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## The Experiences of Trans\* Students in Residential Life

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## The Experiences of Trans\* Students in Residential Life

Lydea Rowell

In this paper I explore the experiences of trans\* students in their residential life settings. I first identified three areas of discrimination and discomfort for trans\* students, including the housing selection process, the relationships they have with roommates and residential life staff, and the residential hall community. Subsequently, I provided implications for making the housing experience better for trans\* communities. Recommendations include gender-inclusive housing, training, and education for staff, trans\*-affirming administrative policies, LGBTQ+ living-learning communities, and programming.

*Keywords:* trans\*, residential life, housing, bathrooms, dead names, pronouns, gender inclusive housing, trans-affirming, policies

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## **The Experiences of Trans\* Students in Residential Life**

“Housing is not a luxury; it is a basic human right, and on a college or university campus it has the potential to be more” (Wagner et al., 2018, p. 38). Trans\* students do feel that having a comfortable living situation is a luxury. Trans\* students experience discrimination and discomfort in the residential setting specifically in the areas of the housing selection process, their roommate assignments, and interactions with said roommates and housing professionals, and in the residential hall community and amenities. The trans\* community has been underserved in institutional and residential life settings. Therefore, it is crucial to explore ways for residential life staff to enable trans\* students to not just survive their college years but to thrive in them. Institutional leaders need to review the current policies and practices that support trans\* inclusion and find ways to meet the wants and needs of trans\* students (Wagner, Marine, & Nicolazzo, 2018).

In this paper I will use the abbreviation trans\* to represent individuals who identify under the transgender or transsexual umbrella and represent a wide variety of gender identities, appearances, and behaviors that blur or cross gender lines (Sausa, 2005; Singh et al., 2013; Marine & Catalano, 2014; Torres & McGowan, 2017). Principally, trans\* individuals reject their assigned gender at birth. While some trans\* individuals identify as men or women, others are gender-fluid and nonbinary (Beemyn et al., 2005; Singh et al., 2013). It is important to note that gender identity and expression are always evolving, and individuals can use any terminology they choose regarding their own gender identity even if it does not align with society’s definitions (Nicolazzo, 2016).

Too often, trans\* students are grouped in with those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) but gender identity and sexual orientation are two distinct categories of self-identification therefore their needs and experiences are vastly different (Renn, 2010; Pryor, 2016). Trans\* students often have their needs and experiences neglected due to being grouped with the LGB community. When educational settings make an effort to better support and include the LGB community they assume trans\* students are also receiving those benefits. Torres and McGowan (2017) describe it best when writing, “Given institutional barriers and challenges facing trans\* students, understanding the appropriate terminology coupled with adopting policies, procedures, and practices that are inclusive of individuals of all gender identities and expressions are paramount” (p. 197). To be clear, sexual orientation is one’s romantic or sexual feelings towards men, women, both, or inside or outside of those categories (Savin-Williams, 2005) while gender identity is an individual’s way of defining themselves as being a man, woman, or an identity between or outside of man or woman (Wilchins, 2002; Nagoshi, 2012).

### **Queer Theory**

In this paper I recognize and utilize concepts from queer theory. Hernandez (2017) explains queer theory as, “challenging the notion that developmental processes are universal, or in other words, that everyone follows the same general developmental pathway regardless of lived experiences, context, or identities” (p. 210). The goal is to acknowledge that individuals embody their identities differently and no two or more people who have a shared identity also have shared experiences (Hernandez, 2017). Queer theory fights the assumption that cisgender, heterosexual individuals are the norm and instead

argues that there is no norm. Additionally, queer theory is intentional not to essentialize one community's experiences as a common denominator. An example of this was mentioned previously when discussing that trans\* students' needs are not met with an institution's solutions for the LGB community. Nicolazzo (2016) deconstructs gender norms and shows how similar presenting identities can have extremely unique needs. The idea is that a cisgender man may present similarly to a trans\* man, but they hold separate identities and experiences that shape their individual and community needs.

By utilizing queer theory, in this paper I explore the umbrella of trans\* students and their experiences in various aspects of residential life in an institution. When exploring recommendations for institutions, queer theory will play a role in ensuring that a "one size fits all" approach is not being enacted and creative solutions are being considered. The following information will challenge the norms that are currently in place and acknowledge that identity is ever-changing and developing (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hernandez, 2017). Utilizing queer theory creates a stronger narrative of trans\* students' experiences by utilizing multiple perspectives.

