

**Benchmark Cultural Immersion Project: Research and Events Focusing
on the Transgender Community**

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Abstract

The term transgender is in reference to an individual who has moved away from the gender that they were assigned at birth. They may do this through a variety of methods ranging from changing the way they dress to receiving hormone therapy. The transgender community has a history, language, inter-group dynamics and interaction with society that are unique to itself. Transgender individuals have existed since early history across many different cultures. Although attitudes are changing, the transgender community has long been the subject of violence, oppression, and discrimination.

Keywords: Transgender, transitioning, society, oppression

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The term “transgender” has only come into popular use in the past few decades and has been surrounded by misunderstanding and misinformation (Stryker, 2018). A modern and appropriate understanding of the term transgender is in reference to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.”(Stryker, 2018, p.1). The transgender community has its own unique culture, history, and inter-group dynamics. Transgender individuals have been oppressed throughout history and despite some progress, continue to face discrimination today.

Customs and Dynamics Within the Transgender Community

Transitioning is the process undertaken by transgender individuals to align their gender expression with their gender identity (Fein et al., 2017). Many transgender individuals choose to change the way they express their gender through clothing, hair, makeup, and sometimes, a new name (Romito, 2020). Many transgender individuals pick a new name for themselves and have their name and sex changed legally (Fein et al., 2017). The name that a transgender individual is born with is sometimes referred to as a *deadname* and can be painful for them to hear or be called by.

Some transgender individuals choose to receive gender-confirming surgery and/or hormone therapy as part of the process of transitioning (Fein et al., 2017). A study by Prunas, et al. (2016) showed that transgender individuals who receive medical intervention reported higher levels of self-acceptance than those who had not yet received medical intervention. Some

transgender individuals feel more comfortable transitioning non-medically and prefer to express their gender identity without medical intervention (Fein et al., 2017).

Transgender individuals often feel societal and inter-group pressure to *pass* as a cisgender individual (Feder, 2020). This may mean taking further steps to look and act in a way that society associates with the gender they want to pass as. Passing can make the lives of transgender individuals easier in that those around them do not recognize them as a transgender individual. This makes it easier to avoid discrimination and obtain a job, education, or enter into relationships. Many transgender individuals feel that the concept of passing provides unnecessary stress and that society should accept transgender individuals and treat them equally no matter how they present themselves (Feder, 2020).

The concept of *disclosure* is one that a transgender individual may wrestle with starting early in the transition process (Feder, 2020). Disclosure is the act of disclosing to others one's identity as a transgender individual. This may be done individually with family or trusted individuals, via social media, or often to one's doctor or other medical professionals (Haimson, 2020). Disclosure can be a very complicated and dangerous process as it may lead to violence or discrimination (Feder, 2020). Transgender individuals may feel conflicted between wanting a sense of privacy about their identity and wanting to be wholly truthful with those around them. Some transgender individuals feel that they should have no obligation to disclose to those around them as being transgender should be more normalized.

Transgender History

Increasing public awareness of the transgender community came about in the mid 1900's when the industrial boom and World War I caused many to become more independent of their families and explore their identities (Stryker, 2018). The increase in public awareness of the

transgender community has led to the perception that transgender individuals have only existed in recent history, or that the concept of being transgender is a relatively new phenomenon.

Transgender individuals have existed throughout history, although they have sometimes been referred to as transexuals, transvestites, or cross-dressers- terms that do not always indicate identification as transgender and would be considered inappropriate or offensive now (Stryker, 2018). Transgender individuals exist under different names in different cultures- such as in Hawai'i where the mahu, those who embrace both masculinity and femininity, were celebrated and honored in traditional Hawai'ian culture (Wilson & Hamer, 2014). There has been some evidence in historical iconography that transgender individuals have existed since ancient history.

Christine Jorgensen was one of the first transgender individuals to bring gender confirmation surgery into the American public consciousness (Barajas, 2019). Christine was born biologically male in the Bronx in 1926, and after a long period of self-exploration and a brief enlistment in the army, received a series of gender confirming surgeries in 1952 from an experimental doctor in Denmark. The New York Daily News broke the story and the case received extensive media attention afterward. Christine Jorgensen is often believed to be the very first transgender individual or the first individual to receive gender confirmation surgery; this is not the case; however, she was one of the first transgender individuals to be highly publicized in American media.

A major turning point for the LGBTQ+ community as well as the transgender community was the Stonewall riots (Feder, 2020). The Stonewall riots began in 1969 when police raided the Stonewall Inn, which was known for patronizing the LGBTQ+ community at the time. Residents in the neighborhood fought back and began protesting in the streets for days afterward. These

riots and protests brought the LGBTQ+ community further into public awareness and the community used this attention to advocate for more freedoms for the LGBTQ+ community.

