

Research Paper

Challenges and Job Satisfaction Among Speech and Occupational Therapists Working with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

In India, speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists (OTs) can also have a significant role in the provision of assistance to individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in both the initial phases of treatment and long-term treatment. Nevertheless, not much literature has been done to examine the issues that these professionals go through and the factors that make their work rewarding in the Indian healthcare and education settings. This paper examines different experiences of SLPs and OTs working with individuals with ASD in India. It highlights certain significant problems, such as ineffective collaboration between various types of professionals, an excessive number of patients to serve, workplace insufficiency, and the inability to receive enough appreciation of their work. Despite these challenges, most therapists are contented since they see improvement in the people they treat, work closely with families, and feel that their efforts are indeed making a difference in their work. This paper demonstrates that there is a necessity to improve the policy, train more, and offer more support in the workplace by referring to the existing research and the personal experiences of experienced therapists. The aim is to make awareness to the decision-makers in the healthcare, education and government about the issues that are of greatest importance to the well-being of these therapists and the quality of services they deliver in India.

Keywords: *Autism, Challenges, Job Satisfaction, Speech Therapist, Occupational therapist*

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complicated disease that influences people to communicate, relate to others, and conduct themselves. It is getting more prevalent all over the world, and in India, the awareness and diagnosis have significantly grown over the past years (Srivastava et al., 2023). Significant professionals that assist individuals with ASD are speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and occupational therapists (OTs). OTs and SLPs focus on the following: communication and language skills, and daily living, sensory control, and independence (Junnarkar et al., 2022). However, in India, there are a number of factors that influence the performance of these professionals, such as the organization of the system, cultural orientations, and resource accessibility. A research on Maharashtra revealed that audiologists and speech-language pathologists (ASLPs) are usually stressed due to large workloads, workload paperwork, and long hours. Nevertheless,

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they have a greater level of job satisfaction than in most of the Western nations (Alam et al., 2019). In the case of occupational therapists, 17 experienced therapists were used in a study that indicated that the Indian culture has significant influence in the way they work. Some of the challenges such as lack of clear guidelines within their local setting, poor public awareness about themselves, and weak institutional support have been experienced. They also struggle to implement Western practices in Indian contexts (Indian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 2023). According to experts, additional local outcome measurement research and measurement tools should be utilized (RehabINK, 2024).

Despite the results of the international research, in which the Burnout and job dissatisfaction are typically triggered by such factors as workload, support, and pay (Wagstaff et al., 2019), little has been researched in India, particularly on the topic of therapists involved with ASD. Nonetheless, some SLPs and OTs in India have been satisfied with their work since they observe the improvements of their clients, have contact with families, and get the sense of the meaning in their work. This demonstrates the need to put into consideration the good and the struggles in their professional experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of the speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and the occupational therapists (OTs) in the support of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) patients is not a secret. It is concerned with early diagnosis, individual therapy, and collaboration with other professionals (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], 2020; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2021). Nevertheless, not a lot is said about how these therapists operate, what challenges they meet, and how pleased they are with their work. There are numerous challenges that therapists dealing with individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encounter in various parts of the world. They are usually overwhelmed with patients and are emotionally drained, as well as have plenty of paperwork (Wagstaff et al., 2019). These issues are exacerbated in less well-resourced countries, such as India, due to other factors, such as the lack of support, any inappropriate tools that can fit in local cultures, and the insufficiency of training (Mukherjee and Tripathi, 2022; Sharma et al., 2021). In India, the number of people who require assistance exceeds the number of trained speech-language therapists and occupational therapists. There is little to no support in smaller towns and rural areas because of the majority of these professionals working in big cities (Srivastava et al., 2023). Choudhary and Roy (2022) also discovered that cultural attitudes towards autism are often a problem for Indian therapists because they struggle to get families to accept the diagnoses of autism, which complicates the process of involving families in the treatment. Also, such issues as the lack of effective infrastructure, the lack of communication between various healthcare providers, and the lack of incentives by healthcare systems are typical (Alam et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, therapists tend to be happy when their clients are getting better, establishing positive relationships with them, and have the power to work (Zhou and Feng, 2020). However, the reverse is true, and when they are not paid enough, have no career advancement and development opportunities, and lack the support of their employers, they may be stressed and less willing to remain in their jobs (Mukherjee & Tripathi, 2022). Alam et al. (2019) conducted a study in India and discovered that even with a moderate level of job satisfaction, speech-language pathologists were still concerned about too many patients and insufficient recognition. In another study of occupational therapists undertaking ASD, it was revealed that the mismatch of assessments with local culture as well as the lack of

