Cisgender therapists working with transgender clients: Building cultural empathy and clinical competence from an outgroup position

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Welcome!

Our Outline for Today’s Workshop:

1. Introductions
2. Hopes and Expectations for the Workshop
3. Need
4. Therapist Qualities
5. Clinical Competence
6. Therapeutic Relationship
7. Cultural Empathy
8. Advocacy
9. Questions
10. Resources
11. References
The Need for Addressing Therapist Competence

- Mistreatment within the medical and mental health fields
- Access to trained clinicians
- Sharing the duty
- Lack of training
- Lack of understanding
- Access to referrals for medical intervention
Therapist Qualities (Attitudes)

- Affirm gender identity, expression, presentation, and diversity beyond a male-female binary
- Acknowledge own biases
- Recognize intersections of identities
- Refute pathology of gender dysphoria
- Understand ongoing nature of competence and empathy building
- Affirm medical and mental health care needs of trans individuals
- Trans-affirmative care and support increases the potential for positive life outcomes
- Understand that we may miss-step/mess up
- Acknowledge that both trans and cis therapists are vulnerable to concerns in the therapeutic relationship and clinical competence with trans clients
Clinical Competence: How is Competence Observed?

• Developing awareness of gender identity and transitioning issues
• Empathy, compassion, care, sensitivity, support, directness, flexibility
• Experience (with specific pops or in specific areas), expertise
• Knowledge of resources, referrals, processes
• Foster self-acceptance/validation and coping with painful experiences
• Challenge without prescribing
• Confidentiality
• Understand potential long-term need for therapy
Clinical Competence: Training

- Textbook knowledge itself is not sufficient
- Supervision, consultation, training/ continuing education
- Familiarization with WPATH and other published guidelines, such as APA
- Ongoing consultation and professional development
Clinical Competence: Additional Knowledge and Skills

Awareness of:

– The range of gender identities and expression beyond a male-female binary
  – and the binaried gender expectations that exist
– Complexities and ongoing nature of the coming out process
– Impact of transphobia, heterosexism, sexism, and cisgenderism
  – at individual, institutional, and systemic levels
  – from microaggressions to severe violence
  – trauma
– Variance of the evolution of gender identity and expression across the lifespan
– Distinctness but interrelated nature of gender identity and sexual orientation
– Social, biological, familial, cultural, psychological, and economic factors that may influence development, identity, and distress
Clinical Competence: Additional Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge of:

• Various ways of living consistently with one’s gender identity
• Trans-positive resources and referrals in your area
  • support groups, mental health providers (individual, partner, family, group), medical providers (general care and transition services), clothing, hair (and removal), makeup, voice training, centers, legal, spiritual
  • that also address multiple identities
• The climate of the community you practice in
• Individuals and groups you may seek collaboration with and consultation from
Clinical Competence: Additional Knowledge and Skills

Consider differential and co-occurring diagnoses

• Distress may not be indicative of pathology
• Co-occurring disorders do not necessarily preclude treatment for gender concerns

Take care in use of psychological assessment instruments

Consider and make known your practices about writing letters for gender confirmation treatments

Acknowledge experience, training, and expertise working with gender concerns upon starting therapy
Therapeutic Relationship: Client and Therapist Identities

Therapeutic relationship holds identity differences and systemic and individual dynamics created by systems of privilege, power, and oppression

- Discussions of differences and similarities in identities that may impact the relationship
- Privileged identities of the therapist
- Therapist’s gender identity, expression, and concepts are relevant to and influence the relationship
Therapeutic Relationship: Microaggressions (and Macro-)

- Language, name, and pronoun usage
- Transphobic comments
- Assumptions
- Exoticization
- Discomfort/ disapproval
- Gender normative or binaried beliefs, including “passing”
- Denial of transphobia (systemic and personal)
- Pathologizing
- Harassment, overt hostility, or physical threat
- Denial of bodily privacy
- Environmental microaggressions
- Goal of eliminating pathology only
- Providing treatment without competency
Therapeutic Relationship: Transference and Countertransference

