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Sexual Identity & Human Occupation: A Qualitative Exploration

Rory Devine [a] & Clodagh Nolan [b]

[a] Occupational therapy lecturer and research supervisor at the Department of Occupational Therapy, E-mail:

[b] Post-graduate student at the Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Dublin, Trinity Collegeiversity of Dublin, Trinity College

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Abstract

The dearth of literature within occupational science regarding the relationship between sexual identity and human occupation has been noted. This constituted a gap in knowledge that warranted exploration in a discipline that strives to understand the meaning individuals place on occupations and how occupations enable adaptation. A small-scale qualitative study was undertaken within Dublin, Ireland to explore the influence of sexual identity on the occupational lives of gay men attending third level education. Semi-structured interviews informed by naturalistic inquiry and phenomenology were undertaken with four participants. The themes that emerged describe how participants' occupations were influenced by their sexual identity. The findings also shed further light on core occupational science concepts such as the relationship between identity, meaning and occupation.

Key Words
Sexual identity
Occupation
Meaning
Adaptation

Rory Devine, BSc(Hons)OT is a post-graduate student at the Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Dublin, Trinity College.

Clodagh Nolan, MSc, MA, PGDipStats, DipCOT is an occupational therapy lecturer and research supervisor at the Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Dublin, Trinity College.

Address for correspondence:
rdevine@tcd.ie

In Western societies, human sexuality has been and continues to be the subject of moral, legal and scientific concern (Sullivan, 2003; Weeks, 1996; Williamson, 2000). Within the discipline of occupational science, however, the issue of the relationship between sexual identity and occupation has remained largely invisible (Jackson, 1995; Walsh & Blesedell-Crepeau, 1997). To date, little empirical literature exists within the discipline to elucidate the influence that sexual identity may have upon occupation. This has a bearing on the scholarly endeavours of occupational scientists who aim to understand the symbolic, transcendental aspects of human occupation and the role of occupation in adaptation during times of transition (Clark et al., 1991; Yerxa, 2000). An exploration of the link between sexual identity and occupation was therefore necessitated from a philosophical and academic perspective.

Since sexual identity is a relatively uncharted territory in occupational science, a brief introduction to the language and research traditions of the field of human sexuality is necessary. Of particular importance to this study are the following terms: sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual identity. The term 'sexuality' is considered by theorists to encompass more than biological arousal or physical acts (Frankowski, 2004; Garnets & Kimmel, 2003; Williamson, 2000). Instead it is considered to be "affectional and erotic" (Garnets & Kimmel, p. 217), emotional (Frankowski), and an integral component of one's personal identity (Garnets & Kimmel; Harrison, 2001; Williamson). The term sexual orientation, on the other hand, refers to one's "acted or imagined and persistent" (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000, p. 197) preference in choosing sexual partners or "activity for sexual gratification" (p. 197).

Of most importance to this paper, however, is the term sexual identity, which is a culturally-bound concept since an identity is one's link with the social world (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000; Rust, 2003). It is how one is to be known or described by others. The language describing sexual identity therefore changes between cultures and across time (Rust, 2003; Sullivan, 2003). A homosexual identity is therefore more than merely one's same-sex sexual behaviours or feelings but has implications for how one is perceived in society. Although same-sex sexual relationships have existed across cultures and throughout the ages, historically speaking lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities are relatively recent social constructions unique to Western cultures (Frankowski, 2004; Markowe, 2002; Sullivan; Weeks, 1996; Williamson, 2000). For instance, certain cultures permit homosexual sexual behaviours within accepted societal norms (Williamson, 2000) and so, this negates the need for the creation of a homosexual sexual identity as something different from the mainstream within that culture.

In Western cultures, the process of recognising, adopting and sharing a sexual identity or 'coming out' as it is popularly called, is necessitated because there is a presumption of heterosexuality unless there is evidence to the contrary (Rust, 2003). This presumption has come to be termed 'heterosexism'. Coming out can present difficulties because the "heterosexist biases" (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003, p. 217) in

a culture devalue same-gender relationships. Since many inequalities exist between those with homosexual sexual identities compared to those with heterosexual sexual identities (Pellegrini, 2002), sexual identity is "important socially, politically, and on an individual level" (Markowe, 2002, p. 226).

