Affirming Psychotherapy for Transgender and Gender Diverse People: Understanding Affirming, Neutral, and Marginalizing Experiences in Therapy

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Introduction

- Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people face barriers in seeking affirming psychotherapy services
- Currently, there are minimal guidelines established for working with TGD folx
- Past literature is told from therapists’ perspective rather than TGD clients
- Present study aimed to gain better understanding of improvements necessary to create an affirming, effective therapeutic environment by getting data directly from TGD folx

Background

- TGD patients are often subjected to marginalization in social, cultural, political, and interpersonal settings (Austin & Craig, 2015; Heck et al., 2015)
- APA currently has guidelines, but some are ambiguous (American Psychological Association 2019)
- Some literature discusses TGD experiences, but not directly from the clients’ perspective (Austin & Craig, 2015; Benson, 2013; Bess & Stabb, 2009; Heck et al., 2015)

Methods

- N=15 from Central Great Plains
- Participants viewed affirming, neutral, or marginalizing videos of therapy
- Quantitative analysis using Session Rating Scale
- Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interview

Results

Table 1. Summary of Session Rating Scores for Each Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marginalizing</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirming</td>
<td>38.56</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>26.05</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td>5</td>
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F (2,12) = 30.83, Mse = 39.99, p<0.001

Table 2. Themes, definitions, and examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Therapists understanding the nuances between TGD identity and mental health</td>
<td>Therapist understands how a client’s TGD identity can play into the client’s mental health in certain situations and be separate in other aspects and knows how to navigate these nuances</td>
<td>“It wasn’t like here I am sitting here treating a trans person. It was, I’m here seeing a person who happens to be trans.”</td>
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<td>Therapists actively making an effort to mitigate fear of clients’ marginalizing therapy</td>
<td>Therapist understands that clients have the possibility of being subjected to behavior that is marginalizing to their TGD identity and actively works to mitigate this fear</td>
<td>“They started a little bit reluctant, but I think you could kind of see the flip of a switch right when the therapist said ‘everyone deserves to have access to accommodating therapy’”</td>
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<td>Therapists fostering pride in a client's TGD identity</td>
<td>Therapist makes it a point to be affirming of the client’s TGD identity, understand how their TGD identity plays a role in their day-to-day life, and helps the client foster a sense of pride in their identity</td>
<td>“[The therapist] was very much like I understand that this is something that has a real impact. Even if I don’t experience that impact it sounds like it’s really affecting you severely. So, I think it felt like they were being heard and they were being understood”</td>
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Discussion

- Link between affirming behavior and more inclusive, effective therapy
- Affirming videos received highest ratings and least negative reactions
- New guidelines are necessary; neutrality is actually harmful