Ethical Issues Working With Transgender Clients

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More In Depth on Ethical Issues

What will be covered

- APA Guidelines for Psychological practice working with Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Clients
- Common Ethical Issues
APA Guidelines for Psychological practice working with Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Clients

In 2015 the APA issued some specific guidelines for working with Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming clients (TGNC). There are 16 Guidelines which will be discussed in the following slides. The link to the full article is on the recommended reading page of the course. These guidelines are a great way to better understand different aspects of how to do ethical work with TGNC clients. I have added some comments below each guideline.
“Guideline 1. Psychologists understand that gender is a nonbinary construct that allows for a range of gender identities and that a person’s gender identity may not align with sex assigned at birth.”

Your TGNC clients they will have a wide variety of identities. It is important to understand the language used and have accepted that people have identities that may not align with what society says they should be. It is also important to allow your client to self-identify in the ways they need to and allow for that to change over time.
“Guideline 2. Psychologists understand that gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct but interrelated constructs.”

Many people conflate sexual orientation and gender identity. They are very separate identities though there can be some intersectionality between them. Do not make assumptions.
“Guideline 3. Psychologists seek to understand how gender identity intersects with the other cultural identities of TGNC people.”

In the affirming counseling with TGNC handout/video, I talk more in depth about intersectionality. It is important to have cultural competence with gender, sexuality, race, ethnic background, and religion because each of those identities will overlap with gender identity.
Guideline 4. Psychologists are aware of how their attitudes about and knowledge of gender identity and gender expression may affect the quality of care they provide to TGNC people and their families.

This is very important. Our biases can easily come up with any work we do with clients. It is very important to have done your own work around privilege and gender identity.
“Guideline 5. Psychologists recognize how stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and violence affect the health and well-being of TGNC people.”

I included a presentation on discrimination faced by TGNC people as part of this class because minority stress can and does affect the well-being of our clients. Many times people are diagnosed with mental health issues that are really a response to their environment. As a result of the violence and stigma many TGNC clients face you will see many clients that have trauma histories that you need to be able to address.
“Guideline 6. Psychologists strive to recognize the influence of institutional barriers on the lives of TGNC people and to assist in developing TGNC-affirmative environments.”

This is why you need to be very aware of the message your office, website, marketing materials, and paperwork send. You need to use inclusive language and have an affirming website and office. Have someone review it to look for areas in which it can be improved.
Guideline 7: Psychologists understand the need to promote social change that reduces the negative effects of stigma on the health and well-being of TGNC people.

Many therapists do not see social change as part of their work. However, if you work with TGNC clients it has to be. It is our job to advocate and try and make things better for all TGNC people.
“Guideline 8. Psychologists working with gender-questioning and TGNC youth understand the different developmental needs of children and adolescents, and that not all youth will persist in a TGNC identity into adulthood.”

Gender Spectrum is a great resource for working with youth. It is included in the recommended reading section. It is very important to understand youth development and how to work with families to support their children in their gender expression which may or may not continue into adulthood.
“Guideline 9. Psychologists strive to understand both the particular challenges that TGNC elders experience and the resilience they can develop.”

This country’s attitudes towards TGNC people has improved some in recent years. But TGNC elders have lived many years in extreme fear and with few resources. Therapists need to have an understanding of that to work effectively with them. I have also included an article on working with TGNC elders in the recommended reading section.
“Guideline 10. Psychologists strive to understand how mental health concerns may or may not be related to a TGNC person’s gender identity and the psychological effects of minority stress.”

As discussed previously, some TGNC people may be diagnosed with anxiety or depression or other mental health issues that are more related to minority stress than to an actual diagnosis. Psychological stress is no inherent for TGNC people. It is important to diagnosis appropriately and work to end stigma. I have included a link to an article on microaggressions in the recommended reading section.
“Guideline 11. Psychologists recognize that TGNC people are more likely to experience positive life outcomes when they receive social support or trans-affirmative care.”