Transference Reactions:

• Anger, fear, distrust, feelings of unfairness
  • due to previous experiences with mental health or medical professionals
  • due to previous experiences with cis people
  • due to therapist lack of experience with transphobia (may not be transference)

• Identification

• “Negative filter” / “Confirmation bias”

• Desire for a more intimate relationship/ connection

• Internalization of therapist’s microaggressions
Therapeutic Relationship: Transference and Countertransference

Countertransference Reactions:
- Expectations for gendered expression
- “Threats” to own gender identity and expression
- Protectiveness
- Push past developmental or safety appropriateness
- Fear or grief for client
- Fear of behaving in a transphobic manner
- Fear of incompetence
- Difficulties owning privilege
Therapeutic Relationship: Power, Privilege, and Oppression

• Gatekeeper role
• Historical power of mental health professionals
• History of cisgenderism and heterosexism in psychiatry
• Gender Dysphoria as a diagnosis
Therapeutic Relationship: Additional Factors

Discuss:
• Name and pronoun usage for all involved, and this may be ongoing
• Restroom access in your space
• Feelings of comfort/safety in your space, including how clients would like to “show up”
• How clients will be identified in your system

Awareness:
• Language, its constant evolution, and your client’s wishes/usage
• Presenting concern may not be related to gender identity

Openness to discussing experiences of discrimination and oppression

What does your space look like? What message does it send?

Do your clients see you enact what you preach?
Cultural Empathy

Defined:
• Empathic response capable of transcending cultural differences
• Ability to understand, accept, and feel the client’s situation while able to separate own personal and cultural experience
  • Boundary between self and other
  • Understand this separation so as to not expect clients to adopt your values
  • Understand we experience empathy from our own position, influenced by our unique experiences, identities, values, and within the cultures we are surrounded by

Importance of understanding the context for trans persons
• Acquire knowledge needed
• Ability to recognize what we do not know and how to obtain information we need
• However, acknowledge that one cannot genuinely understand the client’s unique position
Cultural Empathy: Development

- Seek out perspectives and personal narrative of the trans community
- Understand and accept the context of family and community for clients from different backgrounds
- Incorporate providers and practices familiar or requested by the client
- Seek knowledge about the historical and political background of trans people (and other cultures/identities)
- Seek knowledge about psychosocial adjustment to new environments/situations
- Be sensitive to the oppression and discrimination that may be encountered by trans people, including oppression related to other and intersecting identities
- Position yourself as an ally/advocate
Advocacy

- Importance of social justice and advocacy as part of the therapist’s work
- Using our position to advocate for institutional change
- Educate professionals, students, and supervisees
- Facilitate empowerment of clients in underprivileged and devalued positions
- Advertise yourself, be visible, network, build a reputation
Questions?
Resources

Publications:
• The World Professional Association for Transgender Health. (2012). *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People*.

Local (at your own University/Town):
• Trans Ally Trainings
• LGBT Resource Center
• Policies for your University medical center and insurance coverage
• Search for medical providers who will prescribe hormones, surgeons, other therapists, voice training, clothing, hair removal/make-up/salons, support groups, conferences, religious resources (try to find multiple resources to address different identities)
Resources

Conferences:
• WPATH, Transgender Health: Best Practices in Medical and Mental Health Care -
  http://www.wpath.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=2577 &pk_association_webpage=6633
• LGBTQ Health Conference - https://community.centeronhalsted.org/SOGI

Online:
• Sexual Orientation & Gender Institute, Center on Halsted -
  http://www.centeronhalsted.org/mentalhealth.html
• National Center for Transgender Equality - http://transequality.org/
• Transgender Law Center - http://transgenderlawcenter.org/
• Campus Pride - http://www.campuspride.org/
References


Thank You All!

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