Within western cultures, the study of homosexuality has taken two broad directions, the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000; Garnets & Kimmel, 2003; Williamson, 2000). An essentialist viewpoint posits that homosexuality is an inherent feature of an individual caused by genetic or biological factors. Social constructionists, however, consider the origins of one's sexual preferences to be irrelevant and instead focus their efforts on uncovering the social meaning and consequences of homosexuality (Garnets & Kimmel). Sexual identities are social constructs and would not be of concern if Western cultures had not labelled them deviant, abnormal or different (Drescher, 2002). Recent theory and research on homosexuality has tended towards an "interactionist perspective" (Garnets & Kimmel, p. 24) in which homosexuality is understood to be multiply-determined and its meaning is considered to vary across cultures.

The general thrust of research and theory on homosexuality has, in the past, been concerned with cause and, at various times, control or 'cure'. It is only a relatively recent phenomenon to explore the meaning, experience and behaviour of those who identify as homosexual. Indeed in a pluralistic society, it is argued that there should be no attempt to explain the origin of homosexuality unless an effort is made to explain all human sexual identities (Drescher, 2002; Ellis & Mitchell, 2000; Williamson, 2000). This study will make no attempt to explore or explain the causes of homosexuality but instead will focus on exploring the experience of being gay in a Western culture to elucidate the link between sexual identity and occupation.

Sexual Identity and Occupation: Theory & Research

A thorough review of the published literature (1990 to present) in occupational science and occupational therapy was undertaken using electronic database searches (e.g. PSYCHlit, Pubmed, CINAHL) and hand-searching of references. Several relevant articles were located. Jackson's (1995) seminal theoretical paper is an oft-cited piece on the place of sexual identity in occupational therapy and occupational science and provided the impetus for this study. Jackson proposed that having a minority sexual identity (for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual etc.) may influence occupations differently than being heterosexual, by virtue of the individuals' minority status. While stipulating that a gay identity is a "theme of meaning" (p. 671) that may shape occupation, rather than one's entire identity, Jackson argued that:

> If occupational scientists seek to understand the human's existence as an occupational being, then it seems appropriate that they begin to acquire knowledge about how persons who are lesbian, gay or bisexual conceal, deal with, reconcile and reinforce their homosexual sensibility through what they do. (p. 671)

Jackson also proposed that sexual orientation may influence occupational choices, contexts, the people with whom occupations are shared, "the function those occupations play in their lives, the historical significance of these occupations and the meaning they attribute to occupations" (p. 673).

Later theoretical papers by Birkholtz and Blair (1999) and Williamson (2000) built upon Jackson's (1995) arguments. They theorised how the sexual identity of lesbians influences occupation through the process of coming out, which "can inform a choice of different literature or movies, for example, because a focus on lesbian fiction may help cope with the transition" (Birkholtz & Blair, p. 71) and how "dining with friends can serve to replace a community or family which may reject lesbianism" (p. 71). Williamson (2000) furthered the discussion about sexual identity and human occupation, arguing that "sexuality is one of the frameworks that provide scaffolding" (p. 432) for identity and proposed adopting a developmental perspective in order to shed light on the process of "doing, being and becoming a gay man or lesbian" (p. 433). Such a perspective might illuminate "how an identity, based in part on the sexual self, has influenced the development and been incorporated into the performance of work, leisure and other activities of daily living" (p. 432).

Walsh and Blesedell Crepeau's (1998) study marked the first attempt in the occupational therapy literature to elucidate the influence sexual identity may have on occupation using an in-depth narrative interview approach. Their study aimed to gain insight into the day-to-day experience of a gay man, to investigate the process of coming out and to explore the influence of homophobia on relationships and occupational choice. They found that sexual identity influenced the meaning of occupation as well as the place occupation has in adapting to the challenges of being gay, and concluded that sexual identity must be given due concern because of to its potential impact upon occupational choice.

