Effects of therapists affirming and non-affirming reactions to transgender identity exploration on the therapeutic relationship: An analogue study

Jay N. Bettergarcia, M.A. & Tania Israel, Ph.D.
University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

Transgender individuals seek mental health counseling for a variety of reasons (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006). However, their experiences in therapy are not always positive, and some experiences are quite negative (Rachlin, 2002). The present study utilizes an analogue research design and video vignettes to investigate how a therapist’s response to transgender identity exploration affects participants’ perceptions of the therapist and the therapeutic relationship. The study utilized a series of mock therapy video vignettes that vary the way that a therapist responds to the client including transition-affirming, gender non-binary affirming, and non-affirming responses. Transgender participants watched one of three mock therapy clips before completing a series of questions about their perception of the therapist’s expertness, likability, trustworthiness, and the session smoothness, depth, positivity, and arousal. Results indicate that the affirming and non-affirming messages the therapist provides in session significantly affect the perceptions of the therapist and the quality of the therapeutic relationship. This study provides a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which transgender individuals experience different therapeutic approaches and how these perceptions may be different based on their own desire to transition or not transition.

Introduction

Transgender individuals access therapeutic services for a number of reasons and their experiences of therapy are not always positive. Guidance exists, especially for transgender people who want to transition. However, not all transgender people want to transition medically. Current recommendations may not be helpful for counseling transgender clients who are not interested in transitioning.

Participants

Self-identified as part of the transgender-spectrum, 18+ years old, live in United States (n = 409) 39% genderqueer, 20% trans men, 17% trans women, 6% women, 6% men, 13% something else. Age: 31-50% y/o, 6% 51+ y/o. Race/Ethnicity, 78% European American, 8 African American, 7% Latino/a/Hispanic, 3% Asian American, 2% Middle Eastern, 5% “other.” “Transition plans: 38% no plan to transition, 34% interested in transitioning, 19% in process, 10% already transitioned.

Design

An analogue research design was used to create the conditions that approximate the therapeutic relationship. Created video vignettes of a mock therapy session between a therapist and a client questioning their gender identity. Recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), social media, listservs, emails, & community centers.

Procedure

**VIDEO CONDITIONS**

- Transition affirming: Therapist presents the option of transitioning and explains the process
- Sometimes people choose to transition to help them feel more like themselves.
- Non-binary affirming: Therapist presents the option that the client can explore their gender identity and fluidity
- Sometimes people are flexible and fluid with their identity. They may feel comfortable being in between...maybe both male and female or neither male nor female.

**MEASURES**

- Counselor Rating Form—Short (Garrett & Schred, 1983)
- Session Evaluation Questionnaire (DiC, Miles, & Stone, 1990)
- Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (KSPPHS; Fischer & Turner, 1970)
- Transgender Adaptation and Integration Measure (TG AIM; Spelberg, Walsh, Staney, 2004)
- Measures Transgender Congruence Scale (TCS; Koene, Tylka, Bauerback, 2012)

Results

- Significant difference with a medium to large effect size, F (8, 404) = 9.55, p < .0001; Wilk’s Λ = 0.71, partial n² = 0.159.
- Significant difference between both affirming videos and the non-affirming video condition.

Hypothesis II: Interrater reliability rated the video vignettes for the transition affirming and non-binary affirming conditions as compared to the non-affirming condition. Significant difference with a medium to large effect size, F (8, 404) = 9.55, p < .0001; Wilk’s Λ = 0.71, partial n² = 0.159.

Discussion

- Provides strong empirical evidence of the damaging effects that non-affirming interventions have on the therapeutic relationship for transgender individuals
- Trend in data that shows it may be possible that what is affirming for transgender clients differs based on their plans to transition or not transition.

Implications for practice:

- Being warm, supportive, and attempting to be helpful is not enough to counter the invalidating statements throughout the non-affirming video.

Implications for training:

- Training should include the basics about gender identity, transgender identity, gender fluidity, and the differences between sex, gender, and sexuality.
- Training should also include information about the various facets of affirming and non-affirming approaches that might help or hinder the development of a strong therapeutic relationship.

Limitations

- The video vignettes might not have been a strong enough manipulation for the transition affirming and non-binary affirming approaches.
- Might have detected differences in the affirming approaches with a different manipulation, more participants, or a different research method.

Future Directions

- Additional research is needed to help support or challenge the standards, guidelines, and recommendations for working with transgender clients.
- Research is needed to understand the differences between various affirming approaches for people who do or do not plan to transition.
- Additional research is needed about the positive and negative experiences of non-binary and genderqueer clients who may or may not be interested in transitioning.
- Research is needed to further explore the positive experience of transgender individuals in therapy and what makes it positive.

For more information, please contact:
Jay N. Ledbetter, M.A.
JayBettergarcia@gmail.com
Tania Israel, Ph.D.
tania@education.ucsb.edu