Historical and Current Oppression

Transgender individuals have had little to no rights and have faced insurmountable difficulties across history. Dating back to the 1850's, American cities made it illegal for a person to appear in public in clothing not socially acceptable for their assigned sex (Stryker, 2018). Identifying as transgender has long been stigmatized by classification as an illness by scientists and psychologists. Transgender individuals still have difficulty receiving medical interventions as they must first be diagnosed by a professional as having gender dysphoria.

Although the transgender community is beginning to gain acceptance in mainstream culture, they have long faced discrimination and violence as well as social and economic marginalization- specifically with employment and housing (Stoltzer, 2017). There is a lack of data on violence against the transgender community, and the statistics that do exist are hindered by many factors, such as the privacy of the individual's identity and the misgendering of victims by police and media (Wirtz, et al., 2020). However, it is known that transgender individuals experience violence at a rate disproportionate to the rest of the population.

Transgender individuals experience transphobia in the media, over social media, in person on the street, or from people they know. Harmful depictions of transgender individuals exist in popular films and TV such as *Ace Ventura*, *Silence of the Lambs*, or *CSI* (Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020). Transgender individuals are often misgendered or referred to by their deadname in the media, especially when their deaths are being reported (Seely, 2021)

The term *trans-exclusionary radical feminist* (TERF), a term that is viewed extremely negatively, has been coined for some feminists who do not believe that transgender individuals

should be included in the fight for women's rights.(Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020). A popular belief of a TERF is that transgender individuals who are born biologically male cannot truly understand what it is to struggle as a woman. Their attitude towards transgender individuals born female is that they found being a female too difficult and are betraying their sex for an easier life as a male (Feder, 2020).

Events Portion

For the events portion of this project, I viewed two documentaries as well as one of a series of local school board meetings. The first documentary I viewed is called "Disclosure" with a run time of one hour and forty minutes. This documentary was directed by Sam Feder and executive produced by Laverne Cox, both of whom are transgender individuals. Part of the conversation in the documentary was about why media focusing on the transgender community should be conducted by transgender individuals- the concept "nothing about us without us". Even well-meaning individuals can produce media about the transgender community that can be harmful or problematic simply because they do not know enough about the community. I was especially impressed that this documentary was created by transgender individuals and included interviews from numerous transgender individuals.

The second documentary I viewed was called "Kumu Hina" with a runtime of one hour and seventeen minutes. This documentary focused on Kumu Hina, a transgender woman who is a teacher at a traditional school in Hawai'i. She teaches her students to accept each other by teaching them the true meaning of Aloha -love and respect for one another. She also helps her student Ho'onani Kamai, a sixth-grader who is considered Mahu, someone who embraces both masculine and feminine traits.

Lastly, I viewed the second in a series of three school board meetings via livestream, discussing the introduction of policies for transgender students in Hanover County, Virginia, a county quite close to where I live. This meeting was approximately two and a half hours long. I originally learned about these meetings on the news, as schools have been instructed to write and introduce policies for the protection of transgender students by the state of Virginia. There was a strong and impassioned community turnout at these events both for and against these policies. Hanover county has now gone past the due date for creating and implementing these policies, as they were ultimately voted against in the course of these meetings.

My Response

In viewing these documentaries and attending the school board meeting I had a variety of emotional responses. My emotions were mostly those of grief, anger, and surprise. I felt myself grieving with transgender individuals as they described their experiences. I also felt angry towards those who have actively worked to take away the rights and dignity of the transgender community. I was surprised at the struggles that the transgender community faces and those who have presented them with those struggles.

I was especially moved by the story of transgender actress Sandra Caldwell in the documentary Disclosure. Sandra Caldwell has had a long film and TV career dating back to the early 1990's (Feder, 2020). Sandra kept her identity as a transgender woman a secret until she decided to play the role of a transgender woman on stage in 2017. I was shocked and saddened that a transgender woman could only exist and have a successful career with no problems by keeping her identity a secret. I was also surprised by the fact that transgender individuals who choose to make their identity public have an extremely hard time finding roles on film and TV that are not related to sex work or criminal activity.

I felt especially conflicted as I viewed the documentary Kumu Hina, which described how American missionaries suppressed traditional Hawai'ian culture and took the status of the mahu from a place of honor to one of shame. Being a Christian and the child of missionaries myself, this allowed me to reflect on the impact of Christianity and my own family on foreign culture.

