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Project: *System change: creating structural safety for gender diverse people accessing mental health services in Alberta*

Background

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the ways power via the institutional norms and practices affecting trans and gender diverse people operates in the mental health system of Alberta.

Hypothesis: While individual mental health professionals may work with trans and gender diverse people in supportive and empowering ways, the context in which this work occurs is governed by unexamined institutional norms and practices that impact the overall experiences for trans and gender diverse people accessing these services in Alberta.

Justification: Alberta has a significant history of sorting fit, healthy, and desirable citizens from the unfit, defective, and undesirable (Malacrida, 2015). One of the biopolitical tools used to influence the governing of both individuals and collective identities and embodiments is the norm. While we no longer have the infamous Alberta Eugenics Board, other institutions have stepped into its legacy, using norms to shape

society to white, heterosexual, cisgender, christian, economically contributing, able-bodied identities, standards, and behaviours.

The mental health system is one such institution; anyone not reflecting the above-mentioned identities, standards, and behaviours has a high chance of being psychopathologized (a process in which the social is brought into the realm of psychopathology) (Inch, 2016). This psychopathologization is discriminatory, as it centres certain identities, standards, binaries, and behaviours as the only acceptable way of being. It can also mean that not being able to reflect these norms leads to reduced access to needed services. This discrimination has implications for the mental health of the individuals and communities who cannot or will not meet the embodiments, standards, and behaviours needed to be 'healthy'. In this way, norms contribute to the individualization of structural oppression. Trans and gender diverse people seeking mental health support and/or mental health assessment for medical transition are required to conform to the norms and narratives expected of them by the system (Sharman, 2016). Whether or not this is achieved by the individual, this requirement leads to experiences of invalidation (Spade, 2003), othering (Namaste 2000), psychopathologization (Sennott, 2011), and even trauma in a place that is ostensibly intended to support mental well-being.

It is critical to challenge these norms in the mental health system, as they continue to reflect western colonial, racist, homophobic, cisnormative, and transphobic histories. There are numerous occasions in the recent past where challenging norms can lead to positive change. It is time for this shift to happen in Alberta.

Objectives: a) to trouble, theorize and give meaning to the institutional norms and practices that shape interactions with mental health services for trans and gender diverse Albertans, b) to understand how mental health practitioners situate themselves in relation to the institutional norms practices of the mental health system, c) to create knowledge of ways these norms and practices are being troubled and resisted, and d) to mobilize this knowledge in ways useful to trans and gender diverse communities and mental health service providers.