### **Trans\* Student Narratives**

Trans\* students are often put into uncomfortable and unfair situations in their university housing. One transgender student, Kourt Osborn, who attended Southern Utah University was denied both housing for men and women (Pomerantz, 2010). Kourt identifies as a man and therefore requested the university to be able to live in male housing. Kourt was required to have physician supervision of hormone treatment, therapist acknowledgment of their gender identity disorder, and official documentation of sexual reassignment surgery. All these items needed to be present to receive male housing, but Kourt had already been denied female housing. The dean, and assistant to the president, of the university responded to a formal grievance filed by Kourt stating that the "school was not discriminating against transgender students, but following a policy that aims to ensure that all students feel safe and comfortable in on-campus housing" (Pomerantz, 2010, p. 1215). University policies and procedures must be reviewed and updated for such reasons.

Another instance of trans\* marginalization in the residential setting was experienced by a trans\* male named Alex (Pryor et al., 2016). Alex began his transition after already living on campus with a female roommate. He and his roommate had a good relationship, but the roommate's parents were not comfortable letting their daughter room with a man. The university did not give Alex many choices moving forward and allowed him to either live alone or find his own roommate. Alex chose to live alone. A typical solution that universities enact is to give the trans\* student a room to themselves. By doing this, housing professionals become the ones contributing to the marginalization of transgender students. Additionally, they strip these students of the "traditional" college experience. There are numerous stories just like Kourt and Alex's where trans\* students are the ones making sacrifices, suffering, or compromising their identity to survive through the residential experience at college. One of the main aspects of residential life that fails to accommodate the needs of the trans\* community is the current housing policies and the housing selection process.

### **Policies and the Housing Selection Process**

Most universities use gender-based policies in their residential life processes. This forces trans\* students into gendered room assignments based on their biological sex rather than their gender identity (Greytak et al., 2009; Pomerantz, 2010). While sex-segregated housing should remain an option for those who seek it, universities need to consider gender-based or non-binary housing to support the population of students who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth.

These roommate pairings primarily present an issue for incoming students as they are randomly assigned a roommate from the university. Oftentimes, the university uses the sex students indicated on their application, but many factors may present this as an issue. Students may indicate their sex identified at birth on their application because although they identify as another gender, they have no proof. Another situation students face is their parents not knowing about their gender identity different from their sex assigned at birth and the student does not want them to find out, in addition to many other reasons. If universities make roommate pairings based on the sex identified on a student's application, they should be transparent in that process during their visit days, on the application, at orientation, and any other time applicable.

To better pair random roommates, universities should add a non-binary gender question to allow students to self-identify outside of male and female categories (Pomerantz, 2010). Additionally, students identifying outside of their sex assigned at birth should not be required to provide official documentation to prove their gender identity whether that be through therapy, surgery, or any other means.

Another important dynamic to consider when supporting the trans\* community is their interactions with others involved in these processes such as their roommates and the housing professionals. Universities are often juggling the rights of trans\* students while still respecting the rights of others. Although the university might want to accommodate a trans\* student's request to house with the gender they identify with, they also must consider the rights, safety, and comfort of non-trans\* students (Pomerantz, 2010). This can result in a lot of tough decisions and misunderstandings. Housing staff and campus administrators too often show a fundamental lack of support and awareness of trans\* students and trans\* issues. Housing professionals' resort to allowing or forcing trans\* students to live alone as a convenient solution for them (Pryor, 2016).

### **Student and Staff Comfortability**

It is no secret that college roommates often do not get along and complain about one another. However, introducing a trans\* student into the situation can add a layer of complexity due to the unfamiliarity and discomfort with gender non-conforming behavior (Pomerantz, 2010). Concerns arise when students are uncomfortable in their assigned room. Both trans\* and non-trans\* students have concerns about their right to privacy. Pomerantz (2010) outlines concerns that may arise within room arrangements such as modesty concerns and privacy in bathroom access. Modesty concerns are concerns of privacy related to one's physical naked body. When a cis-male or female house with a trans\* student who identifies as the same gender as their roommate but assigned the opposite sex at birth, the non-trans\* students may argue that they are uncomfortable. The student can argue that the living

arrangement violates their privacy interest of keeping their body secluded from a sex differing from their own (Pomerantz, 2010). By having same-sex roommates, their individual privacy claims are protected.

