to a clear understanding of varied contexts. Strategies were partially mentioned by Panelist B by saying that each facet actually contributes to the identity of each individual and needs to be understood and translated to other stakeholders and contexts. Furthermore, in this theme, being a navigator means being able to guide the client towards self-awareness aside from being with them throughout the access and utilization of healthcare. Professionals should be able to define, explain, identify, and respect facets that contribute to the individuality of each client and relate it to context holistically.

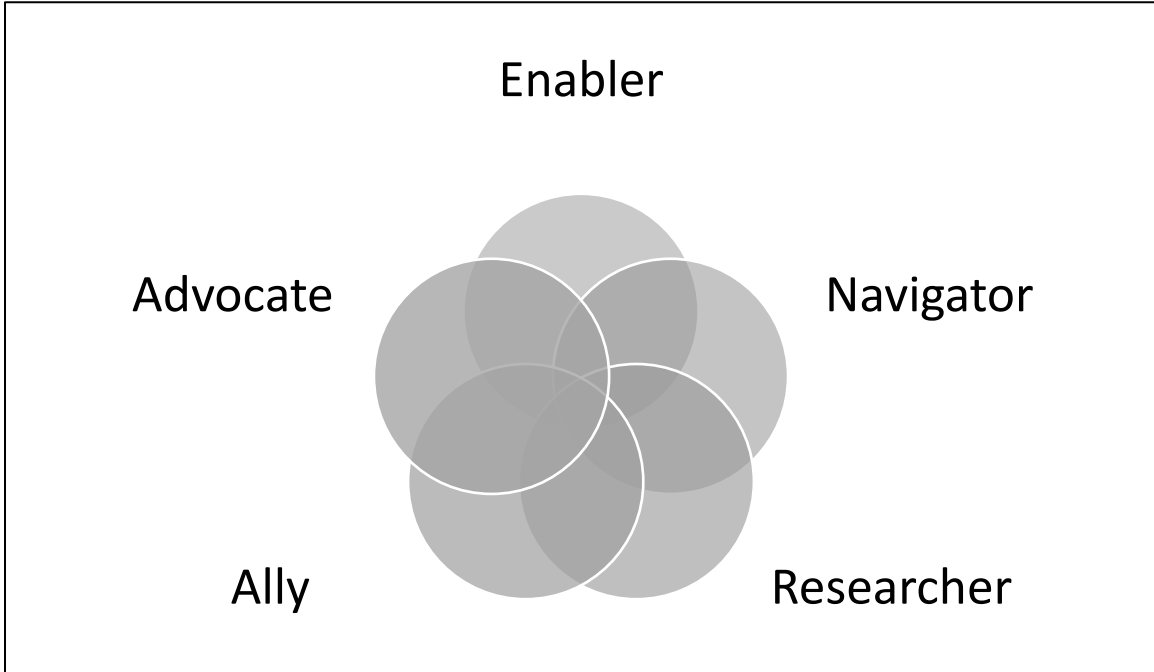


Figure 1. Role of occupational therapists toward the LGBT community

Researchers on evidence-based and practical practices towards the LGBT community.

Professionals in healthcare are now focused on evidence-based practice.¹⁴ This pushes professionals to become active researchers and consumers of research. This is true also when trying to care for clients or individuals that have diverse gender and sexualities.

“You’ll never know everything.” - Panelist A

The above statement crystalizes the need for professionals to continue doing research and activate themselves in searching and verifying literature since one cannot know everything based on experience and exposure alone. Research is warranted based on Panelist A to understand more about the LGBT+ community. Panelist D narrated the gap in the literature on how to really fulfill the role of a healthcare professional in the practice when being thrown with the complexity of gender-affirmative healthcare¹⁵. There are social determinants and physical environments that contribute to the problems being dealt with by the community. Panelist D also said strongly that even the correct language to be utilized to communicate and its effect is not fully grasped since these are not covered in professional training yet by the

majority. According to Hansen & Himley,¹⁸ there is a scarcity of research and education on the LGBTQ population for healthcare professionals, and there are few tools for them to use to improve their knowledge and cultural competence on the demographic.

Furthermore, it was enlightening when Panelist A remarked that research should not be heavily focused on finding problems and health disparities but also celebrate the strengths and contributions of the LGBT community and the opportunities for cultural competencies for healthcare professionals.

“ [understand the LGBT community] more in-depth than we do both looking at the some of these disparities and need, but also finding the ways that we can celebrate the things that we learned and cultivate through participating in daily life as a queer person.” - Panelist A

Currently, there are curriculum topics on LGBT that do not seem to be given much focus across educational settings. As part of the commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity; the occupational therapy curricula should include topics that are LGBT-related.¹⁷

Enablers of gender expression among the LGBT community. As an enabler, occupational

therapists and healthcare professionals should assist LGBT individuals to realize their full potential and their opportunities to flourish. Sometimes, clients who are identified as members of a gender-diverse group tend to be discriminated against because of a lack of support due to training deficiencies, a shortfall in language and sensitivity, and unintentional ignorance. According to Panelist A, the LGBT+ community has a lot of assets and capacities that need to be celebrated but are not often highlighted because of the situations mentioned above. Hence, to become an enabler, we should create safe spaces by displaying items in public and clinical spaces signals that welcome the LGBT community. Also, all staff, especially healthcare professionals, should upskill their language and concept knowledge to be more culturally sensitive, making an environment more friendly for all.

