

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

***Anita Hund, PhD***

***Jodi Thomas, PsyD***

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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:

- Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling. (2009). *Competencies for counseling with transgender clients*.
- American Psychological Association. (2015). *Guidelines for psychological practices with transgender and gender nonconforming people*.
- The World Professional Association for Transgender Health. (2012). *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender- Nonconforming People*.
- Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals. (2014). *Suggested Best Practices for Supporting Trans\* Students*.

## 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](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/>

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7. Johnson, D. E. (2014). *The impact of microaggression in therapy on transgender and gender-nonconforming clients: A concurrent nested design study* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession Order No. 3620966)
8. Nadal, K. L., Skolnik, A., & Wong, Y. (2012). Interpersonal and systemic microaggressions toward transgender people: Implications for counseling. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 6*, 55-82.
9. Sennott, S., & Smith, T. (2011). Translating the sex and gender continuums in mental health: A transfeminist approach to client and clinician fears. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 15*, 218–234.

# Thank You All!

## ***Anita Hund, PhD***

Licensed Clinical Psychologist  
Clinical Assistant Professor  
Division of Counseling Psychology  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
188G Education Building, MC-708  
1310 S. Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820  
217.300.6964  
[ahund@illinois.edu](mailto:ahund@illinois.edu)

## ***Jodi Thomas, PsyD***

Licensed Clinical Psychologist  
Counseling Center  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
206 Student Services Building, MC-306  
610 E. John Street, Champaign, IL 61820  
217.333.3704  
[jmthomas@illinois.edu](mailto:jmthomas@illinois.edu)