Three Key Elements

I was able to take away three key points about the transgender community through viewing these documentaries and events that I did not see reflected in current research. The first was the true measure of how negatively transgender individuals are portrayed in the media. The second was just how widespread the concept of being transgender is throughout different cultures. The third was how deep the stigma, stereotypes, and fear run in society towards transgender individuals.

I knew that transgender individuals were portrayed negatively in the media, but I did not realize just how many instances there were of blatant transphobia in the media. The documentary Disclosure discussed the portrayal of a transgender woman in the show CSI:NY, a show that I liked to watch as a teenager. I never thought of or realized just how badly they portrayed transgender individuals on the show- making one character out to be a callous liar who tricked a straight male into a relationship without disclosing their identity as a transgender woman. The sheer amount of shows and movies that have done this came as a surprise to me, as well as the fact that many transgender actors must take these roles because they are often the only roles available to them. One actress in the documentary stated that she had acted as a sex worker so many times she had lost count.

The concept of being transgender exists in many different cultures under many different names. They exist in myths and legends throughout history as well (Stryker, 2018). The documentary Kumu Hina focused on Hawai'ian culture and how the Kumu Hina is using the teaching of traditional Hawai'ian culture to end the stigma against those who identify as transgender or mahu.

Viewing the school board meetings for Hanover County showed me just how fearful our society is of transgender individuals. The parents and family who spoke at the meeting shared many of the same fears: that transgender students would use their right to enter the bathroom of their choosing and assault or take photos of other students. Many transgender students and their families also spoke at this meetings, stating that these fears were unfounded and that no one would go through the struggles of being a transgender individual just to get the chance to assault someone.

Effective Counseling Theories

Not enough research has been conducted to provide specific theoretical guidelines in working with transgender clients (Knutson & Koch, 2018). Current guidelines do state that counselors should gain more knowledge about the transgender community and provide affirmative counseling to be more effective in counseling transgender clients. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as well as person-centered therapy has been commonly used with the transgender community and linked to positive outcomes.

The marginalization of the transgender community may cause individuals to experience minority stress, anxiety and PTSD (Austin, Craig, Alessi, 2017). CBT may be appropriate for use with transgender clients as it seeks to address issues that disproportionately affect the transgender community such as anxiety, trauma, depression, and substance abuse. CBT is

designed to improve emotional and behavioral functions by addressing negative thoughts. Trans-affirmative CBT would potentially address transphobic attitudes and beliefs that a transgender individual may have internalized.

Because the issues faced by the transgender community can be so unique to them, educating oneself about these issues is important in person-centered counseling (Knutson & Koch, 2018). Person-centered therapy has been said to be useful with the transgender community as it has been linked to positive results for groups in conflict with societal norms. Person-centered therapy's approach of empowering the client by focusing on their perceptions and feelings may be particularly useful with the transgender community who may often feel unheard and unempowered.

Conclusion

The transgender community's unique terminology, customs, inter-group dynamics and interactions with society truly make it its own minority cultural group. Just like any minority, they face hardships and discrimination that must be overcome until transgender individuals are more accepted in society. My experience in researching and viewing documentaries on the transgender community has given me a much clearer understanding of transgender individuals. Theories on counseling transgender individuals always include gaining more information about the community in order to be a more effective counselor. I believe that my efforts in this project will have made me better able to counsel transgender clients, something that is very important to me as it is a very relevant issue today.

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Cultural Immersion Project: Interview Portion

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Abstract

Two separate interviews were conducted with members of the transgender community. The first interviewee for the individual interview was Cecelia, a transgender woman who provided insight into the process of exploring and ultimately finding her identity. The second interviewee for the organization interview was Andrew, a member of Equality Virginia. Andrew spoke on some of the challenges that the transgender community face and how Equality Virginia goes about addressing those challenges. These interviews had an impact on how I will personally go about interacting with and counseling members of this community.

Keywords: interview, transgender, LGBTQ+, discrimination

Cultural Immersion Project: Interview Portion

For this project, I interviewed two individuals from the transgender community in order to gain a deeper understanding of the community and the challenges they face. I was able to interview Cecelia, a transgender woman in her twenties who shared a lot of information with me about the process of coming to understand that she identified as transgender. I also interviewed Andrew, a transgender man in his twenties who is a member of Equality Virginia. This project gave me greater clarity about what transgender individuals face as well as giving me a connection to the community that I did not have previously.

