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“An Institution Can Have Good Intentions and Still Be Atrocious”: Transgender and Gender Expansive Experiences in Social Work Education

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Educational settings have been found to be challenging arenas for transgender and gender expansive (TGE) youth and young adults due to misgendering, lack of affirming bathrooms, systemic exclusion (e.g., legal names and lack of inclusive gender identity demographic options), and frequent silence or avoidance related to TGE issues. Though studies of TGE adult experiences in higher education are emerging, most explore disaffirming experiences. Social work education focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion, along with how to promote social justice, which suggests more affirming environments for TGE individuals. However, little is known about the experiences of TGE students and even less about faculty in social work education. To help fill this gap, the researchers interviewed 23 TGE social work students and faculty to explore their experiences of gender-related affirmation and challenges in social work educational programs. The findings from a thematic analysis identified examples of affirming and disaffirming

experiences and recommendations for improving gender affirmation and inclusion in social work programs. Social work is in a strategic position to serve the needs and impact the social welfare of TGE individuals, starting with educational settings.

Keywords: Transgender, social work education, lived experience, policy, and paradigm shift

Transgender and gender expansive (TGE) people live within a sociopolitical climate that challenges their daily existence, from school to work to healthcare and who they love. Each year, more legislative bills are proposed that explicitly attack the rights of transgender people (Bailey, 2022; Lavietes & Ramos, 2022), including bills restricting access to sports, gender-affirming care, and bathrooms (Lavietes, 2022). The Human Rights Campaign called the 2022 legislative session an “intentional, coordinated attack” on TGE people (Bailey, 2022, para. 17). This anti-trans climate affects all areas of life for TGE people, and it is through understanding the nuances of their gendered experiences that social workers can learn to create gender-affirming change (Kinney et al., 2022).

Educational settings are where social workers gain the skills, talents, abilities, resources, and support needed to practice successfully. Social workers are obligated to learn, understand, and adhere to the guidelines detailed in the National Association of Social Workers’ *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021) and the Council on Social Work Education’s *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022). Even though the social work profession has a history of using language, policies, and procedures to restrict access to resources for people who are not perceived or received as cisgender, social work educational settings must cultivate and sustain learning environments wherein social justice is fully embraced and experienced by all participants. Unfortunately, the experiences of many TGE social work faculty and students suggest difficulty in meeting these ideals.

The small amount of literature to date suggests that many TGE social work students experience non-affirming and occasionally openly hostile educational environments (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Austin et al., 2019; Davies & Neustifter, 2021). Such environments

can negatively impact students' academic engagement and post-educational success, in addition to contributing to mental health concerns (McBride, 2021). For TGE faculty, unsupportive environments can hamper employment experiences and contribute to personal and social stress (Shultz, 2018).

Kia et al. (2021) and McCarty-Caplan and Shaw (2022) challenge readers to recognize concurrent tides that flow through social work curricula, namely that the very curricula expected to prepare future social workers to work with members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and additional gender- and sexuality-diverse (LGBTQ+) communities do not give enough attention and space to trans-specific issues, needs, and experiences. In social work educational settings, discrimination, marginalization, and oppression have been perpetuated through the amplification of cisnormativity while knowledge regarding gender diversity is restricted (Byers et al., 2020; Shelton & Dodd, 2019). This exclusion is reinforced through curricula recommended by faculty and taught at the college and university level (Byers et al., 2020; Shelton & Dodd, 2019).

For TGE students, common experiences of macro- and micro-aggressions include deadnaming, refusal to use correct pronouns, outing, having transphobic comments either ignored or even reinforced, exclusion by and isolation from peers, and experiences of pressure or force to adhere to binary-based systems (Austin et al., 2019; Siegel, 2019; Woodford et al., 2017). Woodford et al. (2017) found that such experiences contribute to poorer educational satisfaction, lower academic performance, reduced social acceptance, and increased challenges with academic development. TGE social work students also report that when topics related to gender identity manifest, faculty are often uninformed, express discomfort, expect TGE students to perform as "topic experts," or perpetuate pathologizing narratives of gender diversity (Austin et al., 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Siegel, 2019; Woodford et al., 2017).

TGE faculty report similar concerns. Pitcher (2017) found that TGE faculty (across disciplines) are often misgendered, deadnamed, and tokenized, as well as perceived to be "impossible" to work with by colleagues (p. 697). Faculty reported that they sometimes felt fetishized and as if there was an inappropriate focus on their body and an expectation that they be willing to discuss it (Pitcher, 2017). Similar experiences were noted by Jaekel and Nicolazzo (2022), with

TGE faculty stating they felt both invisible and hyper-visible, sometimes being actively excluded and other times having to be an expert on gender diversity or a spokesperson for all TGE individuals.

The bulk of the research on TGE individuals in academia has focused on difficulties related to being a TGE student or faculty member, limiting information that centers positive experiences of TGE students and faculty members. Further, much of the literature providing suggestions and guidelines on working with TGE students comes from individual faculty members' experiences or general guidelines rather than based on a systematized analysis of group data. Little research has simultaneously explored social work students' and faculty members' experiences, limiting the ability to compare and learn from and with them. This study begins to fill those gaps by centering the lived experiences of TGE social work students and faculty. This study also seeks to enhance the experiences of TGE students and faculty and provide them with the resources and support needed to thrive. For this to occur, we framed our study around the following research question: What are the gendered experiences of TGE students and faculty in social work education? Through exploring this question, we were able to collaboratively inform recommendations to enhance gender affirmation in social work educational settings.