The purpose of the study reported here was to build on previous research by exploring the connection between sexual identity and human occupation in a sample of gay men living in Dublin, Ireland and attending third level education. Two research questions were chosen to investigate this topic: How does being gay influence the meaning and experience of occupation? and How do individuals who are gay adapt to their minority sexual identity and what bearing does this have on occupation? Participants were drawn from a population of men who self-identified as gay. The decision to focus on the gay male population was made as it was assumed that the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities would differ from one another.

Methodology

The emphasis on context, meaning and participant experience led to the selection of the qualitative research paradigm as the epistemological strategy in this study. This emphasis on subjectivity reflects the decidedly post-modern, liberationist, feminist and individual rights standpoint within occupational science (Pierce, 2003). The study design drew from and synthesised perspectives from naturalistic inquiry and phenomenology. Naturalistic inquiry, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is both a philosophy and empirical research approach that asserts that multiple realities exist which are constructed during the interactions of individuals.

Population and sampling procedure

Convenience sampling (Bailey, 1997; Flick, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was utilised to recruit participants, following a priori criteria:

1. All participants would be students in third level education. This decision arose for two reasons: firstly, that the participants shared a common occupational role, which would allow for meaningful comparison; and secondly, this population was readily accessible to the researcher.
2. Participants would be from a variety of backgrounds (urban, rural, suburban) but living in Dublin at the time of the study, allowing exploration of the impact of context upon occupation.
3. Participants who have reached various levels of disclosure regarding their sexual identity would be included, allowing examination of how participants adapted to the challenges and transitions of adopting a minority sexual identity.

To access participants for the study, two strategies were employed. Firstly, an email outlining the details of the study was sent to the president of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) Society at one of the universities from which participants were recruited. This email was subsequently forwarded to those on the mailing list of the relevant society. The second strategy involved networking through personal contacts in the gay community, who were encouraged to ask their gay friends to participate in the study. Those who registered an interest in taking part were contacted by text (SMS) message and email to determine their suitability for the study.

Ethical procedures

Ethical approval for this study was received from the University of Dublin, Trinity College Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee. Participants' rights, obligations and the potential risks and benefits were outlined to each participant andinformed consent obtained. To maintain confidentiality, all transcribed interview data and other raw data were filed under pseudonyms known only to the researcher. All recordings and other stored raw data were destroyed upon the completion of the project.

Brief description of participants

Four participants were selected and provided with pseudonyms to protect their identity. The students attended one of two universities in the Dublin area.

Simon was aged 19 and a full-time third year university student studying for a degree in a scientific discipline. Originally from a rural community, he moved to Dublin when he began university. Despite previous active involvement in his university LGB society, Simon was discrete regarding his sexual identity. He had not come out to his parents but had disclosed that he was gay to one family member. Most, but not all, of Simon's friends knew he was gay.

Anthony was 20 years of age and a full-time university student in his second year of a degree in science. Anthony was from an urban background, having grown up in Dublin, and resided with his family. He was involved with the LGB society at his university and had a large circle of gay friends. Anthony had not, at the time of the study, come out to his family and felt that this created a degree of tension at home.

Maurice was a 21 year old full-time university student in his final year of a degree in law. Originally from a rural background, he had moved to Dublin when he entered university. He was previously a member of his university's LGB society but not an active member. Maurice disclosed his sexual identity to his family when he was 16 and was forced to leave home as a result.

Thomas was a 24 year old full-time student in his final year of a degree in computing. He was from a suburban background and lived with his family. Thomas was an active member of the LGB society at his university. He had previously adopted an activist role in the society and was heavily involved in student politics and campaigning for issues related to homosexuality. Thomas came out to his family at the age of 19 and they reacted positively. Thomas made no attempt to conceal his sexual identity to anyone in his life.