Individual Interview

My individual interview was with Cecelia, a transgender woman from Norfolk, Virginia. One of Cecelia's biggest challenges in exploring her identity was that while growing up, she assumed that it was part of the normal human experience to feel that she did not fit into the social standards set for the gender that she was assigned at birth. She was not familiar with the term transgender until her late teens, at which point she found that it may be the term that fit with her identity. Cecelia stated that her feelings about her gender identity developed gradually until she came to the realization that she may not identify as cisgender when she reached the age of sixteen.

Cecelia grew up with fairly conservative parents and felt safer exploring her identity at school and in discussions with close friends. Upon discussing some of her identity confusion, a transgender friend of Cecelia's recommended that she try out different pronouns to figure out which ones she felt the most comfortable with. At first, Cecelia identified as non-binary and used they/them pronouns. Since Cecelia no longer felt comfortable with her birth name, friends of

hers tried out different names and the name Cecelia stuck. This is part of what helped Cecelia realize that she felt more comfortable presenting as a woman.

Cecelia felt freer to explore her identity when she moved to Richmond, Virginia for college, as she was now farther away from her parent in a more liberal area where people did not know her background. Cecelia truly came to recognize her membership in the transgender community when she attended her first pride festival and encountered people that were just like her, allowing her to finally let her guard down in a public place. Having now met and made friends with more members of the transgender community, Cecelia is able to reflect on her own experiences and bring her to a place where she is happy.

Although Cecelia's parents attended church occasionally when she was growing up, she says that she has always felt disconnected from religious topics. This is especially true now as she feels that most Christian churches are unaccepting and discriminatory towards transgender individuals. As a member of the transgender community, Cecelia has had mostly positive interactions with other minority cultures, stating that one of her closest and most encouraging friends in high school was of the Muslim faith. Cecelia has faced difficulties as a transgender individual, but she feels that her identity as a white person has likely made her experiences easier than those of transgender individuals of color.

Cecelia has had mixed positive and negative experiences with the majority culture. While still in high school, other students would misgender or deadname her after she came out as a transgender woman. In everyday conversation, she frequently gets called "dude" or "bro", terms that she feels strongly are not gender-neutral and make her feel uncomfortable to be called by. One particularly hard experience for Cecelia happened on Halloween when she took a trip to an amusement park with a girl she was dating at the time. Cecelia was wearing a long skirt and was

told by a security guard that she could not enter the park while wearing a costume. Cecelia was not wearing a costume, but the security guard looked her up and down and refused to allow her to enter. In order to get into the park, Cecelia had to switch outfits with her partner. Cecelia was very upset by this occurrence and felt that the security guard was invalidating her identity as a woman. Although this event made the local news, Cecelia would rather forget that it happened and wishes that it would be normal for people to treat transgender individuals with respect. Cecelia has also had many positive interactions with the majority culture including the handful of times she has been asked to speak publicly and share her experiences with others.

My Response, Knowledge Gained, and Application

I went into my interview with Cecelia feeling nervous as I do not know many transgender individuals or their personal stories. I was ready to listen and learn, but I was not expecting to have her story resonate with me so much. Cecelia's journey to find an identity and place to fit in the world is one not too different from the journey that many people take in life. I am happy that she is now in a place where she is happy and comfortable after many years of feeling unsure of herself. I felt angry and sad hearing Cecelia's stories of discrimination, and I was surprised that she did not want to spend too much time going over these events. She did not seem angry to recount them but would just rather move on and exist in a happier place than those memories.

From my interview with Cecelia, I was able to learn a few things about the transgender community that were not apparent to me before. For one, I did not realize just how frequently transgender individuals experience discrimination. From what Cecelia told me, it sounds like she has had to endure hurtful language in many of her interactions with others. Cecelia expressed that she wishes society would begin to de-gender their language and that this is quite easy to do in everyday conversation. This is something that I would personally like to begin doing, as there

are phrases that I can easily take out of my language in order to make others feel more comfortable. She also expressed to me that, as with any group, one transgender individual cannot be representative of the entire group. She wanted to make it clear that this was her personal experience and that everyone was going to have different experiences and opinions.

The specific Element from the book *Gracism* by David A. Anderson (2008) that I felt is the most needed for the transgender community is, “I will consider you.” I strongly believe that if everyone who has been discriminatory towards the transgender community would stop and consider the individuals and their stories that attitudes would change, and problems would be solved. As someone who has grown up in more conservative circles, I have heard many hard-hearted comments uttered with a sheer lack of respect for the transgender community. One of the biggest problems that I see is a refusal to acknowledge or use a person’s pronouns. If a person were truly considering the transgender individuals in their lives, they would use their pronouns out of respect and love for them.

