Understanding Practice Issues with

Transgender People:

Listening to Practitioner and

Client Voices

Stephen L. Rassi, LMSW, MA, PhD
Full-time Lecturer
University of Michigan-Flint
Department of Social Work
Room 454 French Hall
Flint, MI 48502
mercury@umflint.edu
(734) 945-9100
Working Title: **Understanding Practice Issues with Transgender People: Listening to Practitioner and Client Voices**

**Rationale:**
In one of the seminal works concerning counseling bias due to practitioner lack of cultural proficiency, it was proposed that in order for counselors to work effectively with clients who were from cultures other than their own, a sense of their own, and others’ cultures must be cultivated (Wrenn, 1962). It was later posited that single-course methods of multicultural training achieved only basic practitioner competence, or “cultural sensitivity” (Quintana & Bernal, 1995). In this study, the use of a training assessment continuum (Bernal & Castro, 1994) was rejected, and it was asserted that “culturally proficient,” rather than “culturally sensitive” levels of training must be achieved, using empirical knowledge rather than anecdotal evidence regarding a client’s culture (Quintana & Bernal, 1995).

More recently, it has been shown that cultural proficiency is related to practitioner ability to ask culturally sensitive questions in such a way as to determine the relevance and importance of the cultural trends of the client’s own culture for the counseling process: the skill of culturally educated questioning (Walls, Roll, Sprague, & Griffin, 2010). Based on this research, Walls and Nicotera have subsequently developed a unique technique for training social work practitioners, their Culturally Educated Questioning training, which employs discrete modules for use in training practitioners for work with clients. Each module is based on empirical evidence regarding cultural trends for a specific population.

While empirical evidence regarding trends for most demographic cultural groups was readily available in the scholarly literature, there was scant evidence regarding trends for Native Americans or for transgender people. Walls and Nicotera therefore worked with a scholar who had expertise regarding Native American culture to publish an article on trends for Native American people as they relate to counseling (Nicotera, Walls, & Lucero, 2010) and used the empirical evidence from this article as the basis for the Native American module for their training program.

This proposal is to conduct research into trends for transgender people, and to prepare a publishable scholarly article based on the results. While this is the entire proposal, the intention is that once an article has been published, it will then serve as the basis for creation of the transgender module for Walls and Nicotera’s Culturally Educated Questioning training program.

**LGBT Equality Orientation:**
The proposed research will address the lack of literature on social work practice issues when working with transgender clients, by questioning practitioners from a number of fields about the issues and concerns that are presented by transgender clients, and current trends for this population that may impact practice. In addition, transgender clients who have engaged with practitioners for counseling services will also be asked to identify issues and concerns with the counseling process, related to their transgender identities, and to reflect on current trends for transgender people.

The themes gleaned from the proposed focus group sessions (one group comprised of practitioners who have experience working with transgender clients, and the other group comprised of transgender clients) will be submitted for publication, to begin the process of documenting trends for transgender people, in the scholarly literature.

Once an article on trends for transgender people has been published in the scholarly literature, the plan is that with Nicotera, a transgender module will be created, to be added to Walls and Nicotera’s Culturally Educated Questioning training program for social work students. Originally this training technique for teaching students to ask culturally educated questions of their clients included modules for work with Latino/a, African American, and Asian American clients, and for work with clients who identify as gay men or as lesbians. There was not enough research in the literature to create the
modules for work with Native American or transgender clients. Subsequently Walls and Nicotera worked with Lucero to create the Native American training module. Once there is adequate scholarly literature available on trends for transgender clients, the transgender training module can be completed.

It is essential that social workers who do interpersonal or generalist practice with transgender clients be able to refer to scholarly research on trends for transgender clients, rather than using anecdotal information or stereotypes to inform them about trends for this population.

**Benefits:**

It is anticipated that conclusion of the proposed research will result in a publishable scholarly research article on trend for transgender clients of social work practitioners, and that the article produced will be submitted for publication, and successfully published. This will begin the process of scientifically documenting trends for transgender clients in the literature, and will begin to fill a gap in social work scholarly knowledge that currently disadvantages transgender people who are in need of services.

A future benefit will be the eventual completion of the transgender training module, to be added to the other modules in Walls and Nicotera’s Culturally Educated Questioning training program for social work students. This training technique, including the module that is directly applicable to work with transgender clients, will then be available for use in training current and future social workers to more successfully engage with transgender clients, fostering better outcomes for these clients overall.

It is further anticipated that once the transgender training module has been created and added to the Culturally Educated Training materials, it may then be proposed that this technique may be added to online repositories for best-practice social work teaching methods and materials, such as the one that is hosted by NASW (National Association of Social Workers) thus making this technique available to a wider group of social workers, for use to improve their skills for interviewing and working with transgender clients, worldwide.

It must be pointed out that the proposed research is to complete a publishable article within a one-year time frame; the additional benefits listed here are probable and possible outcomes that could stem from the proposed research over a longer period of time.