Mix-gendered roommates who are not in favor of the living situation tend to communicate less or not at all with their trans\* roommate and discrimination is more common (Pryor et al., 2016). On the other hand, when individuals are engaged in their roommate selection, the mixed roommate group is more likely to have a positive relationship. Students argue that it would be better to be able to pick a roommate regardless of their gender (Singh et al., 2013). Trans\* students tend to prefer apartment-style housing or self-contained singles. This is because each roommate will have a private bedroom and sharing a bathroom with a select few ensures their privacy (Pryor, 2016). As previously mentioned, a typical approach to make all students feel comfortable is to give trans\* students their own room with no roommates at all. An interesting argument that Pomerantz (2010) presents is that some students are not comfortable living with their roommates for many varied reasons relating to race, religion, and sexuality. But universities do not accommodate these prejudices, and part of the college experience is to live and interact with all kinds of people. With more education and exposure, universities can help fight ignorance about issues affecting their trans\* population (Pomerantz, 2010).

Trans\* students who are put into housing alone have reported feeling safer, but also feeling lonely and rejected (Pryor et al., 2016). Universities are at fault for these feelings of rejection for segregating trans\* individuals into living arrangements that are out of sight of other students (Bilodeau, 2009; Pomerantz, 2010; Yep, 2003; Yoshino, 2006). Housing professionals may think that providing a room to trans\* students where they can live alone is helping them, but it can create more challenges for them (Pryor et al., 2016). Trans\* students are typically forced to pay more for these single occupancy spaces since they are created to accommodate two or more people. Moreover, while this additional cost is waived for medical necessities, gender identity does not qualify for this cost reduction (Pomerantz, 2010). Additionally, housing professionals perpetuate and normalize the discrimination of trans\* students by removing them from their living situation and placing them elsewhere (Pryor et al., 2016).

### **Dormitory Community and Environment**

An additional aspect universities should be giving their attention to is the residential hall community and its safety and inclusivity. Residential life professionals and their student workers must create an inclusive community not only for trans\* students but for all students. Residential life rosters and door decorations should not be using dead names, bulletin boards need to be inclusive and show no discrimination, programming should aim to bring communities together and educate, and gender-neutral bathrooms and showers should be accessible (Singh et al., 2013).

Trans\* students are aware that residential life staff and their universities do not adequately support their community, and because of this gender performance, masking, and genderism become especially paramount (Pryor, 2016; Griffin, 2017). Trans\* students often go out of their way to communicate to professionals to address them with trans\*-affirming language which are the pronouns and titles that they prefer to use (Singh et al., 2013). While this should be customary practice for professionals, students would rather be sure that their dead names or incorrect pronouns are not used in a public setting.

Additionally, many students express that residential life programming on LGBTQ+ identities are limited, even on social justice-themed floors (Wagner et al., 2018). The extent of discussing this topic with their community members ends with their sharing of pronouns in the first week. Significantly, students should be educated on trans\* concerns and gender identity to foster a more trans\*-affirming community (Singh et al., 2013).

Lastly, bathroom access for trans\* students are a frequent cause of tension in the dormitories (Pomerantz, 2010). Pryor (2016) states, “Few institutions have trans\*-inclusive nondiscrimination policies and even fewer have transgender or gender-nonconforming accessible bathrooms, locker rooms, or residence halls” (Pryor & Hart, 2016, p.45; Beemyn, 2013). Trans\* students are forced to schedule their use of the bathrooms and showers to the times of day when it is least used. If this is what the students are focusing on, they are not able to be fully present in their classes or anything else they might be involved in.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

It is undeniable that the trans\* community suffers in their residential experiences, among others. Universities and their residential life professionals must take the necessary steps to improve their policies and practices. One step they could take to create comfortable living situations for all students is to implement gender-inclusive housing (GIH). GIH has been indicated as a best practice for supporting trans\* students (Pomerantz, 2010; Pryor, 2016; Wagner et al., 2018). GIH should be available to all residential students no matter their year. It should also be a different option than an LGBTQ-themed floor and should be offered in various dormitories instead of just one area. This option of housing should be open to students of all identities and not just trans\* students. This way students can still meet different people and have that “traditional” college experience, but everyone in the situation had consented to these living conditions. Lastly, these floors must offer gender-inclusive bathrooms.

The GIH approach, like any solution, has its pros and cons. With GIH being presented to all students, it does not always center the trans\* and non-binary community. Many cisgender participants of GIH utilized this option to live with their heterosexual partners (Wagner et al., 2018). Not only does this take away from the trans\* community but it also causes cisgender students to dominate the housing presence in these GIH areas. On the other hand, GIH can be a major benefit for the trans\* community by allowing them to self-identify for housing purposes without needing to provide documentation (Pomerantz, 2010).

To combat the issues of cisgender individuals dominating GIH, some universities have taken an approach to discussing individual housing needs with each applicant (Pomerantz, 2010; Pryor, 2016). Students are interviewed by housing professionals and a case-by-case approach is taken, allowing the university to determine if the need for GIH is necessary. For this to work housing and campus policies must reflect inclusive practices to work with trans\* populations (Pryor, 2016). Universities must ensure to make GIH available, affordable, and plentiful for trans\* students to utilize (Wagner et al., 2018).