"...clients [LGBT+ community] need a bit of extra support." - Panelist B

Hence, awareness should be supported in the environment. According to Ayoub,¹⁸ movements and leaders must urge various types of media to convey more realistic stories about lesbian and gay people in order to narrow the gaps between intolerance and cultural change. Panelist D mentioned normalizing conversations about gender identity in mainstream media, policies, and educational settings.

"It's just someone's identity and in small conversations like that, we can start among friends, eventually around our family, we get to talk about these things and you know, normalize it and... mainstream it in media, in.. in our policies, in education, because this is reality." - Panelist D

Consequently, the role of occupational therapists may also include the production of health communication and education materials geared towards discussions and public messaging regarding gender and sexuality that clearly represent the LGBT community. Additionally, McGeorge and Carlson¹⁹ emphasize the significance of understanding one's own idea of heterosexism advantages, assumptions, and identity in order to become an LGBT-affirming therapist. Without being aware of or completely comprehending the concerns and obstacles experienced by the older LGBT community,

therapists may have trouble providing gender-affirming health care that is clinically and culturally competent. According to AOTI,²⁰ it is critical that occupational therapy services exhibit their LGBT+ acceptance. This will reassure potential LGBT+ service consumers that they will be welcomed and given the same high-quality service as everyone else.

Allies of the LGBT community. In an article written by Atcheson²¹, an ally is an individual or group that actively promotes and pursues true inclusion through positive and intentional efforts that benefit the marginalized group or individuals. So, in terms of being an ally for the LGBT community, based on Panelist A, healthcare professionals, with emphasis on occupational therapists, should allow people to flourish through occupations that can be expressed diversely through gender and sexuality. Panelist D also asserted that being an ally is just being people to people. However, Panelist C expressed that sometimes one is not yet comfortable in being an ally, because it needs time and more understanding than usual. Panelist A even said, *"I always recognize that allyship requires risk from those [other] people..."* As an ally, occupational therapists should be comfortable associating oneself with the LGBT community.

"...the first step of allyship is deciding whether you're the right person to be in that space..." - Panelist A

Panelist A also mentioned an instance where you also need to *"find someone who is better suited or more connected to that community"* to act as an ally should you feel that you are not the right person to help the LGBT patient in that instance.

With this statement, it means that wearing a rainbow lanyard or creating pins that signify gender diversity in different places is not enough. It was argued also by Panelist B that there is worry about loosely using these symbols by individuals who do not really understand the complexity of the situations of the LGBT+ community wherein there might be instances that somebody might go for therapists or any professional with the same symbols but experience bad incidents. Hence, this might lead to confusion and a negative perspective on these symbols that should be calming and supportive.

However, allyship is a lifelong process that should be recognized by the LGBT community, not by oneself.²¹

Advocates of inclusion in all spaces. Being an advocate was expounded as panelist A explained that, as a community, we construct these concepts of gender and sexuality that affect political and social relationships that are real and have consequences. This idea is backed by a paper written by Celis and associates in 2013,²² suggesting that basic conditions of lives are shaped by personal and social identification as members of a group. Hence, it includes varied dimensions that need to be advocated to be understood to be more inclusive. Advocacy is an action that is needed when people or systems do not listen or when they let individuals or groups experience injustices. And most often, the LGBT community experiences a lot of these across contexts.²³ As an advocate, healthcare professionals are urged to speak up and amplify the needs and voices of the LGBT community and champion or represent them in all discussions.²⁴ A practical suggestion of Panelist D is to normalize talking about our sexuality [gender and sexuality], which was supported by Panelist B, adding that healthcare professionals should start learning, talking, and building confidence in this area. Moreover, Panelist A said that advocacy should be constant to enable social change, which is mentioned by Panelist B. Advocacy is achieved when there are platforms that enable safe spaces and when policies are co-created with various groups, including the LGBT community.

Moreover, an outcome of occupational therapy is advocacy. It includes advocating for the client's rights and ensuring that, despite difficulties such as an unsupportive workplace, opposing views and beliefs, and a lack of policies, advocating for social, health, and occupational determinants will result in occupational participation and engagement.²⁵ Finally, here is a direct quotation from the works of Simon and associates:²⁶

“Clinicians should be encouraged to serve as advocates for this population across the continuum of care. All of these mechanisms will foster improved OT service delivery.”

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the roles occupational therapists may fulfill toward the LGBT community. It clearly laid out the importance of the profession in various ways for the marginalized community especially with the LGBT community. Occupational therapists can help navigate gender and sexuality, enable, research, and advocate for the LGBT community, and become true allies. However, the extent of how to fulfill these roles is not yet fully explored in this paper which necessitates further studies and exploration. Also, it affirms the professional's holistic perspective in understanding and doing something for various individuals and groups.

Individual Author's Contributions

R.C.D. Conceptualized the research, gathered and analyzed the data, led writing the paper, agreed on the revisions; M.A.B. Co-conceptualized the researched, analyzed the data, co-wrote the paper, agreed on the revisions; R.S. Co-conceptualized the researched, analyzed the data, co-wrote the paper.

Disclosure Statement

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Conflicts of interest

The authors of the study declare no conflict of interest.

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