

4-22-2019

# Building an Affirmative Counseling Practice for the Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Communities

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## Abstract

Mental health care has become increasingly important in our society in recent years, especially in the transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) communities. 40% of transgender adults have attempted suicide during their lifetime and 75% of TGNC youth feel unsafe at school. Rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, and poverty are also higher in this population. Mental health counselors must build an affirmative practice before counseling individuals in the LGBTQ+ community. The presenter is earning a masters degree in counseling and has extensively studied the mental health issues and needs of this population during her education in order to provide competent services.

## Background

Transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals are individuals whose biological sex assigned to them at birth does not align with their gender identities (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2010). In the U.S., TGNC individuals often face discrimination and oppression throughout many aspects of society. As a result, individuals in this population are at higher risk of mental and physical health issues.

- **50%-80% of TGNC individuals report having experienced discrimination, victimization, violence, harassment, sexual assault, and implicit biases in counseling sessions** (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016).
- **67% of LGBTQ homicide victims are transgender women of color** (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016).
- **The lifetime prevalence of depression in the TGNC community may be as high as 50%-67%** (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016).
- **Transgender individuals are twice as likely to be unemployed, with 90% reporting either being harassed or mistreated at work** (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016).

“Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another.”  
— Alfred Adler

## Literature Review

The literature supporting building an affirmative counseling practice for the TGNC communities focuses on two key areas. First, the hesitation coming from TGNC individuals when seeking counseling. Often, many TGNC individuals have difficulties finding affirmative counseling services or are apprehensive in seeking counseling due to past experiences. This is harmful considering the higher rates of mental health issues among this population. Even in a counseling setting, there are instances of harassment, discrimination, and violence. According to McCullough et al. (2017), TGNC individuals have four main areas of concern when seeking counseling services: (a) Mental Health Practitioner selection process, (b) transaffirmative approach, (c) transnegative approach, and (d) support systems beyond mental health services. Many TGNC individuals seek counseling from professionals that seem more likely to be understanding of their identity (i.e., counselors who identify as LGBT+). Whether or not a counselor understands TGNC experiences, is supportive, and competent in counseling TGNC individuals is also a big concern. Additionally, saving support systems available such as religious or community organizations to supplement mental health services is essential.

Second, it is imperative that mental health professionals are competent in counseling TGNC clients. By having transaffirmative counselors and agencies, many of the apprehensions when it comes to seeking counseling services can be eliminated. Burgess et al. (2007) discusses the importance of developing the competencies essential to building a transaffirmative practice. Being a competent counselor not only makes TGNC clients feel supported, but the quality of care that is received is also higher. This is vital for a population that experiences mental health disparities at such a high rate. The ACA (2010) lists almost one hundred individual competencies for counselors wanting to work with the TGNC communities.

## Idaho

According to the ACA (2010), less than 30% of psychologists report being familiar with TGNC clients' needs. In many conservative states, such as Idaho, that number can be even lower. At the time of this presentation, the Idaho Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (IALGBTIC) lists only ten licensed and practicing counselors who have completed the IALGBTIC Safe Space Training, one important step in becoming a transaffirmative counselor. Of those counselors in the state that are competent in serving this population, many have full client loads and are unable to take on new clients. This leaves many individuals without the mental health care that is vital for their livelihood. Having more transaffirmative and competent counselors in the state of Idaho would allow more individuals in the TGNC communities to receive the care they need.