Methods

Sampling

TGE social work faculty and students were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling, following strategies recommended for research with marginalized or difficult-to-engage populations (Sadler et al., 2010). First, the authors identified known possible participants from their respective queer and TGE professional networks and social media and invited selected individuals to participate and share recruitment information. Second, participants were recruited through direct emails to students and faculty within schools of social work (e.g., university listservs) and through social media posts on Facebook within affinity groups for LGBTQ+ academics and students.

Participant eligibility included being 18 years or older, identifying as gender diverse (e.g., transgender, nonbinary, agender, two-spirit), and either currently or recently (within two years) being involved in a social work educational program. Program involvement included enrollment as a student or serving as faculty (adjunct, tenured, tenure track, non-tenure track). Participants received a \$15.00 electronic gift card compensation for their time.

Sample

The sample ($N=23$) skewed White (91%) and included current students (61%), graduates (17%), and current faculty (22%) (race/ethnicity and academic positions omitted due to identifiability). All participants attended or worked in CSWE-accredited programs. Participant demographic details are presented in Table 1 and participant geographical regions are mapped in Figure 1. Pseudonyms have been used.

Figure 1. Map of Participants ($N=23$) by Region

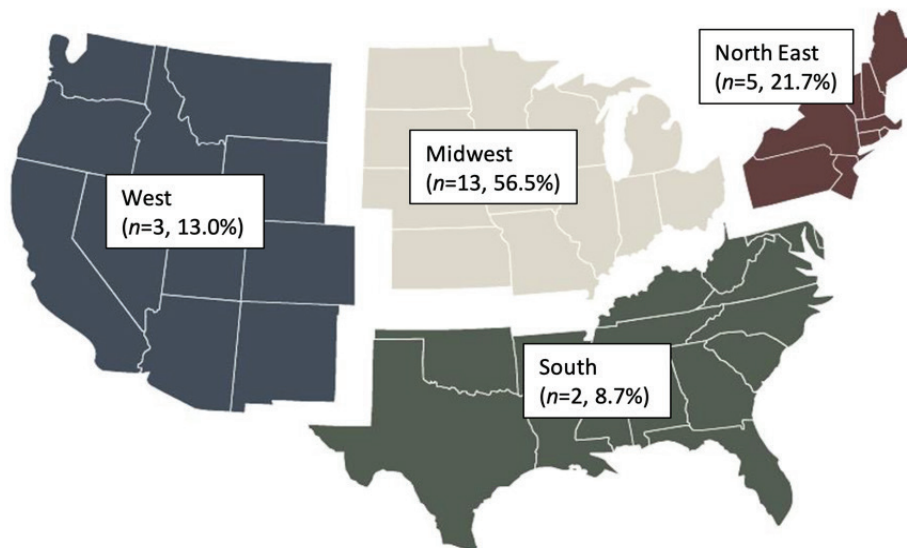


Table 1. Participant Demographics

	M	SD
Age (range 22–53)	31	8.1
Gender	n	%
Nonbinary	7	30.4%
Trans Man	4	17.4%
Genderqueer	2	8.7%
Trans Masculine / Nonbinary	2	8.7%
Trans Nonbinary	2	8.7%
Nonbinary/Genderqueer	1	4.3%
Nonbinary Trans Woman	1	4.3%
Nonconforming “does not fit in boxes”	1	4.3%
Trans/Transgender	1	4.3%
Trans Masculine	1	4.3%
Trans Woman	1	4.3%
Pronouns		
they/them	12	52.2%
he/him	4	17.4%
she/they	3	13.0%
all pronouns	1	4.3%
fae/faer/faers	1	4.3%
he/him/his or they/them/theirs	1	4.3%
she/her	1	4.3%
Educational Position		
MSW Student	11	47.8%
MSW Graduate	4	17.4%
Tenure Track / Tenured Faculty	3	13.0%
Adjunct Faculty and PhD Student	2	8.7%
Ph.D. Student	2	8.7%
DSW Student	1	4.3%

Positionality of Researchers

Positionality statements can be a valuable tool in qualitative work to situate the researchers with the research and participants (Holmes, 2020), as the positions and worldview of the researcher can impact their findings (Bryman, 2012). For this study, all researchers are social work educators with a history of working with TGE populations, are currently able-bodied, and identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Collectively, the authors have insider and outsider perspectives to the TGE study participants. The first two authors are nonbinary/genderqueer, and the other two are cisgender. The first three authors are queer, and the last is gay. The third author is Black, and the other three authors are non-Hispanic White.

These intersecting identities and gendered experiences impacted each researcher's position as insider and outsider in reference to participants (Holmes, 2020), providing potentially advantageous or disadvantageous perspectives and possibly affecting the research process (Herod, 1999). The insider perspectives were considered to be both valuable, shared lived experiences with participants, and the possible potential for biases and blind spots. In complement, outsider perspectives were leveraged as grounding checks and balances.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted online by one of the first two authors over Zoom. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The semi-structured interviews focused on (a) participants' gender-related experiences within their programs ("How do you feel your gender identity impacted your experiences within social work education?"; "What are some gender-affirming experiences that stand out to you from your time teaching in your social work program(s)?"); (b) the meaning participants made of these experiences ("How did these experiences impact your overall experience and decisions about your time in the corresponding social work program(s)?"); and (c) recommendations ("What recommendations do you have for creating more gender-affirming social work programs?"). Recruitment

and data collection were approved by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board.

