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Editorial: Constructing a Globalized Society Without Gender Binaries and Comprehending Gender Variant Clients' Pronouns

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Ray Mathew-Santhosham, MSW Candidate, Policy Board Member

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Within the past several years, pronoun alternatives to the binary she/her and he/him have come to light in mainstream culture, yet many remain dumbfounded regarding the purpose, origin, and nuances of such alternatives. Operating in queer theory, social constructionism, and gender based oppression frameworks, social workers can piece together how our globalized society has reached a critical point in the institutional fight against stratifying gender binaries. Since the proliferation of gender binaries and oppressive policies is associated with western colonial legacies, social workers should heed the moral imperative to counteract binary ramifications through adaptive language and institutional efforts. Understanding the intricacies of how the gender binary was socially constructed can illuminate the undertaking of rebuilding a collective consciousness free from gender based hierarchy specifically targeting the transgender and genderqueer communities.

Imagining a World Without Gender Binaries

As a first step of rebuilding gender variant inclusive societies we will employ a classroom tool introduced by my mentor and friend, Dr. Steve Marson, wherein we ask ourselves to imagine a world free from gender roles or in this case, the gender binary. It turns out we need not look very far into our imagination because a myriad of indigenous cultures around the world incorporate a gender spectrum into their language, norms, and values. Social workers are ethically obligated to maintain cultural competency which includes aspects of diversity related to gender expression. Across cultures subscribing to restrictive gender binaries we still find incongruences between gender roles and expression, contributing to the theory of social constructionism as opposed to biologically determined sex/gender. An intersectional lens enables us to consider how much of our global gender variance was wiped out by the colonial proliferation of eurocentric norms through targeted physical and institutional violence against those with liberated sexual and gendered expression due to their conflation with 'savage' cultures (Milanović, 2017). In the western world, seemingly new pronoun nomenclature is a reactionary development to global sexual liberation, however this cultural tool has existed in many indigenous ancestral worlds dating back to long before colonists began documenting western history. A socially constructed world without gender variation is, in comparison, more of a convoluted fantasy than the recent reclamation of language for gender expressive freedom.

Pre-Colonial Legacy of Gender Identity in India

India, my own ancestral home, depicts a rich history of gender variance marred by colonial violence and sheds light on how a relatively simple change in language can go a long way to make clients and peers feel understood. "Koti " is a Sanskrit term which goes beyond the traditional binary to encompass several gender identities such as hijra, zenana, jogin,

siva-sati, and kada-catla koti. The meaning of these titles can be distinguished through a hierarchical structure based on a person's expression of religion, family patterns, idealized asexuality, physical appearance, and the self-perceived significance of an individual's corporeal form (Milanović, 2017). India's highly nuanced understanding of gender variance includes the cultural tools of language as well as social capital enabling all members across the gender spectrum to have a position in their societal structure. The liberated social context of gender expression in India was completely reorganized following the British imperial take-over which criminalized deviances from western norms of sexual acts introduced in 1872 through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that was only repealed in 2018 (McNamarah, 2018). Post-colonial India balances local and western ideals as the nation still mediates the physical and cultural consequences of imperialism.

Internalized Shame as Motivation for Social Control

Using India as an example we can see how unadulterated gender expression can be transformed into explicit binaries through enforcing mechanisms of social control- although it once was liberated, the country is now facing similar controversy regarding LGBTQ+ issues to what we see in the western world. Due to its roots in body-based oppression, transphobia encompasses intersections of racism, settler colonialism, ableism, sanism, and ageism (MacKinnon & Coulombe, 2021). Transphobia and homophobia impede our ability to understand a client's self-actualized gender and sexuality. Sexual expression is reproduced through internalized shame resulting in a false consciousness holding everyone back regardless of our individual identities. In an effort to reduce social stigma surrounding gender variance, we must seek to understand those who normalize transphobic vigilantism and the motivations of the perpetrators. Although contemporary science and grammar renunciate the logic of a gender binary, much of the world holds theologically and culturally ordained gender roles (Baron, 2021). This

contributes to the dangerous belief that 'deviant' lives are deserving of contempt and violation of fundamental rights. In 2022, three Nigerians were convicted of homosexuality and now face stoning as a punishment of social control with the purpose of perpetuating shame and fear (Clark, 2022). Contrary to our false consciousness, gender unites us all as it is a social construction experienced across all dividing lines and even oppresses those who identify as cis men and women. By remaining curious about a client's experiences with gender, we are choosing to cohere a community founded on self-compassion rather than internalized shame.

