A story my mother often related to me about my birth was what a nurse said to her the moment after I was born. “Another little skirt for you!” Since I was raised in a family and a community open to a range of female gender expression, it was a gender assignment that has always fit me well. Therefore I identify as cisgender, meaning that I am comfortable with the gender I was assigned at birth. Progressively more clients who are trans—individuals who do not identify as the sex they were assigned at birth—are presenting to psychologists and other therapists for supportive counselling, relationship counselling, and mental health care. Many psychologists are unprepared or underprepared for work with trans clients and their families and loved ones. This article outlines suggestions for psychologists working with trans clients so they might examine their own notions and understanding of gender. Ideally, the benefits of one’s greater understanding of trans gender issues are improved cultural competence and stronger therapeutic relationships.

EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT GENDER.
To understand gender in others it is best to begin by looking at one’s self. Ask yourself questions such as “How do I know which gender I am?” “How do I demonstrate my gender to others?”
What is the process by which I perceive gender in others? What role does gender play in my thoughts about others?

Know that some trans people have identities that extend beyond male and female. They may refer to themselves as Trans, Transgender, Transsexual, Genderqueer, MTF (male to female), FTM (female to male), Trans woman, Trans man, Cross dresser, Drag King, Drag Queen, Two Spirit, 3rd Gender, Pan–gender, Zie, Hir, or They. As gender language evolves, the descriptions of identities evolve. Make it easy for clients to disclose gender by using an open-ended question about gender in the demographics section of your intake forms. This is also a signal to clients and colleagues that you have ‘thought outside the gender–binary box’ (Manders & Drewlo, 2011).

An excellent primer for trans knowledge is Lev’s (2004/2007) Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender–Variant People and Their Families. This volume is the winner of an American Psychological Association Div. 44 Distinguished Book Award.

Lev describes six stages of gender emergence:

1. **Awareness** — In the first stage, gender–variant people are often in great distress. The therapeutic task is the normalization of the experiences involved in emerging transgendered.

2. **Seeking information/reaching out** — In the second stage, gender variant people seek to gain education and support about transgenderism. The therapeutic task is to facilitate linkages and encourage outreach.

3. **Disclosure to significant others** — The third stage involves the disclosure of transgenderism to significant others—spouses, partners, family members and friends. The therapeutic task involves supporting the transgendered person’s integration in the family system.

4. **Exploration: Identity and self–labelling.** — The fourth stage involves the exploration of various (transgender) identities. The therapeutic task is to support the articulation and comfort with one’s transgendered identity.

5. **Exploration: Transition issues/ possible body modification** — The fifth stage involves exploring options for transition regarding identity, presentation, and body modification. The therapeutic task is the resolution of the decisions and advocacy towards their manifestation.

6. **Integration: Acceptance and post transition issues** — In the sixth stage the gender variant person is able to integrate and synthesize (transgender) identity. The therapeutic task is to support adaptation to transition related issues (Lev, 2004/2007).

Learn about the history and present circumstance of overt and covert discrimination against trans people. The reality is that trans people are regularly watched and have their gender assessed by others in a constant Foucaultian form of surveillance (Foucault, 2009). This is but one form of discrimination they receive (Tebbe & Moradi, 2012). Consider how discrimination affects them as they move through their daily lives as well as how discrimination may affect their mental health status.

**Assess Yourself.**
A novel concept for psychologists who are used to assessing others! You may want to reflect on items in the Transphobia Scale (Nagoshi et al, 2012) which consists of statements like, “I avoid people on the street whose gender is unclear to me” and “I think there is something wrong with a person who says that they are neither a man or a woman”.
Or, consider where you are on the continuum of Repulsion to Nurturance on the Riddle Scale Adapted for Transphobia (Drewlo & Manders, 2011).

RECOGNIZE THAT WE ARE ALL PRODUCTS OF OUR INTERSECTING STATES OF AGE, CLASS, ETHNICITY/CULTURE, RACE, NATIONALITY, PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ABILITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND LOCATION IN HISTORY (MITCHELL, 2009).

Because of our socialization, our attitudes and practices in our work with clients are largely taken for granted and sometimes invisible to us. Accept that you may have been socialized in a society with rigid concepts and prescriptions for gender, and thus have been left with biases.

We can improve our cultural competence with trans clients through the following steps:

1. Admit we possess biases about gender.

2. Identify our biases by paying attention to our areas of defensiveness about gender issues.

3. Investigate our biases through self-reflection.

4. Choose a bias to challenge (for instance, individuals whom you perceive to be male should not wear “feminine” clothing).

5. Reflect on where you learned that bias and give thoughtful consideration to related thoughts and feelings you have.

6. Reduce your bias through reading, self-reflection, your own therapy, or any other ways you have found helpful in dealing with other biases.

Move away from an expert stance. This is especially appropriate and useful when you are both in a learning phase and working with a stigmatized client group.

You will learn much from your trans and gender diverse clients. However, don’t expect a trans client to educate you about trans issues. In addition to the valuable lessons our clients provide, seek out resources, especially the educational talks and workshops facilitated by trans people within your community or online.

Expanding our understanding of gender makes for more competent psychologists. It moves us along in our quest to reduce suffering. In the larger picture, it contributes to a more fair and equitable world for everyone.

REFERENCES