Data gathering

The data for this study were gathered on a number of different occasions using a variety of different data gathering methods. The primary strategy was in-depth interviewing, with each participant interviewed twice. The first interview used a semi-structured interview schedule adapted by the researcher from the Occupational Performance History Interview (Version 2.0) (OPHI-II) (Kielhofner et al., 1998), which is designed to elicit information about a client's past and present occupational adaptation (Kielhofner, 2002). The rating scales and narrative slopes were omitted from this study as they were not deemed relevant to the study aims. Pilot testing the interview schedule involved a video-taped interview, which was subsequently used to train the first author in gaining the trust of this population. Both the interview participant and the second author were involved in the feedback and training. The data gathered in the pilot study was not included in the analysis. Interviews were conducted by the first author in locations deemed comfortable by the participants. All interviews were

recorded onto mini-disk and transcribed verbatim. Interviews averaged approximately 70 minutes.

Each participant was asked to maintain a Diary of Daily Occupations after the first interview. Written materials produced by participants act as a means of accessing first-person narrative accounts of actions, experiences and beliefs (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The diary format, designed by the researcher, served a number of purposes: to triangulate data, to capture information about what activities participants engaged in on a day-to-day basis and to stimulate reflections about how sexual identity may influence their occupations. Diaries were completed by all participants for one weekday and one weekend day.

After initial analysis of the transcribed data from the first round of interviews and the diaries, a second round of interviewing took place, using a semi-structured interview schedule drawn up for each participant. These follow-up interviews served two functions: to improve the trustworthiness of findings by allowing participants to clarify and verify information gathered in the first interviews and the diaries (member checking) and to flesh out emerging categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The follow-up interviews averaged approximately 30 minutes and each interview was recorded onto mini-disk and later transcribed verbatim.

Field notes recorded by the first author constituted another method of data gathering. They contained both a descriptive and reflective component and employed a format recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). Field notes were used to enrich and supplement the data gathered during interviews, allowing reflection on interview content in relation to the literature and other emerging findings. This was deemed important since audio recording equipment does not capture the entirety of the interview experience (Bogdan & Biklen).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the use of the human as research instrument is one of the strengths of the naturalistic approach. However, to ensure findings are trustworthy, a researcher must demonstrate reflexivity, which refers to the researcher developing insight into his or her background, interests, ideas and motivations in relation to the research topic (Krefting, 1991). In this study, diarying was maintained throughout the entirety of the project to check assumptions and record thoughts in relation to the research process. To conclude, the data set consisted of eight verbatim interview transcripts, four completed participant diaries, plus eight sets of field notes and a reflexive diary kept by the researcher.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is characterised by being an inductive process whereby findings emerge from the data set (Bailey, 1997; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were two rounds of data analysis in this project: 'rough analysis' (based on suggestions by Bogdan and Biklen) of the transcripts of the first interviews, which formed the basis of the follow-up interview, and a final analysis of the entire data set.

The method of data analysis chosen was a modified version of the constant comparative method as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), dubbed the "3x5 inch card shuffle" (p. 203). Analysis led to the emergence of 11 defined categories of data which were then examined for possible relationships, resulting in the categories being subsumed into three over-arching emergent themes, two of which are discussed here. The aim of the data analysis was to examine the meaning and experience of occupation for the participants and explore how their sexual identity influenced their occupational choices.

Trustworthiness

The rigour of qualitative research is demonstrated by establishing trustworthiness, which is analogous to the criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity used to assess the rigour of quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, triangulation of sources and methods, peer debriefing, member-checking, maintenance of a reflexive diary, the generation of 'thick descriptions' of participants and context, dense description of methods and the creation of an audit trail were employed (Lincoln & Guba; Krefting, 1991).

Findings and Discussion

Two emergent themes are described and discussed in light of the research questions and available literature; Sexual identity and the daily life of participants, and Sexual identity and adaptation: Doing, being and becoming gay.

