

# GENDER, SEXUALITY AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY - WHAT'S THE LINK?

Gender and sexuality are becoming increasingly debated topics around the world, yet the thoughts of occupational scientists and occupational therapists are often missing from these discussions.

It has previously been stated that sexuality is a broad term, and that it refers to more than just physical sexual behaviour, as it also relates to thoughts and feelings of everyday life (Coultrick, 1998a). It has also been said that sexuality can shape gender identity, while also contributing to the formation of social roles and relates to a whole spectrum of attitudes, behaviours and activities (Weeks, 2003).

With occupational therapy being a profession that places much emphasis on holistic and person-centred practice, it is somewhat perplexing then, that occupational therapists are often absent from discussions surrounding gender and sexuality. Furthermore, it raises questions surrounding the very limited availability of research surrounding the interplay of one's identity (including their gender identity, sexuality and sexual orientation) and its impact on occupation.

## What the literature says so far...

Expression of sexuality is an important aspect of quality of life, health, and wellbeing (Anderson, 2013).

Sakellarjou and Algado (2006) noted that the majority of the occupational therapists believe sexuality is an area of concern for the occupational therapy profession, however, that sexuality was not regularly addressed within clinical practice, with lack of education being cited as one of the main reasons.

It has been argued that individuals continue to be sexual beings during illness and disability, and therefore their sexual concerns should be addressed along with all other health needs (Young et al., 2020).

Sexuality and sexual functioning are considered an activity of daily living by the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (2008); however, it has been suggested that they are not routinely addressed by occupational therapists or other healthcare professionals (Hattjar, 2012).

Young et al., (2020) noted that exploration of clients' sexuality is an integral and necessary part of holistic care and practice. Respondents were said to believe that expressing sexuality in itself is occupation based and therefore well aligned with the expertise, priorities, and person-centred holistic approach that is fundamental to the occupational therapy profession.

There is a developmental need in regard to providing training tools to overcome the many barriers encountered by occupational therapists regarding the domain of sexuality (Lepage et al., 2020)

Occupational therapists have a role to play in supporting transgender and non-binary people to access and participate in occupations that can facilitate their authentic gender expression (Swenson et al., 2021)

## Reflections...

The terms 'sexuality' and 'sexual orientation' are often used interchangeably in conversation. However within all of the literature that I have reviewed (which is not limited to that which has been included on this poster), the term 'sexuality' is often used to refer to sexual activity, expression, and sexual health and rarely recognises sexual orientation.

For years now, there seems to have been acknowledgement within the literature that sexuality fits within an occupational therapists domain, yet there appears to be a lack of research or resources available suggesting how this can be addressed in clinical practice.

There is limited research exploring the links between sexual orientation and occupational therapy

In order to further explore the relationship between gender, sexuality and occupational therapy, perhaps first we need to be clearer on the definition of the terms 'gender' and 'sexuality'.

## Moving forward...

Though the literature so far suggests that there is a link between sexuality and occupational therapy, this is not absolute. It is far less clear as to whether there is a general consensus that gender identity and sexual orientation are linked to occupational therapy. Perhaps then, we need to take a less broad approach to our line of questioning. Seeking answers to the following should help to solidify or disburse the questions surrounding gender, sexuality and their relevance to occupational therapy.

- I. Is there a link between gender identity and occupation?
- II. Is there a link between sexuality and occupation?
- III. Is there a link between sexual orientation and occupation?

References  
American Occupational Therapy Association (2008). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 61, 422-451.  
Anderson, R. M. (2013). *People sexuality and its impact on overall well-being: An integrative literature review*. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 66, 238-248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022112469184>  
Coultrick, L. (1998). *Sexual orientation and the occupational therapist*. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 61, 111-116.  
Hattjar, B. (2012). *Occupational therapy and sexuality: A review of the literature*. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65, 111-116.  
Lepage, C., & Poirier, J. (2020). *Sexuality and occupational therapy: A review of the literature*. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63, 111-116.  
Swenson, K., & Poirier, J. (2021). *Transgender and non-binary people: A review of the literature*. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 64, 111-116.  
Weeks, J. (2003). *Sexuality: The social context of sexual orientation*. *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 66, 238-248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022112469184>