

Social Justice and Advocacy for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Clients

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KEYWORDS

• Transgender • Gender diverse • Advocacy • Social justice

KEY POINTS

- Mental health providers are well-positioned to serve as advocates for transgender and gender-diverse people.
- Mental health providers must have a good working knowledge of the history of their relationship to the transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) community.
- Professional organizations have developed policy statements that support the role of the provider as advocate.

Many scholars have called on counseling and psychological services for increased attention to social justice and advocacy when working with transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) clients.^{1,2} These calls for attention to social justice and advocacy are supported by research documenting extensive health disparities and discrimination among TGD people in society.³⁻⁶ TGD people experience high rates of not only vulnerability to societal discrimination and violence, but also high rates of negative health outcomes related to these experiences, such as suicide,⁷ depression, anxiety,⁸ and substance abuse.⁹

In addition, counseling and psychological professional associations have joined these calls for mental health practitioners to engage in social justice change within the helping professions. The American Counseling Association (ACA) adopted counseling competencies with transgender clients in 2010.¹⁰ These competencies

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described eight areas of training where counselors could engage in social justice change when working with transgender clients:

1. Human growth and development
2. Social and cultural foundations
3. Helping relationships
4. Group work
5. Professional orientation
6. Career and lifestyle development
7. Assessment
8. Research and program evaluation

The American Psychological Association also developed guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming clients,¹¹ where attention to issues of societal equity with transgender clients was detailed with 16 guidelines within five domains: (1) foundational knowledge and awareness; (2) stigma, discrimination, and barriers to care; (3) lifespan development; (4) assessment, therapy, and intervention; and (5) research, education, and training.

The World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH)¹² also has begun to more explicitly examine the importance of social change efforts that increase awareness, respect, and dignity of TGD people.

One of the major challenges to engaging in social justice and advocacy is that mental health professionals may not always be aware of the history of counseling and psychology that TGD people have with health care. In this article, the sociopolitical and historical context of mental health care is discussed. In addition, the professional role of advocacy is also discussed in relation to the major professional documents described previously when engaging in social change. Finally, specific recommendations for social justice and advocacy strategies are provided.

Advocacy and social justice are related but distinct terms. Advocacy is related to the ways in which providers take action in support of their client's needs.² This might include working with school administrators, employers, or providers to ensure that the individual has access to the necessary resources and services to support their affirmed gender. Social justice is similar in that it also targets the needs of marginalized people. However, it is more of a theoretic approach to clinical work.¹³ Social justice approaches recognize the systemic barriers that client's face and work to dismantle oppression.

HISTORY OF THE ADVOCACY MOVEMENT FOR GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE

Recent advocacy for transgender people began in the 1990s around two different issues. The first issue was related to trans people's identities. No longer were TGD^a people hiding in closets and blending in with the woodwork. Instead, we were holding our heads high and celebrating our gender in all of the ways and varieties that we were able to display. The second issue of advocacy, which remains a deep concern for TGD people, was the ways in which our stories were erased in the "war against AIDS." TGD people are adversely affected by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/AIDS and often erased when it comes time for care. Trans women who were affected

^a In this article the authors use transgender and gender diverse (TGD) as a broadly inclusive manner of identifying transgender people. Recently, the term transgender and gender nonconforming has been used; however, the authors believe this term can have the effect of pathologizing one's gender identity and expression because gender is on a spectrum and has existed throughout history.

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