Theme 1: Sexual identity and the daily life of participants

The first theme contained data which explored the influence of sexual identity on daily routines, productive occupations and relationships with friends and family. This theme comprised of four categories of data. See Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Sexual identity and the daily life of the participants	• Sexual identity and daily routines • Working, studying and being gay • Friendships and sexual identity • Family relationships: the impact of being gay
Theme 2: Sexual identity & adaptation - Doing, being & becoming gay	• Challenges and changes – realisations & coming out • Adapting through 'reading up' • Adapting through the occupations of the Dublin gay scene • Adapting through the occupations of the LGB society

Sexual identity and daily routines

This theme addresses a wealth of information on participants' occupational routines as opposed to the broader occupational choices (e.g. choice of university course). It goes on to examine views on how sexual identity influenced the daily round of the participants' occupations such as going to classes, working part-time, going for coffee with friends, going

shopping or going to the cinema. Participants tended to describe typical daily schedules of occupations that they engaged in. Although recognising their sexual identity as an important part of their identity participants did not acknowledge that sexual identity impacted greatly on these day to day schedules of occupation: *"I wouldn't see it as changing what I do day to day, because you know, they're the same things I'm sure straight people do day to day as well" (Anthony, Interview 1); "at the same time it's not my entire identity… it's not the be all and end all" (Maurice 1).*

Working, studying and being gay

However, other data revealed evidence that the participants' experience of productive occupations such as work or college may have been shaped by their sexual identity by virtue of having to contemplate whether or not to come out to colleagues or class-mates.

While working, participants thought about whether they could disclose their sexual identity. The need for such considerations arose from an underlying worry that homophobic reactions might affect one's work as illustrated in this quote: *"I suppose there is an element that a lot of people fear that… promotional aspects would be disrupted because of their sexuality" (Maurice, Interview 1).* As students, the participants did not face the same dilemmas relating to their sexual identity. All of them had come out to classmates and friends at university: *"anybody that I do know in college, they know me well and they know I'm gay" (Anthony, Interview 1).* This phenomenon seems to relate to how participants view the university environment: *"I think it's like this enclave that… it's just a place where, it's very liberal in every sense, I think. And it's a very open-minded kind of place" (Thomas, Interview 1).*

Despite having to make decisions to come out to classmates and friends, for participants the decision did not seem as difficult in the workplace. Many came out indirectly to classmates or friends allowing them to discover the fact without making *"an issue out of it" (Thomas, Interview 1).* The issue of coming out may have influenced the experience of participants' productive occupations (i.e. work or study) but not the performance of these occupations.

Friendships and sexual identity

The data revealed that being gay influenced the formation and quality of participants' friendships, suggesting they placed great importance on having gay friends. It emerged that while they shared similar occupations with both gay and straight friends, that the meaning of these occupations changed as illustrated here:

> *With going out with gay friends, even if it's just for, you know, one drink or whatever, it does add that extra sense of belonging to something that's bigger than you and belonging to something that's a little bit more accepting (Anthony, Interview 2).*

Family relationships: The impact of being gay

Participants' sexual identity was also found to impact upon family relationships and home life. Two participants received positive reactions to disclosing their sexual identity and found that their being gay did not impact upon their home life. One, however, had more negative reactions to coming out as evidenced in this quote: *"My mother was like… I'd rather you were dead than gay" (Maurice, Interview 1).* This particular individual's home and family life was transformed dramatically by revealing his sexual identity – being forced to leave his home environment and the shared occupations of family life.

The participant who had not disclosed his sexual identity found himself as having to conceal certain occupational experiences, such as going out with gay friends and attending gay pride events: *"I always have to bend the truth. You know, going to events like 'Pride' or something. I just say I'm going into town to meet a friend for coffee or something" (Anthony, Interview 1).*

Discussion of theme 1

The data from Theme 1 indicated that identifying themselves as gay influenced the meaning of daily life experiences and relationships. There is also a suggestion that being gay did not influence how participants performed at work or study or what they choose to do on a daily basis. It has been proposed that the meanings people place on occupations are a product of volitional processes, and that how people experience an occupation, i.e. what they think about in the midst of doing, has a bearing on what meaning or value they place on it (Kielhofner, 2002). The findings of this study suggest that, for the participants, the experience of productive occupations was in some way shaped by their sexual orientation and therefore the meaning ascribed to these occupations may have been influenced by their sexual identity. These findings echo those of Jackson (2000), who in a qualitative study of lesbian occupational therapists found that individuals who were gay felt alienated from the workplace because heterosexist and homophobic viewpoints were perceived to exist. The participants in this study described how they had to assess the attitudes of co-workers and the atmosphere of the work environment before making a decision to come out.