After transcripts were cleaned, each interviewee reviewed their cleaned transcript for member-checking and redaction, as they felt was needed. Due to the sensitivity and identifiability of the data, this additional measure was taken so participants could protect their identities and feel more empowered to participate confidentially. NVivo was used for analysis. The first two authors initially coded data using a priori codes informed by current theory focusing on gender-diverse experiences. These codes were used to identify and highlight experiences related to gender affirmation and disaffirmation, impact of experiences on participants' engagement with their program, and recommendations for creating more affirming programs. Recognizing the significance of the personal meaning assigned to experiences and how such meaning can shape participants' understanding of their experience in social work education, the authors also drew upon interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) that focuses on understanding a phenomenon through participants' experiences and the meaning assigned to those experiences by the participants themselves (Smith et al., 2021). This blended approach allowed for a deeper understanding of not only the experiences participants had in their programs but also the meaning these experiences held as participants contemplated what it meant to be TGE in social work higher education.

After applying broad codes related to affirmation, disaffirmation, impact, and recommendations to selected sample transcripts, the first two authors met to explore code nuances and application. After revising codes to better capture the essence of participants' experiences, the authors coded the remainder of the transcripts while continuing to meet regularly to review and "dialogue" about codes and the notes taken regarding the participants' understanding and meaning-making of experience (Smith et al., 2021). The first two authors used the coded data and their dialogue notes to develop representative themes that reflect both experience and the participant-assigned meaning of experience.

Findings

Experiences of Affirmation

Participants described three main themes related to gender affirmation they experienced while at a social work program: The presence of positive experiences, the absence of negative experiences, and the affirming responses from others when negative experiences occurred.

Presence of Positive Experiences. Participants described the many ways they experienced gender affirmation as a result of the direct actions of others and the environment created as a result of such actions. In reporting these experiences, participants offered concrete examples of phenomena that facilitated gender affirmation.

Faculty Promoting Affirmation. Faculty were noted as key individuals to model expected social work behaviors grounded in professional ethics. Often, this modeling began early in the semester when faculty asked students to introduce themselves and asked for student pronouns as part of the introduction. AJ, an MSW student, shared,

There's been like one class that I experienced where we [were asked to share pronouns] when we were doing introductions at the beginning of class. I always love when that happens... just the intentionality of it like, we recognize that this is a thing we should address. It is very affirming.

While students most widely reported the intentional use of pronouns, faculty also shared feeling affirmed when asked about their pronouns by their colleagues. Nic, a faculty member, shared about their time on the job market and reflected on an experience they had as part of an interview:

For my first job talk, one of the professors who was [helping me prepare for the talk], was like, "what do you want your pronouns to be?" I had this moment with him where I was like, "Well, I want them to be this, but I don't know how that would be for people and I'm fine if people mess up." And so, he was just very affirming. He's like, "If your pronouns are they/them, use they." And, [he] put it on himself, too. He said, "I'll make sure that everybody knows that these are your pronouns."

While correct pronoun use was widely noted as a simple yet necessary part of affirmation for participants, some participants encouraged faculty and students to think more critically and deeply about gender and TGE marginalization. They shared that without such criticality, the simple act of respecting pronouns merely became “performative” and resulted in little opportunity for sustained affirmation.

Participants also noted TGE visibility within their curriculum as affirming. This occurred when TGE experiences were discussed in non-pathologizing ways. Despite the importance of such experiences, participants described them as rare and reported that TGE experiences were often either outright overlooked or treated as an “after thought.” In an example of when TGE experiences were presented in an inclusive and affirming way, Avery discussed how someone in a leadership role at their school required their faculty to take trans-focused training. Avery, a DSW student, reported a clear change in the content of faculty lectures and presentations afterward, saying:

The very next lecture, they use completely inclusive language... And so they've completely shifted decades of their, like research and knowledge to be wildly inclusive to the point that I sent them an email afterward like, “I [felt like], I was so included in your lecture, and I so appreciate it.”

Students Promoting Affirmation. Just as participants noted the value of professors asking about pronouns, they also reported the importance of students sharing their own to normalize the avoidance of gender-based assumptions. One MSW student, Billie, discussed a core group of students who had known them prior to coming out and who had been consistently supportive of their ongoing expression of gender. Billie shared that these students would often share their own pronouns to take attention and pressure off Billie when they might otherwise be the only one doing so. Billie explained, “That’s affirming to me, because I don’t need to be singled out in every situation. You don’t need to know me as like ‘the trans person in the program’.”

Students reported feeling affirmed when their classmates recognized their gender outside the classroom as well. Whether within

a study group or a social gathering, having members of their academic cohort affirm participants' gender was reported as a consistently supportive experience. Oliver, an MSW student, explained that they did not like it when classmates "go out of their way because that makes it sound like they're like going over the top" but enjoyed being part of their group and just being "one of the guys." Similarly, Raven, an MSW graduate, shared:

My fellow students were excellent. I did not run into any transphobic people the entire time I was in grad school. A lot of people were genuinely interested and not in the way of like exploitative...I was gendered correctly by all of my fellow students and that was nice. Most of the time everything was fine.

Absence of Negative Experiences

Early in data analysis, it became evident that participants described affirmation as the absence of the transphobia and gender binarism they were accustomed to elsewhere. Even among participants who had experiences that made them feel good, when asked about examples of affirmation, most first thought of moments in which active harm was not occurring.

When asked to discuss what felt affirming in his program, Oliver reported that he felt affirmed by the fact that he "...never met any professor or student in the program that's been like outright transphobic or anything." Dragonfly, a MSW student, shared that he felt affirmed by professors who, "Don't see me any different, don't treat me any different." Similarly, Zack, a MSW student, commented:

I've never been misgendered. I've never been, you know it's never been a question. [My gender] has never been pushed back upon, which is something that happens often outside of the classroom. I guess I don't have a particular incident, because it is just kind of like it's a non-issue. It's just treated as a given. It can just be "normal."

For most of the participants, the absence of harm was perceived to be an affirming experience. Some participants shared that because of the challenges faced in their daily lives, they expected similar challenges within their educational programs. At times,

the concerns were founded, but at other times participants were pleased to have relatively positive or at least neutral experiences.

