

Factors Influencing Occupational Participation for Older Gay Men

Joy Kelleher 4th Year Occupational Therapy, University College Cork.

Jeanne Jackson Supervisor, University College Cork.

Background	Methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A local LGBT community organisation contacted Community Access Research Links (CARL) in UCC seeking students who were interested in conducting research to identify the needs of older gay men living in the community. As the population of gay and lesbian older adults grows in terms of size and visibility, the need for research regarding the issues relating to this population equally grows. Sexual orientation is one factor influencing how we choose and experience occupations, however despite increased visibility of the role of sexuality in occupation, OTs in Ireland remain reluctant to address sexuality with older adults in practice. Occupational therapists must consider sexual orientation and how it influences occupational participation to provide a client-centred service to gay and lesbian service-users. The literature review conducted, revealed a gap in research regarding the occupational needs and experiences of older gay men in an Irish context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A small-scale qualitative study took part in an urban area in the south of Ireland to investigate factors influencing occupational participation among older gay men. Given the nature of the topic, a qualitative methodology with an interpretive phenomenological approach was chosen to explore individual meanings of occupation. Participants were recruited through a gatekeeper in the local LGBT organisation and posters advertising the research. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven men who self-identified as older and gay,, aged between 32 and 65 years old, in various locations of their choice. Due to audio issues, the researcher was unable to transcribe one interview, thus six participants are represented in the data analysis. Participation was voluntary and could be terminated at the request of the participant. Anonymity was ensured throughout, and all identifiable information was omitted from the data. Phenomenological thematic data analysis was chosen to analyse the meaning of the lived experiences described by participants as it understands, translates, and illustrates the data through deconstruction, to uncover the meanings of the phenomenon . Subthemes were refined and synthesised to form three overarching themes and nine associated subthemes which are presented below using quotes from participants.
<h2>Research Aims</h2>	
<p>Through discussion with the community organisation, the research question was decided:</p> <p><i>Factors influencing occupational participation for older gay men living in Ireland</i></p> <p>The study aims to explore factors influencing the experience and meaning of occupation for older gay men.</p>	

Findings		
Life Journey	Unsafe Spaces	Social Network
<p>Personal History:</p> <p>“Basically, having to battle your way through to school and at home or to the local shop. You don't know what you'd be faced with. So that was something I would have been quite nervous about.” - Mike, 44</p> <p>“What alcohol did for me, it allowed me to go to school, it allowed me to go out, it allowed me to mix because it was illegal to be gay... I acted a part that the world wanted me to do it and it was those substances that allowed me.” - Liam, 62</p> <p>Age and Experience:</p> <p>“As long as and as resourceful as I am, I want to be able to advocate for myself and problem solve and be as resilient as I am.” -Sean, 65</p> <p>“I had years where I felt, shameful around my own sexuality... I wanted to work in an area where you could relieve that sense of shame for other people. So, I suppose that would have been my motivation for this area of work.” -Mike</p> <p>“I just had a very, very positive outlook... If this is the worst that can happen and if I'm gonna die, there is fuck all I can do about it, I'm not gonna sit here in my bed dwelling on it.” -Liam</p>	<p>Heteronormativity</p> <p>“I don't want to be in any place where I have to explain myself, apologise for anything, retreat to a closet... I don't want to be sitting in around and among heterosexual seniors talking about their children and grandchildren ... That was not my lived experience.” -Sean</p> <p>“It's a very heteronormative world that I live in... it's assumed, unless you are a screaming Queen, you're straight.” - Liam</p> <p>Social Inaccessibility</p> <p>“Team sports for me were certainly, you know, not fun safe spaces, so I never got into sports” - Mike</p> <p>Homophobia</p> <p>“Some people would threaten violence at the door. So just seeing that because you don't see it a lot and was a reminder that it's still there. I remember there was thirty something percent of people who voted no. So that's significant.” -Mike</p> <p>Physical Inaccessibility</p> <p>“Oh my God, have you walked on an Irish footpath recently? ... Did you know the City Library does not have a lift?” -Sean</p>	<p>Family</p> <p>“I grew up, as many in my generation did in an Irish Catholic, alcoholic, dysfunctional family of origin... but here in my rainbow family of choice, these are the people that I choose to affiliate with now, people who understand me and ... speak the same language” -Sean</p> <p>Friends</p> <p>“dinner with my friend on a Tuesday night, its neither for fun nor relaxation it's just a fulfilling and enjoyable. Good company. That kind of thing.” -Pat, 56</p> <p>LGBT Community Involvement</p> <p>“Having been away for a year... I've had to rebuild... the (local LGBT organisation) for example I purposely contacted them.” -Edward, 56</p> <p>“I suppose it just feels inclusive. It's nice not to feel like the minority” -Mike</p> <p>“Just talking with the people and somehow you think about things in a different way and you have different ideas.” -James, 56</p>

Discussion	Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The positive outlook towards aging suggested by participant responses, supports the findings of Fenkl and Rodgers (2014) that older gay men have a great deal of optimism regarding aging, despite adverse past experiences. As outlined by Edward in his workplace, heteronormativity was seen as a factor that forced individuals to share their sexual orientation with each new acquaintance. It has been argued that constantly having to reveal their sexual orientation to others as they participate in work or leisure activities may cause further stress for gay people. This may be why Liam has adopted a way to avoid having to formally come out to each person he meets. Research illustrates the presence of negative physical and psychological consequences associated with experiencing victimisation due to one's sexual orientation (Garnets et al., 2003). Interestingly, Edward describes experiencing enhanced confidence in his self-defence skills and receiving support from his local community. Edwards experience parallels findings that anti-gay victimisation can provide opportunities for personal development, as well as risks for impairment (Garnets et al., 2003). Increased levels of loneliness and isolation are reported among older LGBT adults (Kuyper & Fokkema, 2010). On the contrary, loneliness and isolation were not reported by any of the participants in the current study. The majority of participants were linked with a local LGBT organisation and this may be why isolation and loneliness were not encountered among the current sample of older gay men. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The findings of this study will benefit both community organisations and healthcare providers, by providing insight into the occupational needs of this population, as well as the barriers they face. In addition, this research adds knowledge to occupational science and occupational therapy theory regarding the occupational participation of sexual minority groups. It is imperative that we recognize the occupational needs of LGBT older adults and eliminate barriers to engaging in meaningful occupation to prevent occupational deprivation among gender and sexual minority groups. Further research is warranted to understand the role of past experiences on current occupational participation for this population. Facilitators and barriers present in the various environmental contexts (physical, social, political) negotiated by older gay men and related effects on occupational participation require further investigation. <h2>References</h2> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fenkl, E. A., & Rodgers, B. L. (2014). Optimistically engaging in the present: Experiences of aging among gay men. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014545463 Garnets, L.D., Herek, G.M., & Levy, B. (2003). Violence and victimisation of lesbians and gay men: mental health consequences. In: LD Garnets, DC Kimmel, eds. Psychological perspectives on lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences. 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 188-206. Kuyper, L., & Fokkema, C. M. (2010). Loneliness among older lesbian, gay and bisexual adults: The role of minority stress. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39(5), 1171-1180. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-009-9513-7