## Presenter's Efforts

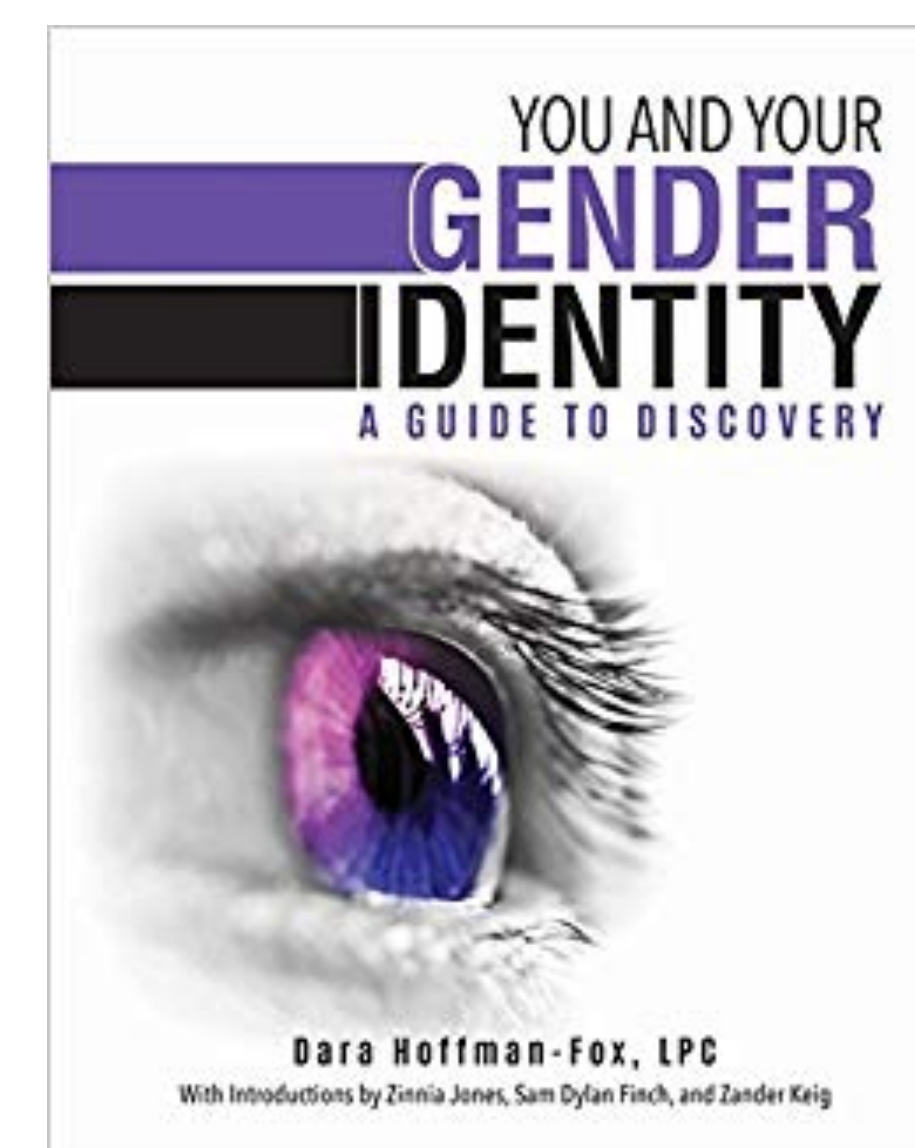
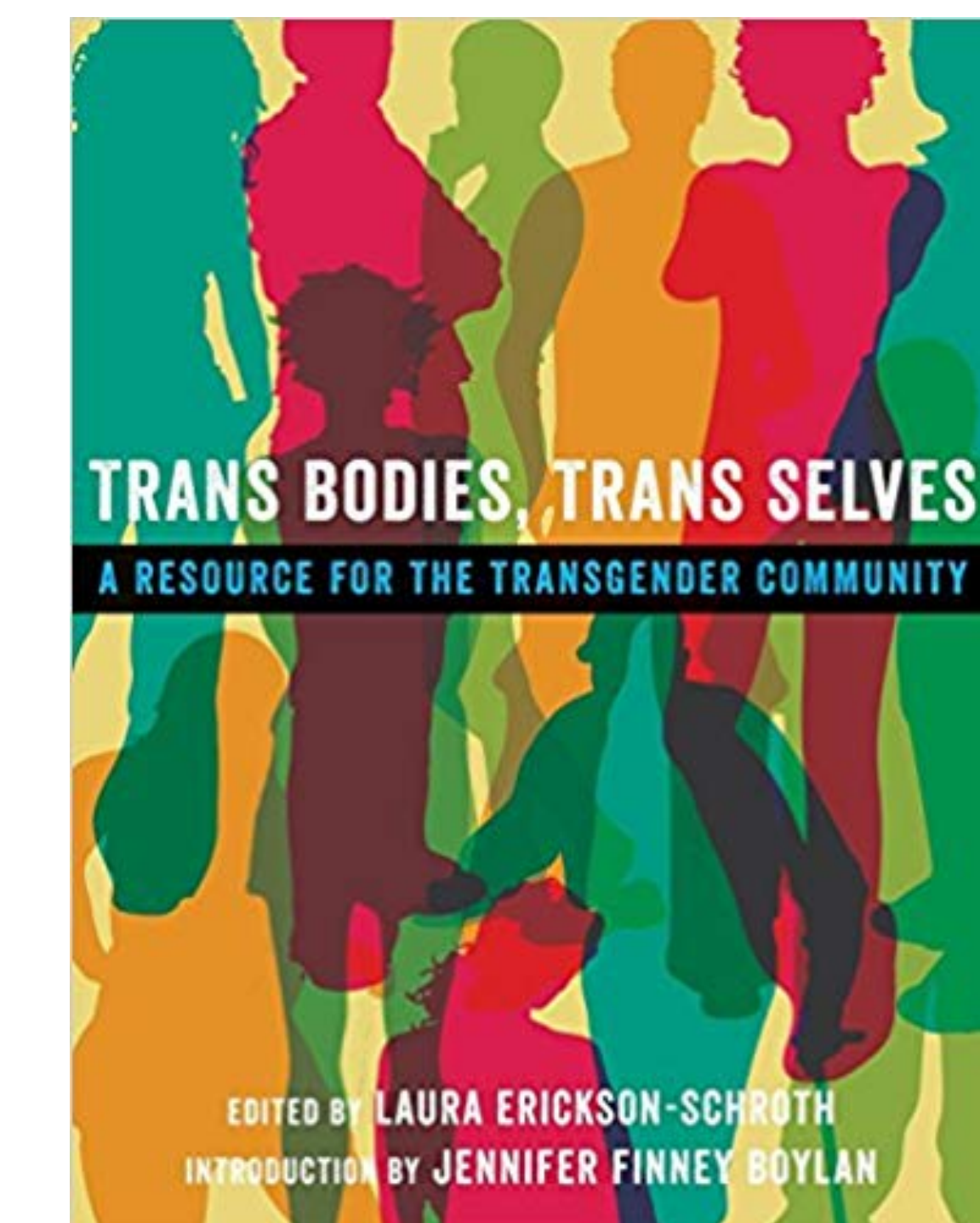
The presenter has studied extensively about the unique needs of the TGNC populations throughout her time in the Masters of Counselor Education Program. She has attended several trainings outside of the required course load of her program and plans to attend the Gender Odyssey Conference in San Diego in August.



## Resources

### Further Information

- GLSEN – Gay, Lesbian & Straight Educator Network: [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)
- Safe Schools Coalition Idaho: [www.safeschoolscoalitionidaho.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalitionidaho.org)
- Gender Spectrum: [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)
- Idaho Association of LGBT Issues in Counseling: [www.IALGBTIC.org](http://www.IALGBTIC.org)
- Gender Odyssey Conference: <http://www.genderodyssey.org>
- *You and Your Gender Identity — A Guide to Discovery* by Dara Hoffman-Fox, LPC
- *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves — A Resource for the Transgender Community* by Laura Erickson-Schroth



Hotline for Trans Lifeline  
1-877-565-8860