This may seem self-evident but many TGNC people have had prior traumatic experiences with the healthcare system. It is our job to end that cycle and make sure we make referrals to places/providers that provide affirmative care. We also need to help them create social supports for themselves as appropriate.
“Guideline 12. Psychologists strive to understand the effects that changes in gender identity and gender expression have on the romantic and sexual relationships of TGNC people.”

As the prior guideline said acceptance is a part of a successful outcome for TGNC people. Part of that may be navigating their intimate relationships and how partners respond to any change in identity a person may make. It is also important to respect clients that choose not to make any changes in order to maintain their relationships.
“Guideline 13. Psychologists seek to understand how parenting and family formation among TGNC people take a variety of forms.”

Families are made up of all sorts of shapes and sizes. LGBT people have long created their own chosen families. It is our job to make sure our clients have adequate support in their lives and to support their families whatever they look like.
“Guideline 14. Psychologists recognize the potential benefits of an interdisciplinary approach when providing care to TGNC people and strive to work collaboratively with other providers.”

Many of our clients will need other support such as medical providers. It is important for therapists to develop relationships with these providers when they can in order to collaborate on care when possible.
“Guideline 15. Psychologists respect the welfare and rights of TGNC participants in research and strive to represent results accurately and avoid misuse or misrepresentation of findings.”

If we do research or refer clients to research projects we need to do so ethically. If we see research that misrepresents TGNC people we should challenge it whenever possible.
"Guideline 16. Psychologists Seek to Prepare Trainees in Psychology to Work Competently With TGNC People."

If you are supervising trainees/interns you need to make sure that they can work with TGNC competently and ethically.
Other Ethical Issues
Scope of Competence
Scope of Competence is one of the biggest ethical issues I hear about in regards to working with TGNC clients. Most therapists know that to work with substance abuse, eating disorders, and trauma, that they need some type of specialized training. For some reason, the same knowledge doesn’t always pass on for TGNC clients. Therapists may also assume that accepting is competence or they may think that if they have worked with LGB clients that TGNC clients are similar. Many clients have been hurt by therapists, who may have been well intentioned, working with them without proper training. The next slide will talk more about what that might look like.
What you need to know before working with TGNC clients

✦ Knowledge of WPATH Standards of Care
✦ Ability to discuss risks and benefits of medical interventions. This includes fertility preservation.
✦ Ability to discuss and help a client establish an after care plan if they choose surgical interventions
✦ Ability to make local referrals to surgeons and informed consent clinics for hormones
✦ Ability to discuss and acceptance of non-binary identities
✦ Keep up on newest developments in the field through conferences and or journals
How to get proficient in working with TGNC clients

- WPATH has a newly developed certification process. More information can be found here.
- Conferences-USPATH has one bi-annually, Philadelphia Trans Health Conference, USCF National Transgender Health Summit, Gender Spectrum (youth focused-in CA), and Gender Odyssey to name a few
- Reading Journals and books that focus on TGNC issues
- Supervision and or consultation with a gender specialist
- Having done your own work around gender and privilege
Scope of Competence

To write assessment letters for surgical procedures you should have specialized training. You also need to have the ability to do a comprehensive assessment and diagnosis gender dysphoria. You also need to be able to assess whether the client understands the risks and benefits of their treatment and have an adequate after-care plan. If a client gets surgery they may not be prepared for mood shifts that may occur post surgery. It is our job to help them be prepared for such shifts.
Self Disclosure
Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is another ethical issue that can arise often. Many clients will want to know about you and why you work with TGNC clients. They may also want to know something about your belief system and even politics. In addition, if you are a trans therapist and go through a transition while working with clients it will bring up a lot of questions. Whether we choose to self-disclose or not is based on a lot of things including our theoretical orientation. It is important that you think about how you might answer these questions ahead of time so you are not caught unprepared.
Self Disclosure

After the 2016 election, this issue came up a lot. Many TGNC clients were upset and scared by the results. Therapists had to decide whether or not to disclose their own feelings on this with their clients. And if you supported someone different than your clients it is an even more complicated decision.

Obviously we should only self-disclose if it is in the best interest of the clients. So again it is important that we be thoughtful about this process.