Relationships with others formed an important backdrop to occupations (Walsh & Blesedell Crepeau, 1998). For the participants in this study, sexual identity influenced relationships with friends, family, co-workers and classmates. The findings also suggest that the people participants shared occupations with had a bearing on the meaning ascribed to that occupation. It is therefore conceivable that by shaping the participants' relationships, sexual identity influenced the meaning of a variety of the participants' occupations.

Conclusions from theme 1

For the participants, sexual identity influenced the experience and meaning of occupations in daily life. This group of findings of course relates to the first research question posed. As discussed, Jackson's (1995) proposition that sexual identity may be a theme of meaning in the lives of gay people influences the significance of certain occupations. This proposition is supported by these findings. The findings also

suggest that being gay influences the symbolic aspects of occupation and the meanings individuals place on occupation, which supports Clark et al.'s (1991) assertion that more research is needed, particularly regarding how their sexual identity influences the meaning gay individuals place on occupation.

Theme 2: Sexual identity and adaptation: Doing, being and becoming gay

The second theme indicated the challenges and changes that participants faced when adopting a minority sexual identity, providing insight into how the participants adapted through occupation. Four subthemes were identified, as identified in Table 1.

Challenges and changes: Realisations and coming out

This subtheme reflects participants' narratives of first realising they were gay and first coming out, and the challenges and changes encountered at this time. It emerged that participants all realised that they were gay at a young age and that this was a difficult experience: *"Initially there was a degree of depression… I was saying 'it's only a phase' or whatever. 'It'll pass'" (Maurice, Interview 1).* Participants experienced shame, confusion, isolation and denial. As they began to realise that being gay was not a transient phase, some felt an urge to share their sexual identity with close friends or relatives: *"I just felt I had to tell somebody… it was just sort of going 'round in my mind and I couldn't get it out of my head" (Simon, Interview 1).*

The impact of coming out varied among participants. For some, it was a positive experience but for others the process was highly disruptive and challenging: *"It was very difficult because I was sort of being ostracised from my social network, ostracised from my family, … so that led to depression. And it manifested itself in… becoming insular and secretive" (Maurice, Interview 2).* These experiences influenced the participants' views on coming out to new people: *"I just don't like the idea of doing it" (Simon, Interview 1).* The data clearly showed that there were numerous challenges and transitions to be faced when the participants realised they were gay and began to adopt a minority sexual identity.

Adapting through 'reading up'

All the participants recounted times when they 'read up' on being gay. This occupation began when they first began to consider their sexual identity and encompassed reading a variety of materials: books about sexuality, psychological texts, gay themed literature, and articles on the internet. At the time of data collection, participants continued to engage in this occupation and it emerged that the function of reading was to adapt to the challenges presented by adopting a gay identity.

For most, learning about sexual identity and recognising that they were not alone in their experiences led to an acceptance of being gay: *"Reading up psychology books… and sort of coming to terms with, actually you know, it's not something that I can change" (Maurice, Interview 1). "You can feel like… you're the only person in the world who's going through it then you realise that you're not" (Thomas, Interview 2).* For others, reading enabled them to reshape their views of being gay or find role models that challenged previous negative views of homosexuality. One participant reported a *"sense of sort of empowerment" (Anthony, Interview 2)* and acceptance that arose from reading gay literature.

Adapting through the occupations of the Dublin gay scene

Another theme concerned the participants' engagement in the occupations of the Dublin gay scene, whch refers to venues where gay community socialise e.g. bars, restaurants, community centres. The social occupations of the gay scene were imbued with a variety of meanings by the participants and were important in adapting to a homosexual identity. All participants had engaged in occupations on the gay scene, ranging from drinking with friends, dancing, shopping, and seeing films or plays. The occupations that occurred in this context enabled participant to get to know other gay people and to develop a sense of belonging in a wider community: *"It makes you feel accepted… like you belong to something" (Anthony, Interview 1). "You put a lot of meaning on that and you're like… now I'm a normal gay person. Because this is what normal gay people do" (Anthony, Interview 2).* In essence, the data revealed that, for the participants, occupations performed on the gay scene took on great personal significance and played an important role in adapting to a gay identity.