**Proposed Method(s):**

Since little research has been conducted about social work practice with transgender clients, it will be necessary to conduct a qualitative, exploratory investigation of issues, concerns, and trends that impact such work. Utilization of focus groups will allow for respondents to interact with others during the group discussion, adding to, and elaborating upon their initial responses.

It is proposed that two focus groups, each comprised of 7 to 10 members, will be conducted, in late spring/early summer of 2014. Participants will include adults ranging in age, gender, ethnicity, dis/abilities, etc. One group is to be comprised of social workers, counselors, and psychologists from across the State of Michigan, who are known either in practitioner communities or in transgender communities, to have extensive experience and expertise in counseling transgender clients. The second group is to be comprised of transgender people who may or may not have experience engaging with social workers, counselors, or psychologists for counseling. Transgender people from many places on the transgender spectrum will be included in the client focus group, to ensure that themes reflect the breadth of trends that co-occur simultaneously at the current time.

Subjects will be recruited through existing networks of mental health professionals, and through support groups and community centers for transgender people. Recruitment will occur through snowball sampling that will begin with the principal investigator contacting members of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Health Equity Council of Southeastern Michigan, and contacts at the
Affirmations LGBT Community Center, for subject referrals. These focus groups will be conducted either in a central location (at the NASW office in Lansing, Michigan) or at a large LGBT community center in Michigan, or one group in each setting, so that the participants are at ease with regard to distance traveled, and knowing that they are in a safe location, where they can fully express themselves.

**Procedures**

Potential subjects will receive an invitation to participate in the study via email or telephone call at which time they will be informed of the purpose of the study, expectation and time commitment for subjects, name of referring person, and compensation details.

Information regarding culturally-educated questioning will be provided to each subject who agrees to participate prior to the actual focus group meeting so that they have a foundational understanding of the conceptualization. Additionally the focus group protocol (including questions) will be provided prior to focus group meeting.

Upon convening of focus group, principal investigators will provide an overview of the project, and informed consent for participation, including limits of confidentiality. Participants who agree to continue participation will be requested to complete the project’s informed consent forms and be given a copy to keep.

Next, the principal investigators will review the theoretical foundation of culturally educated questioning and the use of the approach in multicultural counselor skills building. Participants will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the theory, technique, and article previously read.

Focus group members will then respond to the following protocol. While mental health practitioners adhere to strong ethics of confidentiality, principal investigators will remind participants not to use identifying information about clients during the focus group process. Subjects will be reminded of principles of focus group participation (e.g., the activity is for brainstorming as many ideas as possible without judging responses; level of participation is dependent on individual comfort level; not taking others’ responses personally; and, not coercing others into speaking).

a. What kind of cultural trends and patterns have you identified from your experience as a member or from working with members of the transgender population?

b. What are the kinds of things you do (or others could do) to assess if these cultural trends and patterns influence a client’s presenting problem(s) or functioning?

c. If we translated the kinds of things you or others do to assess the influence of these cultural trends and patterns on clients’ lives into culturally educated questions, what are the questions we would ask?

d. If we used these culturally educated questions, what responses would you expect from clients, and how would you interpret those responses?

e. What other cultural influences would influence the responses you would expect, and how would they nuance your interpretation?

Focus groups will terminate with a debriefing of the activity and an explanation of the upcoming member checking process whereby focus group members will receive a summary of focus group findings to insure that what has been captured reflects their input. Incentives for focus group participation will be distributed.

Approximately 2 weeks to one month after focus group has been convened, focus group members will receive a summary of focus group findings by their preferred method (email, mail, delivery) including a self-addressed stamped envelope in which they may return any comments or corrections to the principal investigators.

ATLAS-ti will be used to identify themes, and to group quotes into corresponding themes. The themes, along with corresponding quotes, will be provided to all participants for member checking, to
create reworked definitions, to create new categories. Inter-rater reliability checks will be performed throughout the process.

**Potential Impact:**

The immediate impact of the publishable article that is proposed as an outcome of conducting this research, is anticipated to be greater than normally expected, due to the gap in the scholarly literature on trends for transgender clients. This severe lack of information bodes well for the prospects of getting the article published. In addition, due to the dearth of research in this area, this could become a seminal article for further research on transgender people, and on clinical and/or generalist practice with individuals from this population.

The future impact is much greater, in practical terms, than that which would usually be associated with the publication of one research article. If the proposed research is used to create the transgender module for Walls and Nicotera’s Culturally Educated Questioning training technique, and especially if this technique is made available on international websites, such as the NASW site, as a best-practice training technique for social workers who will be doing interpersonal or generalist practice with transgender clients, then the impact will be broadened significantly, and to some degree, social work services for transgender people could become more sensitive to their issues and concerns across the board.

**Human Subjects or Internal Review Board Processes Description:**

An IRB application, along with a proposed focus group recruitment letter, and a focus group protocol of questions has been submitted to the appropriate IRB at Eastern Michigan University, to request IRB approval for conducting this research in late spring/early summer of 2014.