Pepper, an MSW student, shared that they had a practicum placement in a K-12 school and they feared that administrators might be resistant to their gender presentation, however, their concerns were thankfully unfounded. Moreover, they were excited to report that their visibility in the school provided an opportunity for queer and trans students to connect with them and express their own identities.

I was open with [my students]. You know, these are my pronouns, and this is how I identify, and they would come into school...and they were able to like, share those things [about their identities] with me, which was super affirming and exciting.

Affirming Responses from Others

Even when negative experiences occurred, participants did not report a universal experience of disaffirmation. Rather, many participants described feelings of affirmation based on others' responses to harmful behaviors and comments.

Peers Advocating for Inclusive Language. Participants described feelings of affirmation when they were not positioned as the only people advocating for inclusive language within their programs. Billie shared a story about a guest speaker who came to class and was talking about abortion access. During the conversation, Billie referred to "people with the capacity for pregnancy" and the guest speaker insisted that this meant "women" exclusively. While this would have been a disaffirming experience on its own, Billie was excited to share that a group of cis men in the class, chimed in, defending Billie's intentional language and asserting, "How do you know that one of us couldn't get pregnant? You don't know our situation." Billie reported a sense of comfort and appreciation when such instances occurred.

Recognizing Challenges and Welcoming Growth

Most participants expressed a general sense that they expected and were understanding of gender-related mistakes, particularly regarding language, if faculty and students showed an interest in

understanding the harm done by cissexism and gender binarism. Moreover, participants articulated an appreciation of explicit efforts to increase self-awareness and actively engage in efforts to change harmful components of their programs.

Monroe, a MSW student, reflected on how there was little attention to the TGE experiences within most of their social work courses. Often, such experiences lend themselves to feelings of invisibility and “outsiderness.” However, Monroe shared they had one professor who took the shortcomings of the curriculum and used it as an opportunity to amplify diverse perspectives and voices:

[My professor] was like, “the book that we’re reading is a White man’s perspective and we not only need women’s perspective, but also LGBT perspectives,” [He explained] LGBT people aren’t involved in any of the data that we’re looking at. He’s careful about that, and it’s been a great experience. We’ve watched YouTube videos or supplemental readings.

Many participants talked about finding themselves (by choice or circumstance) in a position to educate others about TGE identities and experiences. While this was often perceived as burdensome emotional labor for students who wished to be able to engage in their environments as learners (as opposed to teachers), some found the openness of others to learning to be affirming. AJ, a MSW student, explained:

A lot of our textbooks are pretty outdated. And they’ll use terms that generally people don’t use anymore. They’ll use terms like transsexual or cross-dressing, that kind of stuff. And that can be annoying. But then I also have found pretty consistently that when I point out, like, “Hey, I’m just really nervous. We don’t really use those terms anymore. Can I talk a little bit about it?” I would say almost every time—if not every time—the professor has been like, “yes, tell us more.”

Promoting an Educational Culture of TGE Respect

Program and classroom culture were topics central to both faculty and student participants’ experiences. The nature of the culture participants experienced often held elements of both gender

affirmation and disaffirmation. Those that discussed affirming cultural environments emphasized the importance of clear expectations of gender inclusivity and respect within classroom settings. Zack shared about the need for people to explore their own personal beliefs and values that might be at odds with gender affirmation as an important process in preparing for professional practice. However, he also felt that when this exploration occurred in the classroom, it prioritized cisgender students' reflective processes over TGE students' safety. He felt affirmed in one such encounter based on how a professor responded to students' value exploration.

You do want it to be a safe place for people to reconcile their beliefs, and to debate these things and to be able to understand them. That's a messy process, I appreciate it. There's one professor I've had, where, when these kinds of topics [come up], is like, "Okay I want this to be a safe place for us to explore but when it comes wrestling with your own beliefs, you have to take into consideration who you're asking on that journey with you." And she was very explicit on like, it is good that you're questioning [personal beliefs and assumptions grounded in cisnormativity]... but I also want to make sure that we are learning to recognize your audience, and who is consenting [and not consenting] to be in this conversation.

Zack went on to share that this professor encouraged people to find peer support or counseling-focused spaces if they felt they needed to unpack their personal beliefs in order to operate within social work's professional expectations and affirm TGE people's identities.

Students and faculty alike shared that they felt it is important for TGE to be visible in leadership roles throughout higher education, and especially within the classroom. This visibility was central to creating inclusive and affirming cultures of learning. Jack, a faculty member, shared that, "I consider it my...an obligation—but not in a bad way—and my privilege to be visibly me for students that identify similarly, and that have not seen themselves reflected in their chosen profession ever before." Likewise, Nic shared that they regularly mentored and provided support for trans students who have specifically reached out to them hoping to connect with an "out" TGE faculty member.

When students had the opportunity to take classes with TGE professors, they reflected on such experiences with excitement and described a joy that came with their identity being normalized through a role model from whom to learn. Tye described one such experience:

I know that they've had to have experience in the field to get to the point of being a professor and that they've like navigated the world and are a person older than me, functioning in the world of social work, and it hasn't pushed them out yet. That's affirming.

Experiences of Disaffirmation

Some experiences of disaffirmation were perceived as intentional or malicious, though many were not. As an MSW student, Rae stated, "an institution can have good intentions and still be atrocious...I know they can and should do better, not just for myself, but for others." Good intentions did not diminish the harm and even further complicated the challenge of addressing disaffirmation. Participants' experiences of disaffirmation were coded as three themes: Interpersonal interactions, curriculum and classroom culture, and invisibility and avoidance. Within each theme, types of disaffirmations were identified.