No one policy or practice can accommodate all students on campuses, but residential life staff needs to seek ways to allow trans\* students to feel safe, included, and welcome in the residential halls

(Pryor, 2016). All staff who work with residential students should be intentionally prepared to work with and serve gender-diverse students (Wagner et al., 2018). It would be especially impactful if staff beyond residential life members such as facilities, custodial, and any office staff received training to address gender identity and gender justice.

One way to address the needs of trans\* students is to cultivate trans\*-affirming policies that are inclusive of gender-nonconforming students (Beemyn, 2003; Singh et al., 2013). One policy should be the requirement of training on gender diversity and trans\*-affirming topics and language. Residential staff members are not always given the appropriate training to interact with these students, even staff tasked with working directly in gender-inclusive housing spaces (Wagner et al., 2018). Residential life staff should respect trans\*-affirming language such as names, pronouns, and titles when addressing students (Singh et al., 2013). One student expressed that they cannot imagine receiving anything but the bare minimum from their university staff, “the basics of names and pronouns would be nice. It is kind of hard to think about this topic, because there are so many basics that aren’t being met that it’s hard to think of getting something above and beyond the basics” (Singh et al., 2013, p. 215). It would also be beneficial for residential student staff to receive training and expectations around what they should be doing to support their trans\* residents. One way residential student staff can foster a healthy living arrangement between trans\* and non-trans\* students are by sitting with them to create a formal roommate agreement (Pomerantz, 2010). Creating a roommate agreement can be uncomfortable regardless of who the roommates are but an added layer can be created when the roommates have different gender identities. By having a residential staff support students through this process, they can help foster a relationship and boundaries between the roommates (Pomerantz, 2010). If roommates cannot make the living arrangement work, it is important to trust the individualized judgments of the residential staff members to make a placement decision for the trans\* student.

Increasingly, trans\* students are coming out in higher education spaces (Marine, 2011). As that number grows universities must provide opportunities for trans\* students to find other trans\* community members (Evans et al., 2010; Pryor, 2016). Some ways universities can create these opportunities is through themed living communities and programming. One practice becoming more prevalent on campus is lavender or LGBTQ+ living-learning communities. A living-learning community allows a group of residents who share an identity to live all together on a shared floor, dormitory, or house (Pomerantz, 2010). It is becoming more common in universities to create lavender housing which is a form of GIH for the LGBTQ+ community. Being a part of a living-learning community allows their housing experience and programming to be more catered to their identity and community.

Additionally, campuses could provide more programming that promotes the mingling of the LGBTQ+ community (Pomerantz, 2010). Specifically, it would be beneficial to facilitate affinity spaces or programming to help trans\* and non-binary students build relationships and potentially become roommates. Not only would this create opportunities for friendships, but it would also allow students to find someone they could be comfortable living with. GIH should be available to current and incoming students, roommate groups or single applicants (Pomerantz, 2010). It would be beneficial to advertise and hold a space for incoming students before they arrive on campus to meet and find a roommate with mutual comfort to live together. It would also be helpful to facilitate a program like

this each academic year before housing selection. Lastly, universities could ask all incoming students if they are comfortable living with an LGBTQ+ student. Each university could create a database of students who consent to living with an LGBTQ+ member to easily pair random roommates (Pomerantz, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is a lot of work to be done to support the residential trans\* community on college campuses. Universities need to make the housing process and living arrangements as smooth as possible for students of all identities, especially for trans\* students (Pomerantz, 2010). Housing professionals who hold positions of power need to be reflective practitioners and identify areas that they need to learn more about (Pryor, 2016). In this case, reflecting on the knowledge one has on how to best support trans\* students but also how confident they are with trans\*-affirming language and practices. Moreover, residential life professionals should be reviewing outdated policies and practices and seeking new, more inclusive ones.

Additionally, housing applications need better choices in terms of sex, gender, and comfortability with living with different genders than one's own (Pomerantz, 2010). Students should have the option to live in GIH and not be limited to one floor or area of campus. Housing professionals should be helping students find roommates who are comfortable and welcoming to live with a trans\* student rather than requiring them to adhere to single-sex housing policies or live alone (Pomerantz, 2010; Pryor, 2016). Furthermore, residential life professionals should be taking additional steps to make the residential halls welcoming and inclusive through programming, gender-inclusive bathrooms, and trans\*-affirming language. Trans\* students deserve to feel like safe, welcoming, and inclusive housing on a college campus is a basic human right rather than a luxury.

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