

Gender Disparity and the Lived Experience of Male Occupational Therapists in the United States

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Gender diversity in healthcare has been linked to health care quality and improved access. Unfortunately for occupational therapy (OT), gender disparity is well documented with only 7.6% of practitioners as males. In its Centennial Vision, the American Occupational Therapy Association recognized the professional concern of having a "diverse workforce." This poster highlights the need for gender diversity in the occupational therapy workforce and how it may contribute to enhanced delivery of OT services by addressing gender-related issues with occupational engagement.

The work draws from a phenomenological study that explored the lived experience of male OT practitioners (OTP) from their initial entrée into the profession and throughout their journey in female-dominated fields of practice. A total of 20 male OTPs from diverse clinical backgrounds underwent in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Using Colaizzi's framework, interviews were transcribed, coded/recoded, member-checked, and categorized for themes. Four themes emerged: 1) fitting in with the masculine stereotypes; 2) having the male advantage; 3) achieving congruence between professional values and client needs; and 4) struggling for professional recognition. The study findings have broad implications for the profession in terms of addressing gender disparity and division within the OT workforce, portraying a more gender-balanced professional image to the public, and promoting access to culturally-competent occupational therapy service provision.

Failure to acknowledge gender imbalance and disparity within the profession only disadvantages us and the clients we serve. Having increased gender diversity better positions the occupational therapy profession for societal and global impact.