Interpersonal Interactions

During participants' time in their social work educational institutions, disaffirming interpersonal interactions were identified by all participants and included disbelieving, gaslighting, and infantilizing, with misgendering being the most prominent form of disaffirmation. These incidents ranged from unintentional accidents to outright hostility. Misgendering (the use of a wrong name or pronoun) was widely reported. The people misgendering TGE individuals included students, faculty, administrators, and practicum supervisors. Monroe, an MSW student, explained that misgendering happens and is disaffirming even when done with good intentions or lack of awareness:

I get called girly a lot...not meaning any harm. They think it's a fun thing. And I'm kind of like, that makes me feel really icky. But I'm not going to tell you because I have one class with you.

These cases can be particularly challenging to speak up against with some, like Monroe, sharing that they do not correct people when it is not intentional.

Unfortunately, participants reported much of the misgendering seemed intentional—Fen, an MSW student, described it as “repeated, continual misgendering.” Times that felt especially obvious included on Zoom, such as when Rae said, “all my Zoom things I have they/them and even one of my professors, we had our names with our pronouns and everything and I still got misgendered.” Misgendering occurred with pronouns and names when not legally changed, as Fen stated, “Thankfully, these people don’t know my dead name, because I had it legally changed, and I protected myself in that way. Or else that would have been a thing, too. And that would have been worse.”

The accumulation of such disaffirming experiences was exacerbated by power imbalances, as Fen stated, “We have the perfect storm of you have all the power, and you’re deeply oppressive, and you can’t even see it.” Though deeply upset about a disaffirming experience, Rae reported feeling helpless due to the power position of the offending administrator. A reoccurring experience among participants was misgendering and an unfulfilled desire to pursue accountability due to the offender’s position. TGE faculty also were misgendered and felt the influence of power dynamics. Jack spoke of being read as a woman and not nonbinary, which gave them empathy for students who are being misgendered:

I’m successful, and I have so much privilege and all of these things, and it still is so fucking hard. And then I think about students, and they’re also new, and they’re coming into a new place and a new institution and a new field and meeting all new people. And then managing all the stresses of school? So, if it’s so hard for me, how hard is it for them?

TGE faculty were driven to speak out to disrupt misgendering and establish it as unacceptable. Thus, the burden to correct or point out misgendering was often said to fall upon TGE students or faculty unless allies advocated for them. These dynamics were often exacerbated by being the only out TGE student or faculty. Jack describes,

“as *the* trans person in faculty and staff and admin, I think I’m a fierce advocate. *And* I want other people to do it, too.”

When students observed cisgender faculty misgendering students without intervention, they felt it established an atmosphere where misgendering is acceptable. Fen shared:

They [faculty] weren’t even remotely trying. And what’s terrible about it is that they’re setting up the expectations for the students of what they should be doing...they [students] would just blatantly misgender me. I felt like it was a machine gun of misgendering.

Further, even when faculty were respectful and used chosen names and pronouns, sometimes misgendering continued from peers. Pepper stated:

My professors specifically, like since freshman year have always been like, “What are your pronouns?” and are very respectful. But there’s just some students who don’t seem to quite understand yet, which is concerning for me, [they are] entering the field and working with some of the most vulnerable populations.

This impact is doubled when the response was described as gaslighting as Merrill, a Ph.D. student and adjunct faculty, recounted:

People get angry when I correct them. And they’re just like, “Oh, come on, it’s hard.” And I’m like, “No, it’s not hard. It’s hard for me to just let it go. Why is it that I am the one who has to let you go?”

Curriculum and Classroom Culture

A sentiment across participants was frustration related to TGE-focused curricula and how such topics were taught in outdated and potentially harmful ways. Participants raised two primary critiques: The quality of TGE narratives and topics and the absence of affirming content.

First, participants described TGE content as transphobic and pathologizing. For Raven, “some of the educational materials in the coursework were aggressively transphobic. And they didn’t even notice it because they’re that clueless about it.” Jordan, a faculty member who did notice, reported, “I’ve engaged in a lot of debate

over textbooks and ideologies and what kind of politics we have in our curriculum. And I've pointed out specifically transphobic things inside of textbooks. And those have just been glossed over." TGE content was said to be taught through a frame of pathology and adversity. Nic critiqued the inclusion of TGE content for:

[An] over focus on clinical—only talking about trans people in reference to the DSM and deficit-based. We just had gender dysphoria in my DSM-5 class and here's how it felt to me as a trans person, like, hearing this professor completely pathologize so many wonderful things about who I am.

As a result, participants described painful experiences learning about their communities in social work education.

Second, even when not outright offensive, the curriculum that included TGE people was described as an afterthought or a specialty rather than infused across course content. Finley, an MSW graduate, recounted such an example:

I just remember in general, like, the lack of transness the entire time. There was like nothing. Maybe there was one case vignette that had a trans person in it, but it was not the point of the case vignette at all...It definitely seemed like they just like took an old case vignette and then stuck "trans" in front of "man"...it was like "good enough." Just like lack of existence, as well as the lack of presence really hurt.

Likewise, Tye, an MSW student, noted outdated and "cringy" language used in curriculum and without disclaimers or context. The lack of meaningful curriculum was attributed to teachers who are not knowledgeable or comfortable with trans content, such as when Dragonfly reported he had to try and explain when terms were used incorrectly, and others did not understand. Avery noted gender-disaffirming language was a critical area that needed improvement:

[The professor] was talking about trans people and was constantly messing up all of the language...literally talking about trans women and saying "biologically male," which is just like, I need you to get those words out of your mouth forever. And at one

point described gender diverse folks as “gender non-normative.” And I sat in the room silently knowing that he’s in charge of my whole future and just quiet, quiet, quiet, quiet. And by the third or fourth time he did that I was like, “so I know you’re the expert. I know you’re the one with the information. And you really can’t call me gender non-normative one more time.”

