

Where Do We Go? Gender Identity and Gendered Spaces in Postsecondary Institutions

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Universities and colleges play host to a number of traditionally gender segregated spaces, from restrooms to dorm rooms. Gendered public spaces can be both exclusionary and dangerous for trans and gender non-conforming persons as well as cisgender individuals whose appearance may not conform to dominant gender norms. The university, like most social institutions, is built upon a system which requires individuals to choose from identities that would seek to render them comprehensible in society within what Rosenberg terms as “the regime of a gender dichotomy” (2004, p. 45). This strict social demarcation between male and female delegitimizes trans identities, erasing trans bodies and attempted self-definition. This paper will explore how the creation and maintenance of gender segregated spaces on campus affects trans and gender non-conforming students.

Instead of endeavouring to make trans identities intelligible through inclusive and accessible spaces, many vital facilities and services impose boundaries that limit access and contribute to the erasure of gender identity. This is a known problem in both secondary and postsecondary schools, as touched upon in a wealth of scholarship with reference to restrooms. However, this issue runs much deeper than ‘bathroom bill’ and ‘right-to-pee’ headlines, as making all spaces inclusive and accessible for students of all gender identities is a vital component of creating a safe and inclusive

environment for trans and gender non-conforming individuals and challenging structural binarism and cissexism.

Restrooms: A Question of Access, Health, and Safety

Restrooms are a particularly appropriate example as they are a basic human requirement and a permanent fixture of any social institution. One of the most inveterate examples of gender bifurcation is found in the segregation and labelling of public restrooms. These facilities should be safely and easily accessible by all persons; however, they are often the site of great discomfort, fear, and danger. Traditionally, washrooms have been consistently separated on the basis of the gender binary. Scholars and activists in the field of gender identity have discussed the issue with varying terminology for decades. In 1979, Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman coined “toilet segregation,” prominent author and activist Kate Bornstein adopted Jacques Lacan’s term “urinary segregation,” scholar Jack Halberstam calls it the “bathroom problem,” and scholar Catherine Connell appropriately terms it the “bathroom question” (Connell, 2011, p. 175; Gilbert, 2009, p. 95).

University facilities can be viewed as a prime example of the “gendered architecture of exclusion,” as termed by scholar Sheila Cavanagh (2010, 32). The binary conceptions of gender are mutually defined through opposition and, through gendered spaces, they are excluded from each other. These two exclusive spaces thus lead to a rejection of all those who do not comfortably fit within the confines, thus both creating and distancing the ‘other’. As Butler teaches, the subject is constituted through the process of exclusion, therefore the trans or gender non-conforming subject is relegated to a position of abject ‘other’ (1990). While the restructuring of facilities is integral to addressing this process of ‘othering’, it must be acknowledged that this undertaking is important not only for trans and gender non-conforming students (Bilodeau, 2005; Markman,

2011). Restrooms and locker rooms can be challenging and restrictive for many students, staff, and faculty, including those who are queer, those who have disabilities or may require an assistant, and those who require a private space for health, medical, or religious reasons (Beemyn et al., 2005).

Accessing safe and gender appropriate facilities can be a challenge for many individuals within the postsecondary institution. Gender neutral washrooms remain few and far between on the majority of campuses, and if they do exist, students may be forced to run to another floor or building during classes to access an appropriate restroom. Some put off using the restroom until they have a break during which they can run to their place of residence.¹ Others try to strategically time their restroom trips to avoid interacting with others, often checking multiple restrooms to find one which is entirely empty, a procedure which is both time consuming and stressful (Connell, 2011). Many individuals who have experienced discrimination or expect to be questioned or harassed using the facilities which correspond to their identities feel that their safest option is to avoid the space altogether. On top of being uncomfortable and stress-inducing, restricting one's bodily functions can lead to health consequences. Lower urinary tract infections and other complications are often brought on by 'holding it', not to mention the effects on one's mental health and sense of self (Connell, 2011).

The fear of harassment on campus is not limited to postsecondary facilities. Trans and gender non-conforming students from grades K-12 also cite discrimination and verbal abuse when choosing or using a restroom. A Canadian study of gender diverse youth in Toronto secondary schools shows alarming rates of

¹ This option assumes mobility, and is further dependent on where one resides, and that their residence has appropriate facilities (if they reside on campus).

harassment, as 79% of students surveyed reported there to be at least one unsafe location in their school (Taylor et al., 2011). Seventy-eight percent of youth reported feeling unsafe in their schools, and 52% noted they felt unsafe in restrooms and locker rooms; 90% shared that they heard transphobic comments from their peers daily or weekly (Taylor et al., 2011). Thirty-seven percent reported physical assault because of their gender identity or expression, and levels of violence rose considerably for trans youth of colour and Aboriginal youth (Taylor et al., 2011). An American study of students from K-12 to graduate programs reported that just over one quarter of respondents had been denied access to appropriate restrooms (Grant et al., 2011). A male-identified student from a university in British Columbia expressed how "trans students and gender-non-variant folks carry a lot of anxiety about accessing washrooms because of a real fear of violence and rape" (Kane, 2015). Many students are forced to drop out of secondary or postsecondary school due to severe harassment and the threat of violence. The report *Injustice at Every Turn* cites that 68% of students forced to abandon higher education due to discrimination have attempted to commit suicide (Grant et al., 2011). Safe and accessible spaces and services play an important role for trans and gender non-conforming students in the institution.