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adequate training were among the major stressors, yet most therapists remained proud when their clients achieved success (Indian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 2023). Treatment of ASD would typically require collaboration between various types of professionals such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, educators, and families. According to international studies, collaboration is extremely crucial in effective care (ASHA, 2020). However, in India such collaboration is not so widespread due to the lack of interconnectedness between the healthcare system, and few professionals and families are familiar with the benefits of such collaboration (Sharma et al., 2021). The absence of official policies that assist with team work and continuous learning causes therapists to feel isolated and burned out (Choudhary and Roy, 2022). Experts recommend enhancing the support of organizations, providing additional training on ASD-specific skills, and forming groups in which therapists can exchange ideas and support one another to help (Mukherjee and Tripathi, 2022).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In the present research, thematic analysis was employed to examine the interview records and/or survey responses of the Indian speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and occupational therapists (OTs) who work with individuals having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Qualitative data are usually studied through thematic analysis. It assists in locating, interpreting and distributing the information patterns or ideas (themes). It is a good approach to examine detailed and multifaceted information such as interviews or open-ended surveys. It is effective when the researcher wants to investigate such issues as the challenges and gratification of working with individuals with ASD experienced by SLPs and OTs. As a result of looking at the qualitative data with the help of the thematic analysis, we discovered that there are four major themes that reveal what SLPs and OTs in India go through when they work with people with ASD.

- 1. Emotional and Physical Burnout:** Participants often talked about feeling really tired both emotionally and physically. They mentioned that having too many cases, more than what is usually suggested, along with the strong emotional work of helping kids with difficult needs, led to burnout. Therapists said they felt exhausted not just because of the amount of work, but also because of the emotional effort needed to deal with behavior issues and manage family situations. This tiredness made it hard for them to stay energized and motivated over time.
- 2. Intrinsic Rewards and Job Satisfaction:** Despite the difficulty, much of the therapists experienced great feelings of happiness and contentment in their profession. The actual changes in their clients, where they saw them communicate better, control sensory challenges or cope with everyday activity was a great motivating factor. Forming trusting relationships with families and observing therapy created a positive difference in the lives of children were accompanied by a lot of pride and emotional satisfaction. Such intrinsic benefits were frequently used to relieve the pressure of work by the therapists.
- 3. Systemic and Institutional Barriers:** Therapists cited most problems that were system related leaving it difficult to offer good services. They tended to not have access to therapy tools and the required space to work. They also discussed the healthcare and school systems not adequately recognizing and supporting them, which then demoralized them. Also, team work among various professionals was not effective enough and care was divided. This complicated the task of the therapists to deal with hard cases individually.

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- 4. Cultural and Familial Influences:** The cultural beliefs and how families perceive autism were found to have a significant impact on the course of therapy and the sensation of therapies to those engaged in the business. The reasons why many therapists were challenged were stigma, misconception of autism as well as the extent to which families were involved. In some cases, the beliefs within a culture caused family to be less receptive to participate fully in treatment plans and therefore, the therapists were required to be cautious and adaptable in their techniques. These problems complicated the work of therapists and determined their level of satisfaction with their work and the obstacles they encountered.

DISCUSSION

This study looked at the real-life experiences of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and occupational therapists (OTs) who work with people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in India. Using thematic analysis, four main topics came up: emotional and physical burnout, feeling rewarded and satisfied at work, challenges from the system and institutions, and the impact of culture and family. These results give important information about the difficulties and positive aspects that therapists face in this particular cultural and healthcare setting. These results show the need for better support systems for SLPs and OTs working with ASD in India. It is important to focus on ways to reduce burnout, like managing workloads, offering mental health support, and recognizing their work. Also, improving teamwork between different professionals and creating tools that are suitable for the local culture can help improve the quality of services. Lastly, raising awareness about ASD and the roles of these therapists can create more understanding and support for both families and professionals.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the various experiences of speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists who work with people with autism spectrum disorder in India. Despite facing big challenges like emotional and physical tiredness, limited resources, and cultural difficulties, these professionals find deep satisfaction in seeing their clients improve and building strong partnerships with families. These insights show the urgent need for changes in how things are organized to better support therapists, give them the tools they need, and encourage teamwork that works well within the Indian setting. Also, raising public understanding and offering training that respects cultural differences can help therapists better deal with family and community issues. By tackling these issues, leaders, teachers, and healthcare providers can create a lasting and motivated team of professionals who can offer high-quality, culturally respectful support for people with ASD across the country. Future research should keep looking into ways to reduce burnout and boost job happiness, which will help improve the overall care system for ASD in India.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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