As a result of missing or poor curriculum, TGE students were expected to be in the role of cultural expert and educator. Raven experienced this in his undergraduate and graduate classes:

It became an issue with some teachers who would just bizarrely reference me in their education because they had zero understanding of trans people. So, if anything came up, they would just be like, “do you have anything to say about it?” and like, asked me to teach the class because I happen to be trans. It was super problematic.

Brick shared, “In classes where they’re going over different LGBTQ policies and everything else, usually, whenever that stuff comes up, everyone’s immediate attention goes to me. And it’s like, “Ah, hello. Hello, everyone’s focus.” Among participants who were placed in this role, many were willing to assist—within reason—in their peers’ learning to help TGE communities. However, a strong sentiment was expressed that sometimes they just wanted to be a student and not an educator.

Challenges with curriculum were further agitated by feedback being met with adverse responses. In one case, Jordan experienced the burden of proof with a colleague:

“Can you give me more proof that this is oppressive?” And I was like, so the transphobia is not enough, right? ... I’m telling you this thing is transphobic. It’s hurting me to teach it. It’s hurting our students, all of our students, to have to read it. So, we can just stop and you’re like, “No, actually, I’m really committed.” And that pain you’re experiencing doesn’t matter. Right? Like it’s just not important.

This attempt to improve curriculum was met with disbelief. Similarly, students were met with apathy and dismissal when they broached the problem. Kelsey, an MSW student, stated:

One instance is the introductory class. They just went through different minority groups and their experience...I raised my hand and mentioned some of the statistics about trans people because it [the class] didn't mention us. My teacher was like, "Well, yeah, I mean, there's lots of groups that are oppressed."

Fen experienced a similar degree of dismissal:

My professor's response to this [very hostile transphobic student comments] was not you know, maybe we should put this in check and recognize that sometimes just asking questions is extremely oppressive. Instead, we were told we should be more polite with each other, and agree to disagree.

Because of acts of disaffirmation, numerous students shared that they do not speak up in class as much as they would like. Further, when topics of transness and gender diversity emerged, they were uncomfortable due to either anticipated or experienced disaffirmation around their identities.

Invisibility and Avoidance

An overarching theme was feeling invisible and experiencing avoidance by others, which contributed to a disconnect from others. Kaid, a Ph.D. student, disappointedly noted his school's lack of a stance on trans rights:

I have a problem with just the general lack of attention to it. It feels like things will happen related to trans rights and then nothing will ever be mentioned by the school of social work about it. But they'll mention everything else that's happening.

Raven voiced a similar concern about the current wave of anti-trans policies that have swept across the United States and alarm that some states are proposing legislation that would limit or prevent social workers from supporting gender-affirming medical care, and yet nothing was being discussed in his program. The silence and lack of response to pressing concerns of TGE social workers and clients did not instill confidence or solidarity with the educational institutions or the profession.

Participants also experienced a wide range of avoidance of pronouns, chosen names, and TGE people and topics, even when the intention was to be affirming. Fen recalled, “there was a classmate who expressed things like, ‘Well, I just try not to have any interactions. Because I don’t want to mess up.’” A less direct form of avoidance was conflict avoidance under the guise of protecting trans students. Kaid describes such an example:

I feel like [faculty] feel uncomfortable talking about it or something. I feel like they feel uncomfortable even doing something like adding pronouns to how people introduce themselves. I’ve heard from them that, especially when they teach undergrads, there have been times where students have laughed about it or made fun of it in the class. And they don’t want to make somebody feel as if there’s somebody in the class who is trans. So, that’s why they don’t bring it up.

Such instances of avoidance were considered lost opportunities for growing, teaching, and advocacy that, if done well, could create a more gender-affirming environment.

Perhaps the most concerning form of avoidance was intentional refusal. Oak, a doctoral student and adjunct faculty, reminded faculty and staff of their name and pronouns multiple times, and “after that, it’s just sort of turned into ‘let me just not even try that, like, I don’t want to be wrong. So, I just won’t even recognize it.’” Ezra, an MSW graduate, told of a time when a student made a statement regarding not wanting to work with TGE clients, “can I just not work with those people? Like, if I’m not comfortable?” To which Ezra’s professor responded, “that’s good for you to recognize that and yeah, you should refer out or whatever.” Ezra was upset by this exchange stating, “A part of me is like, yes, I see some value to that. Like, if you really can’t, like better not to be a total asshole. But also, isn’t that what you signed up for?” The resulting overall impression from disaffirming experiences was you are not important.

Recommendations

As participants discussed their experiences, they also shared with us their recommendations for making social work programs more affirming of TGE students and faculty. While many recommendations focused on ideas such as inclusive language, paperwork, and facilities (bathroom, etc.), it was clear that these tangible changes often feel performative when not supported by deeper paradigmatic and structural shifts.

Increase Representation and Visibility

Participants reported benefits when they were able to work with and learn from TGE faculty. Such faculty presence provided students with the opportunity to connect with a professional role model and see TGE individuals as successful within their practicum. For faculty, connection to TGE peers helped foster feelings of connectedness and a workplace culture in which it was safe to be out. Jack reflected on the challenges they faced entering social work academia as a new professor not having many visible TGE professional role models. They shared how refreshing and reassuring it has been to see more TGE scholars enter social work education, “I didn’t have [visible TGE scholars] ahead of me on the trajectory. But [mentions three TGE junior scholars] were the first people that I saw that I was like, “hey, here we come. People are coming. We’re here, it’s good. We’re going to be just fine.”