Hierarchy of Gender Identities

Studies examining the innate human desire to categorize and discriminate against those in our "out-groups" find that socially constructed hierarchies are from our brain's passive self-protection (Arnold, Mayo & Dong, 2021). However, using violence to extinguish minoritized people should be viewed as dangerous socially replicated vigilantism. In the United States, transgender individuals comprise only an estimated 0.6% of the population which excludes those 'in the closet' or who subscribe to a different gender non-conforming identity but still face transphobia (Baron, 2021). When a gender non-conforming person expresses gendered characteristics that do not align with a gender binary, they become a more likely target for harassment, beginning with the simple act of misgendering or disrespecting personal identifiers. When we consider how our social adherence to a gender binary predisposes transgender people to poverty, attempted suicide, and healthcare avoidance, the ethical mandate for social workers to legitimize a client's self-actualized identity becomes salient (MacKinnon & Coulombe, 2021).

Globally, contempt is not spread evenly across the entire LGBTQ+ community as the trans community specifically faces higher rates of violence (McNamara, 2018). Even within the LGBTQ+ community in-group members enforce their own hierarchies, pitting identities against each other

based on internalized heteropatriarchal biases. Contrasting models of gender hierarchy can be forced to co-exist in a given cultural space because subcultures may amalgamate with globalized or westernized cultures, causing greater difficulty for gender non-conforming people in navigating which spaces respect their authentic expression. We can construct a local cultural environment resembling a globalized conception of gender variance starting with the simple act of remaining curious about gender identities and corresponding pronouns we may not be familiar with. This endeavor goes hand in hand with being culturally competent regarding the heteropatriarchal and colonist legacy of the gender binary across the globe, such as the legal and linguistic history of gender variance in India.

Linguistics as it Relates to Gender

Charles Dawson once stated that, "Language is the gateway to the human world...Language is far older than civilization," (Dawson, 1932). Language is older than civilization because its development catalyzed human connection and innovation. Because of the inherent power of language, we are ethically encouraged to conscientiously use our words to amplify respect towards the institutionally powerless rather than divide. In American history, and globally, the hegemonic interpretation of language was used to justify voter suppression based on the constitutional use of he/him (Baron, 2021). Language is highly adaptive as well as informative of our society. For example, the plural they/them was not added to the English language until the 9th century (Baron, 2021). The practice of creating new words and rewriting their meanings over time is essential to the development of culture. As human society evolves, the tools we use to interact with each other must also reflect this growth.

In western civilized history, nomenclature for people deviating from gender norms was initially pathologized as "Gender Identity Disorder," (Burdge, 2007). The World Health Organization still includes transsexuality and transgenderedness under mental illnesses, fortifying the argument

that despite recent visibility of the trans community, we still lack a world void of gender binaries (Milanović, 2017). The nature of social work calls for practitioners to directly act against the history of pathologizing queerness. For example, the field of psychology's use of the gender identity disorder diagnosis as a way to treat homosexuality with gender reassignment (Burdge, 2007). Disability justice frameworks assert, "prejudice against our differences in function and ability are predicated on how a society is organized to accommodate these individuals, not innate pathology,"(Baron, 2021). Discomfort with clinicians stemming from discriminatory stereotypes often prevent queer and gender non-conforming individuals from accessing care, leading to worse health outcomes compared to cis-heterosexuals and an increased likelihood of non-compliance. Therefore, it is imperative that social workers reorganize their practices to be culturally competent about, and radically accepting of, the gender non-conforming community.

Conclusion

From an institutional or macro perspective, recent policy changes highlight how diversity and inter-relational inclusivity cannot be conflated as the implemented all-gender bathrooms and email signatures with pronoun preferences do not enable people to actively engage against gender-based assumptions. The "add diversity and stir," model lets many marginalized people fall through the cracks. In order for minorities to experience inter-relational safety, an institution's culture requires normative language and interactive changes rather than mere policy changes. These changes could resemble a deeper understanding of how to use she/they, he/they, or they/them pronouns which has received more cultural resistance than switching between binary pronouns.

Self definition is a pillar of social work ethics and values, protecting our clients from malpractice and bolstering their confidence as they step into a society not previously designed for them. With the purpose of navigating

professionalism, social workers should introspectively compare their authentic self with culturally prevalent gender stereotypes to further comprehend what their gender variant clients may be experiencing. Even if not queer identifying, our clients may be “gender murkey,” or questioning the way their gender is perceived and can be empowered with language to explore emerging socially constructed views of gender.

We would be interested in your comments. Please send them to mathew.167@osu.edu and we will publish your comments in our next issue.

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