

Transgressing Gender Norms in Addiction Treatment

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Abstract : At the center of emerging policy debates on the rights of transgender individuals in public accommodations is the collision of gender binary views with transgender perspectives that challenge conventional gender norms. The results of such socio-political debates could have significant ramifications for the policies and infrastructures of public and private institutions nationwide, including within the addiction treatment field. Despite having disproportionately high rates of substance use disorder compared to the general population, transgender individuals experience significant barriers to engaging in addiction treatment programs. Inpatient addiction treatment centers were originally designed to treat heterosexual cisgender populations and, as such, feature gender segregated housing, bathrooms, and counseling sessions. Such heteronormative structural barriers, combined with exposures to stigmatizing attitudes, may dissuade transgender populations from benefiting from the addiction treatment they so direly need. A literature review is performed to explore the mechanisms by which gender segregation alienates transgender populations within inpatient addiction treatment. The constituent parts of the current debate on the rights of transgender individuals in public accommodations are situated in the context of inpatient addiction treatment facilities. Minority Stress Theory is used as a theoretical framework for understanding substance abuse issues among transgender populations as a maladaptive behavioral response for coping with chronic stressors related to gender minority status and intersecting identities. The findings include that despite having disproportionately high rates of substance use disorder compared to the general population, transgender individuals experience significant barriers to engaging in and benefiting from addiction treatment. These barriers are present in the form of anticipated or real interpersonal stigma and discrimination by service providers and structural stigma in the form of policy and programmatic components in addiction treatment that marginalize transgender populations. Transphobic manifestations within addiction treatment may dissuade transgender individuals from seeking help, if not reinforce a lifetime of stigmatizing experience, potentially exacerbating their substance use issues. Conclusive recommendations for social workers and addiction treatment professionals include: (1) dismantling institutional policies around gender segregation that alienate transgender individuals, (2) developing policies that provide full protections for transgender clients against discrimination based on their gender identity, and (3) implementing trans-affirmative cultural competency training requirements for all staff. Directions for future research are provided.

Keywords : addiction treatment, gender segregation, stigma, transgender

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