In addition to visibility among faculty, participants urged for greater inclusion of gender diversity and explicit attention to TGE experiences within social work curriculum. Numerous participants felt that programs speak to the profession’s espoused values of social justice and combating oppression but fail to put action behind these values when teaching materials, texts, and course content continues to marginalize TGE people through embracing an exclusively cisgender perspective. Moreover, some reported TGE-related topics only being discussed in a clinically pathologizing manner. Tye shared:

[TGE people] don't show up anywhere until I'm in a class that's talking about diagnoses...gender dysphoria came up, and it's like, "Oh, now we'll talk about [TGE people] because we're going to diagnose them?" But otherwise, that's just not a category of people that we really talk about.

Jack, a faculty participant, shared that they felt it important for students to discuss the clinical diagnosis of gender dysphoria and "what our role is in diagnosing gender dysphoria, and like what that does to and for and with trans people and like, all the intricacies of that and how much care we need to be taking with that."

Another faculty participant described feeling as though their program was working hard to recognize cisnormativity when it occurred. They reported that faculty would often actively reflect on something exclusive that they said, make a correction, and learn from the experience. They also shared that there is a strong representation of TGE people in the course curriculum:

We read work by trans scholars about trans issues in all of our classes. And it's, not just for trans week, it's integrated. We're seeing good trans interviews when we're doing clinical interviews. Trans people are not being like accidentally left out of conversations that we're having.

For faculty and students alike, having TGE people visible and active in their schools and seeing representation in classroom discussions that present TGE people in both the role of client and service provider were essential to improving the experiences within academic programs.

Trans-Affirming Training

Disaffirming experiences of participants were evidenced by other's lack of knowledge and comfort with TGE people and topics. Thus, participants wanted professors to be educated on TGE people and topics impacting their lives – and more than simply basic introductory training. For Dragonfly, a "really a huge thing is like making sure that professors have competency before they attempt to teach on a subject." Ongoing training was considered a part of a bigger shift to critically de-gender language (e.g., y'all, folx, partner, colleagues)

to send the message that “you do get that I exist here in this space, too.” Going even further, Ashlin, an MSW graduate, recommended “to continuously seek ways to help people to get better about using people’s pronouns,” including candid critical discussions to ask about and identify blocks to overcome (such as to using they/them pronouns) and supports that would be helpful. Similarly, Avery highlighted the need to prioritize trans-inclusions and to “truly feel seen,” stating:

You can talk people through all the different talks, and they can learn the new vocab, but you can’t stop somebody from their internal biases until they just keep doing that work. And I think for gender diverse folks, it’s even less incentivized because it’s just like at the margins of the margins.

While many participants considered training and self-reflection to be the bare minimum, it was also recognized as necessary and foundational for affirming social work education.

Cultural Changes

A call for cultural changes within social work education represented participants’ desire for a paradigm shift in how all marginalized populations were represented and valued in social work education. Many recognized the abstractness of some recommendations and offered an ethos towards inclusive social work education. Dragonfly shared:

I think really, my huge takeaway is that when trying to involve a generally underserved or unheard community in academia, the phrase *nothing about us without us* should definitely be like a mantra you keep telling yourself and find some way to make that actionable in whatever you’re doing...And making sure you’re protecting trans people, in whatever capacity you will involve them.

In short, participants wanted to be at the table and part of the conversations to ensure that, despite low TGE representation, their perspective would be safely and respectfully included in decision-making. Jordan wanted those in charge of social work programs:

...to honor trans people for our lived experience, giving the space for us to offer our expertise, which is our lived experience. And many of us have done this work, in addition to living this, because that's also what's been required of our survival for a really long time, like much longer than y'all have even been getting your Ph.D.s actually.

To guide these cultural changes, participants recommended a social justice framework that included TGE people. Fen elaborated that this practice means "being explicit, that they care about being anti-oppressive in the classroom, and specifically stating 'LGBTQ+' as a group that is facing societal stigma and oppression." Building upon this awareness and lived experience, Kaid stated that, "everything that's done with students should be more trauma-informed and there should be somebody that knows [and has] direct experience with things at least as an advocate."

For TGE students, a trauma-informed approach includes attention to cisnormativity, including binarism. Merrill suggested, "don't wait for students and gender diverse people to tell you when something's wrong. Because at that point, you know, for the one person to tell you that something's wrong, you've already had ten leave." Instead, TGE students and faculty wanted proactive intentions to create gender-affirming social work programs.

University Changes

As social work programs exist within a larger context, participant recommendations included university-level change. Or, as Dragonfly stated:

For trans people to be comfortable in a social work department, they should be comfortable on the campus as a whole. And what I found is even if the social work program is relatively inclusive, if the rest of the campus isn't on board, it's still a huge issue.

At the university level, concrete recommendations were made about navigating campus and systems. Almost unanimously, all-gender bathrooms were identified as a need—ones that were accessible, clean, and critically thought out. In other words, not just a sign replaced over the men's bathroom, a solution that did not

feel safe or affirming for participants. As many participants faced being outed, deadnamed, and misgendered due to the dominance of legal names in university systems, migrating chosen names and pronouns across platforms was a priority. Particularly as some policies—whether formal or simply socially normalized—require legal names, such as changing university emails to reflect chosen names.

To proactively avoid disaffirming experiences, participants recommended additions to existing systems. Participants wanted TGE consultants in health centers to avoid uncomfortable and triggering experiences, such as the unintentionally harmful curiosity Dragonfly experienced:

First of all, [she] way too excited to meet a trans person in real life for the first time. But the first question she asked me is, how did your parents take it? And I'm like, "I'm very fortunate, that is not an issue for me," but good God. Is that a loaded question?