Organization Interview

My organization interview was with Andrew, a transgender man who is a member of Equality Virginia in their transgender speaker’s bureau. The purpose of Equality Virginia is to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals from housing and employment prejudice as well as other types of discrimination. Equality Virginia hopes to advance equal rights for the entire LGBTQ+ community in Virginia. The issue of race is also extremely important to Equality Virginia, and they fully acknowledge the difficulties of being a minority as well as part of the LGBTQ+ community by fighting for racial justice as well. Equality Virginia has a special focus on transgender individuals, providing resources and support for individuals as well as their families. Individuals are made aware of these services mostly through word of mouth and

networking- the many transgender individuals that participate in helping Equality Virginia help to make others aware of their services. Individuals may also come across Equality Virginia on the internet when searching for help fighting discrimination.

Part of what Equality Virginia does is lobbying for or against legislature that will affect transgender individuals. Andrew has personally testified against house bill 1612 in several sessions of the Virginia general assembly. Bill 1612 was a discriminatory bathroom bill that was referred to as the “physical privacy act” that would disallow individuals from entering a bathroom or other private facilities in government buildings that are not oriented for their biological sex. This bill was voted down thanks in part to the help of Equality Virginia and Andrews statements.

Andrew tells me that outright discrimination is the most significant challenge for the transgender community. This is especially the case for transgender individuals who are trying to obtain and secure employment and housing. Andrew himself has experienced employment discrimination after video of his statements in general assembly aired on the news. Andrew’s boss at the time had been unaware that Andrew was transgender and refused to let him leave after work one day until he answered many invasive and inappropriate questions. Transgender individuals also face violence or threats of violence- this year, 375 transgender or gender non-conforming people have been killed worldwide, making 2021 the deadliest year on record for the community (Transgender Europe, 2021).

Equality Virginia seeks to put a stop to discrimination and violence against the transgender community through advocacy and education. The organization hopes that, by changing Virginians attitudes towards the transgender community, they will see a decrease in rates of discrimination and violence. By taking legal action, they hope to decrease the prevalence

of housing and employment discrimination while also bettering the lives of transgender individuals. Andrew says that meeting other transgender individuals through Equality Virginia was the first time that he was able to meet people like him that were married, having kids, and advancing in their careers. Just being able to connect with these individuals gave Andrew immense hope for his future as a transgender man. Social justice is extremely important for the transgender community in this regard, as it can mean the difference between having a job, housing, and safety in the community or not having these things.

Summary Section

While the research portion of my project was informative, reading journal articles written to be professional and informative and watching documentaries was not the same as hearing personal stories from those in my own community. One thing that stood out to me from my interview experience was just how many transgender individuals there are and how willing they are to give back to their community. I received many offers for interviews, and many of the transgender individuals that I spoke with were part of organizations that helped the transgender community. Because individuals like Andrew are able to pass as cisgender, people with transphobic attitudes may be interacting with transgender individuals all the time and may not even realize it. I found that transgender people, in their search for identity, have much in common with the rest of society. Everyone has looked for a place to belong or a category to fit into at some point in their life, and transgender individuals are no different. From my research, I was able to understand that what sets them apart is that westernization has taken their status from one that was culturally honored and respected, to one that is now almost universally feared and hated.

What was most remarkable to me about the information gathered from my interviews was just how willing the participants were to share such difficult information with me. I went into the interviews with the utmost caution and respect, unsure if these individuals would be willing to discuss certain topics with me. However, I found that they were more than willing to share information that could potentially help raise awareness and further advocate for the transgender community. Both individuals that I interviewed were aware of the dangers and discrimination that being outed as a transgender individual could accompany and wanted to do their part to change discriminatory attitudes.

This immersion experience really changed my attitude towards the idea of affirming and accepting transgender individuals. As a Christian, I am still trying to figure out where I stand on LGBTQ+ matters, but I do know that we were called to love one another in John 15:12 and to help those in need in Psalms 82:2-3 (English Standard Version, 2021). Transgender individuals and the entire LGBTQ+ community are not exempt from needing the love and compassion of those in the Christian community, which has so often made them feel unloved. I believe that counselors and those studying to be counselors need to make themselves familiar with a range of different communities, personal stances aside, in order to be a more effective counselors.

Conclusion

I felt privileged to have had these interviews with Cecelia and Andrew, as they provided invaluable insight and connection for me to the transgender community. Transgender individuals, like much of the majority culture, are individuals at various stages of seeking an identity. Those who are afraid of the transgender community and discriminate against them need to come to understand just how much we have in common with them. This project has shown me

just how important it is for counselors to understand the background of the individuals they work with.

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