Neurodiversity-Affirming Autism Assessment for Gender-Diverse Adults: A Community-Engaged Quality Improvement Study

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Background: Gender-diverse adults are 3-6× more likely to be autistic than cisgender populations, yet few assessment services are designed for this community. Autism assessment requests at Dimensions Clinic have been increasing, creating need for neurodiversity-affirming, intersectional approaches.

Setting: Dimensions Clinic, an LGBTQ+-integrated behavioral health program within Castro-Mission Health Center (San Francisco Department of Public Health), provides co-located mental health, primary care, and gender-affirming services.

Objectives:

1) Evaluate client satisfaction with neurodiversity-affirming autism assessment
2) Identify strengths and gaps in current service delivery using community-engaged participatory design
3) Develop actionable recommendations through collaborative provider problem-solving

Methods: Sequential mixed-methods quality improvement with community-engaged participatory approach

Context: The clinic developed a three-phase protocol:

1) Online questionnaires (CAT-Q, RAADS-R)
2) Clinical assessment (2-3 sessions)
3) Feedback/psychoeducation.

Data Sources:

- **Brief survey** (N=10/38 invited, 26.3% response rate):
  - Demographics
  - Satisfaction (CSQ-8 adapted)
  - Knowledge gain
  - Process experience
- **Client focus group** (N=5):
  - 90-minute semi-structured discussion exploring lived experiences and improvement suggestions
- **Provider focus group** (N=4):
  - Collaborative interpretation of client feedback, action planning for implementation

Quantitative Results

Sample Demographics (N=10):

- Mean age: 23.2 years (range 20-27)
- 80% gender-diverse (non-binary, trans-masc, trans-femme, woman, male)
- 80% AFAB, 20% AMAB
- 40% people of color; 20% multiracial
- 80% stable housing; 40% HS diploma, 40% some college, 20% bachelor's

Measure	Finding
Client Satisfaction (CSQ-8)	Mean: 87.5% (range: 68.8-96.9%); Median: 93.8%
Knowledge Gain	100% increased ≥1 level (Pre: 71% good, 29% basic → Post: 57% extensive, 43% good)
Lowest Satisfaction Item	"Support during process" (80%)
Memory Clarity	80% clearly remember assessment details

Key Findings:

- **High satisfaction** with neurodiversity-affirming assessment in LGBTQ+-integrated care setting
- **Universal knowledge gain** about autism
- **Strengths** (preexisting relationships, interactive approach, integrated care, affirming language, intersectional awareness) and **critical gap** (post-diagnosis support) were identified
- **Community-engaged design** enabled triangulation of client perspectives with provider feasibility assessment

Qualitative Results

Theme 1. Preexisting Relationship Facilitates Assessment	Established therapeutic relationships, comfortable assessment, longitudinal observation and trust
Theme 2. Interactive Approach Preferred	Talk-based assessment more flexibility, unveil masked presentations
Theme 3. Integrated Care Model	Co-located services, accessibility and quality
Theme 4. Language & Space for Whole Person	Neurodiversity-affirming language, transparency, and safety
Theme 5. Intersectional Essential	Shared provider identities, political awareness, and documentation choice
Theme 6. Post-Diagnosis Support Gaps	Lack of practical guidance for navigating life after diagnosis, particularly around unmasking and social navigation

Provider Focus Group: Implementation Pathways

Streamline Assessment Process	Enhance Post-Diagnosis Support
Reduce questionnaires burden->shorten to RAADS-14, do in the session patients; scores cause distress without context	Explicitly specify domain-specific questions (home, work, social) in feedback session, neurodivergent/LGBTQ+ community groups
Next Steps: Draft updated protocol; team review; test modifications	Next Steps: Update interview guide; develop resources; identify partnerships; involve incoming interns