

The opinions and
experiences of
psychotherapists on
working with sexually
diverse clients

A dissertation by
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Introduction

Sexually diverse clients are individuals involved in kink, polyamory, BDSM, and fetish practices (Barker, 2019)

They have been found to face bias and stigma in therapy (Spratt et al. 2017)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual had classified this group as having a disorder, but the recent edition now emphasizes distress as the determining factor. (APA, 2013)

Research on sexual diversity in therapy remains limited, with no previous studies from an Irish perspective.

As people become more open about their desires and preferences, it becomes crucial to explore how therapists in Ireland perceive and handle these clients.

Aim of the Study

The objective of this study was to investigate therapists' viewpoints and experiences of working with sexually diverse individuals

Identify potential gaps in the training requirements for therapists in Ireland.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm which allow understanding of personal lived experience (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017)

Participants

- Nine participants accredited (n=4) and student (n=5) psychotherapists
- purposive sampling and snowballing sampling
- Open to student and accredited therapists providing direct services to clients in Ireland.
- Exclusion criteria: therapists not working in Ireland and those with no clinical experience

Ethics

- Ethical approval was given by ICHAS Ethics Review Board
- Informed consent obtained prior to recording interviews
- Data was anonymized using pseudonyms and codes.
- All information gathered held in line with data protection regulation

Data Collection

- Interviews were conducted using Zoom
- semi-structured interviews
- audio was recorded to allow for a verbatim transcript

Data Analysis

- § Analysis was done using Braun and Clarke (2022) six-stage process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis
- § Codes were generated from the data
- § Codes analysed and organised into themes

Methodology

Main

Theme 1 – Sex
and Sexually diverse behav
iour

Theme 2 - Safety

Theme 3 -
Education

Theme 4 –
Barriers and Stigm
a

Subthemes

- Is sexually behaviour discussed and is there a need for treatment
- Defining Sexually diverse
- Ease of discussing sex

- Concerns for client safety
- Abuse and kink

- Current knowledge
- Further Training
- Benefits of training

- Impact of social norms
- Therapy Barriers
- Consequences of barriers and effect of Bias

Thematic Analysis

Therapists are treating clients with sexually diverse behaviour in Ireland with some more frequently than others.

The themes found in this study are all interconnected with social norms playing a key role in the development of barriers and bias in therapy. This can be improved with better education.

The therapeutic relationship is key to when a client feels comfortable discussing sex if they discuss it at all.

Those under thirty are more open to discussing sex possibly because they would have received some form of sex education.

Shame and judgement from others were discussed as the primary reason clients prefer to hide their preferences.

Results

Therapists discomfort toward sex is linked with a lack of basic sexual education and is highly suggestive of the influence of Irish societal norms, where discussing sex is considered taboo even within a clinical setting.



A small sample was interviewed for this study, and it showed significant harm had been done to clients because of the actions of therapists.



None of the participants would encourage clients to stop the behaviour. It was interesting that none of the therapists would try and stop a client who had been abused from engaging in sexually diverse behaviour specifically BDSM. This is a contrast to findings by other international studies



Clients were engaging in dangerous situations, but therapists felt unable to accurately support them.



All nine participants have received little education on the topic of sex in general and that most have been self-taught.

Results cont:

Discussion

The culture in Ireland of repression has a strong influence not just on the public but on therapists themselves.

International research has shown these clients have experienced bias and judgement in therapy with therapists attempting to pathologize the behaviour.

There are reports of poor experiences and unethical treatment that have been heavily influenced by the shame and repression of sex that is shaped by the Irish culture.

Implications

- The results have shown that not only do therapists in Ireland need further education on the topic of sex in general, but it is also likely that there is a limited understanding of safe kink practices amongst the general population. Without proper sexual education, there will continue to be difficulties talking about sex in the therapy room. There is a need and a wish for regulation from therapists in Ireland to help combat unethical treatment with harm being done to clients due to unsafe practices.

Limitations

Phenomenological research encounters constraints due to the inevitability of researchers acknowledging their personal biases and beliefs, making it unethical to attempt detachment (Hammersley, 2000)

The study would have benefited from a more diverse sample.

It is possible that therapists who have no interest or are biased toward sexually diverse behaviour would not have engaged with the study.

Recommendations for Future Research or Interventions

- Further study is recommended on the experiences of sexually diverse people who have availed of therapy in Ireland. It is unlikely that biased therapists would have participated in the study and hearing from people living in Ireland would provide a better understanding of therapy practices in Ireland.

Thank you!

If you'd like to get in touch, there's a few ways you can find me:



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