Training and consultation can help health center workers to become critically aware of what is and is not appropriate when providing services for TGE students. Dragonfly also recommended diversity, equity, and inclusion boards for all university IRBs to integrate critical assessment for disrespectful and harmful methods for marginalized populations. Finally, when disaffirming and transphobic incidents occur, participants wanted an avenue for reporting. For Kaid, "the avenues that they provide for a grievance require so much paperwork and are really complicated to the point where I just didn't even do it. I was just so overwhelmed, I gave up." When paths for reporting were not clear and accessible, participants found there was no accountability for the harm done to them.

When asked about the anticipated impact of recommended improvements, a frequent response was that TGE students would not drop out and, thus, there would be more TGE social workers and greater visibility within programs. Jordan explained that creating more inclusive spaces for TGE students to "drop our shoulders and probably do really fucking fantastic work" would also be a place for BIPOC individuals to thrive "because there are not just only trans and nonbinary White people." Further, Finley elaborated on the potential community-wide impact:

I think the most important thing for me is that people who are gender diverse could graduate...I'm glad that I'm full [with therapy clients]. And I'm really wanted by people in my community, but it's because there's not enough people who have my identities that can do the work that I'm doing. I have had several times, [when] clients come to me saying, "thank goodness, I found you!"...So not only would these kinds of changes mean that trans people can graduate and be in the field doing important work, it would also mean that the people who are cisgender are not harming other trans folks. Because not every trans person can have a trans provider. It just doesn't work that way. So cis people really need to be able to have those skills to hold space for marginalized folks who are not their own identities.

Discussion

This research has identified core experiences and their meanings that have been central to shaping gender affirmation or disaffirmation for TGE social work scholars and students navigating social work education. These experiences are largely connected to visibility and representation, cultural environments, and educational policies and structures. Overwhelmingly, participants were enthusiastic about their pursuit of careers in social work education and practice. Some even felt that their time in social work academia provided the opportunity to deepen self-awareness and be of service to other TGE people. Nonetheless, it seemed easier for participants to envision a better, more gender-affirming social work program than it was to articulate the ways in which they felt their TGE identity was supported in their current program.

TGE people navigate social, political, and cultural environments of pervasive transphobia, cissexism (Austin et al., 2019; Siegel, 2019; Woodford et al., 2017), and gender binarism (Cosgrove, 2021; Kinney, 2021; Kinney & Cosgrove, 2022) across education, employment, and even within broader LGBTQ+ communities. Microaggressions and explicit discrimination contribute to the social and health disparities many TGE people face (James et al., 2016). Social work professional organizations reference the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* and the espoused values of social justice, dignity, and respect, calling for social and political changes, and endorse practices aimed at gender-affirmation (NASW, 2021).

Yet, social work education exists within larger sociopolitical structures that do not uphold equity or justice for TGE people—and some climates are outright hostile, attacking TGE people and those affirming them. Within these contexts, social workers may struggle to manifest their commitment to affirmation in ways that are practical and impactful in TGE students' and faculty's daily lives within their education programs.

One factor where broader cultural forces may shape the experiences of TGE students and faculty is the nature of social work schools and programs being housed within larger educational institutions with varying levels of commitment to supporting TGE people. While this study did not look at larger institutional policies and practices within the participants' institutions, all participants came from social work programs accredited by CSWE. Unfortunately, as noted by Prock et al. (2022), there are many social work programs housed within institutions that have anti-LGBTQ policies. As such, TGE students and faculty may be engaged in programs that are expected to promote social work values yet are beholden to larger institutional policies and cultures that may actively discriminate and marginalize LGBTQ people.

Due to the current lack of trans-inclusionary environments in social work education, some TGE individuals experience hypervigilance about microaggressions. An indicator of this was when participants described affirmation as the lack of negativity or minority stressors (such as misgendering), rather than the presence of positivity. When peers are supportive and environments meet their needs, TGE people can thrive (Kinney, 2021). Hence, social work programs must address harms and amplify TGE support.

Building upon the previous identification of harmful discourse towards LGBTQ individuals in social work education (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019), this study points to the need for TGE knowledgeable and comfortable faculty, staff, administration, and practicum supervisors who can educate and advocate when necessary. Further, the findings help fill in the ways social work programs can create gender affirmation in their curriculum, interpersonal interactions, systems, and culture. As stressed throughout these findings, improvements for gender-affirmation are best when TGE folk are involved, this is particularly true when creating new policies and assessing existing policies for gender affirmation and inclusion

(Kinney et al., 2022). Lastly, both the literature and this study have established a call for improved formal policies and protocols, such as CSWE accreditation and CSWE data collection and reporting on students and faculty.

Limitations

Key limitations of the study include sampling and analysis. Due to collecting original data within the special issue time frame, recruitment was completed through known networks and for a brief duration. This approach limited the diversity of the sample, which reflected a White majority and only two transfeminine participants. In addition to not representing racial and gender diversity, it also limited the discussion about nuanced intersectional experiences. Similarly, the sample reflected a relatively small number of universities in eleven states (see Figure 1). Additionally, the timeline for analysis was fast and only the first two authors completed the analysis. This approach limited the interpretive diversity that would have been present had the entire research team been involved in analysis. Moreover, this study offers an exploration of participants' experiences and the meaning they assign to such experiences. While rich and nuanced, this analysis is subjective by nature and design.

Conclusion

The literature has shown that TGE academics and students experience discrimination and erasure in higher education, which is also represented within social work programs. This study explored gender-affirming and disaffirming experiences of TGE faculty and students and identified recommendations for creating more gender-affirming educational experiences. Many TGE academics and students pursue social work education with an expectation of reprieve from daily microaggressions due to the central value of social justice, but these ideals sometimes did not reflect their experience. The challenges faced by participants speak to the necessity for greater intentional and proactive efforts for TGE affirmation in social work programs and universities.

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