Adapting through the occupations of the LGB Society

This subtheme captures the meaning participants placed on engaging in occupations that occurred at LGB society and the role of such occupations in adapting to a homosexual identity. Although all participants were members of their university LGB society, some were more actively involved than others. Participants described the apprehension and trepidation they experienced when joining and taking part in the society's activities. For some it was a significant act symbolising their first encounter with other gay people or their first time to come out to people they did not know: *"I felt it was somehow a significant act… the first time I'd ever like identified myself as being gay to other people" (Simon, Interview 2).*

The LGB society provided a variety of occupations: nights out, parties, quizzes, meetings, debates, campaigns, fundraising, lunches and coffee afternoons. Engagement in the shared occupations of the LGB society had personal significance for most of the participants as it allowed them to develop a social network of gay people: *"If it wasn't for that particular society I probably wouldn't know at least twenty per cent of the people that I'd know around college" (Anthony, Interview 1).* Their participation in the occupations of the LGB society enabled participants to challenge their feelings of isolation and develop personally: *"I think I got a lot of confidence out of that and I think I grew up as a person a lot" (Thomas, Interview 1).* As the data in this category indicated, through engagement in the shared occupations of the LGB society, participants managed to adapt to some of the challenges of being gay.

Discussion of theme 2

Two key findings comprised the second theme. Firstly, for the participants, the adoption of a homosexual sexual identity presented a number of challenges, difficulties and changes. Secondly, and more importantly from an occupational perspective, engagement in certain occupations provided participants with a means to make the transition of adopting a gay identity. These findings are consistent with theories proposed by occupational scientists and occupational therapists regarding human adaptation through occupation (Clark et al., 1991; Jackson, 1996; Schkade & Schultz, 1992). The participants of this study engaged in a number of occupations to adapt to the transitions they faced in taking on a minority sexual identity. Furthermore, the findings also confirm theoretical arguments that propose that being gay may present adaptive challenges (Birkholtz & Blair, 1999; Jackson, 1995; Williamson, 2000). The data, in the words of Williamson, illustrated the process of "doing, being and becoming a gay man" (p. 433).

The conceptualisation of occupational adaptation as competence in expressing one's identity through participation in occupations in one's environments also relates to the findings of this study (Kielhofner, 2002). Participants chose to engage in occupations available in their environment, which allowed them to explore and express their sexual identity. The findings also complement the work of Christiansen (1999, 2000, 2004), who proposed that occupation is a vehicle for the expression and development of identity.

Conclusions from theme 2

The findings of Theme 2 provide insight into how participants adapted to the challenges and changes relating to adopting a gay identity through occupation. The participants of this study had access to an array of occupations to facilitate adaptation to being gay e.g. a gay scene and LGB societies. If one of the goals of occupational science is to understand the adaptive processes of occupational beings (Clark et al., 1991), further research is necessary to ascertain how gay individuals who do not have such occupational opportunities within their environment adapt to the challenges and changes of adopting a homosexual sexual identity. Occupational scientists must also ascertain what challenges are faced by individuals from other sexual identities such as lesbians, transgender individuals and bisexual men and women, and how they negotiate adaptation through occupation.

Limitations of Study

Three important limitations to the study are recognised. Firstly, the findings are based upon data from only four participants and cannot be generalised to the wider population of gay men. Secondly, the sampling procedure had limitations. Convenience sampling was used and so, accessed only individuals who self-identified as gay, were attending universities in and around Dublin, and were mostly members of LGB societies. Sampling was not completed until redundancy was reached. Finally, the sensitive nature of the research topic made it difficult to recruit participants.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings which emerged from this study may indicate that the sexual identity of gay people influences their occupations. Sexual identity was found to shape the meaning and experience of the participants' occupations. In addition, the adoption of a minority sexual identity was seen to present a number of challenges which participants adapted to through engagement in occupation. These findings are consistent with occupational science theories proposed previously. To gain further understandings of people as occupational beings, research into the relationship between sexual identity and occupation is needed.

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