Campus Facilities and Restrictive Residences

Restrooms are not the only gendered space on campus that is cause for concern. The structure of the institution itself reinforces binarism and delegitimizes trans and gender non-conforming bodies and identities. Professor Kristie Seelman explains the breadth of the issue in an article which explores findings from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey: "Examples of institutional features that exclude or place transgender people at risk for discrimination and harassment are the predominance of sex-

segregated bathrooms, locker rooms, and housing where transgender people regularly are denied access, harassed, and challenged about their gender identity” (2014, p. 4). These features illustrate the institutionalized binarism which regulates all aspects of campus life. Athletics facilities generally have gender specific locker rooms and showers. Aquatics facilities are often accessible to users only by way of locker rooms, which are most often gendered. Due to having segregated facilities, shower and changing areas are often communal and there are few options for privacy. The majority of residences do not offer many more choices, creating a problematic environment for trans and gender non-conforming students.

Living in residence is often considered to be a valuable and rewarding experience for first year students in particular (Enochs and Roland, 2006; Inman, 1997; Pike, Schroeder, and Berry, 1997). Residence can be an excellent choice for some individuals living on their own for the first time as it usually includes access to a meal hall or cafeteria, on-site laundry, common areas for socialization, and supervisory staff. However, this experience often varies for trans and gender non-conforming students, as residence structures are highly gendered and lack personal privacy. Some individuals do not have the opportunity to live on campus regardless of their preferences. Findings from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey show that 19% of trans youth who had attended college or university reported being prohibited from accessing gender-appropriate housing accommodations, while 5% were denied housing of any kind (2014).

Residence applications usually mirror university documentation, giving two binary gender options. In most cases, these options dictate where a student will live and with whom. Shared rooms with one or two other students are common and roommates are traditionally assigned based on gender. Some institutions segregate entire residences by gender or have gender

specific wings or floors and restrooms and shower facilities are usually gender specific. Beemyn et al. explain the anxieties many trans and gender non-conforming students face in these spaces: “A transgender student’s ability to ‘pass’ may be more difficult in a same-sex living environment, where residents are expected to conform to a particular set of gender expressions” (2005, p. 53). This worry persists in co-ed residences as well, particularly when one is assigned a roommate.

The residence system serves to further position students oppositionally, by gender and other underlying classifications such as age, race, class, and sometimes sexual orientation. While some institutions have adopted residence programs that allow students to select a ‘LGBT’ wing or floor, this option can distance students who may already be considered as the ‘other’. While this may create a safe and comfortable space for some queer identified persons, these spaces generally pose many of the same barriers to trans and gender non-conforming students as co-ed arrangements and assumes identification within the queer community.

There is scant research on the experiences of trans and gender non-conforming students in residences. Krum, Davis, and Galupo published a study in 2013 that explored the preferred housing arrangements of college-aged trans individuals, based on the dominant options available at institutions in the United States. Unsurprisingly, they found that the two preferred accommodation styles were those that did not require gender identification and had private facilities. They also found that trans identified students were significantly more likely to attend an institution which offered either single rooms or apartment-style living arrangements (Krum, David, and Galupo, 2013, p. 75). Canadian undergrad Bridget Liang is one of those students, expressing that she chose her Ontario university because of its broad availability of gender neutral single stall restrooms and the option of a private single room in residence

(Gessell, 2014). However, many trans and gender non-conforming students regard the residence option as an insurmountable obstacle and choose instead to live off-campus (Beemyn et al., 2005).

A Gendered Campus: Student Services

The final element to address when discussing the gendered structure of the postsecondary campus deals specifically with access to services. Most institutions have their own health and wellness centres, a campus doctor or nurse, counselling services, and disability services. Women's Centres and queer student groups are also a common aspect of the establishment. Aside from the gendered language and documentation students will likely encounter in these spaces, there is also the question of knowledgeable and sensitivity surrounding gender identity. Viviane Namaste explores the reality of the trans experience further, explaining, "They are required to justify their choices, describe their genitals, provide an autobiography upon demand, and educate their service providers. This framework locates transgendered people within a social relation that neither accepts nor understands the validity of transsexual bodies" (2000, p. 45). This illustrates the lives of many trans and gender non-conforming students within the postsecondary institution, showing the burden they carry while pursuing higher education alongside their peers.

Gender diverse students face challenges accessing necessary services on campus, despite studies that show trans and gender non-conforming youth are more likely to have a disability or mental health condition (Grant et al., 2011). In a sample of the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, researchers found that nearly a third of trans identified respondents reported having a disability compared to one fifth of the overall population. Statistics show that attempted suicide rates for trans youth are twenty-five times that of their cisgender peers and 41% of trans youth surveyed by Grant et

al., reported having attempted suicide (2011). Taking into account the harassment faced on campus, these percentages rose alarmingly. Fifty-nine percent of students who reported harassment from administrative staff or professors had attempted suicide, as well as 61% of those who reported physical assault, 64% who reported sexual assault, and 68% of those who were forced to leave their educational pursuits due to discrimination (Grant et al., 2011).

Students may find themselves forced to educate their health service provider, counsellor, and disability services coordinator. Even then, that individual may not be receptive and may not fully grasp the student's situation. Confusion regarding an individual's gender identity or related medical history may pose a barrier for trans students attempting to access health care services for issues unrelated to gender identity. Scholars cite that a large number of student service and health providers do not have the knowledge or resources to work respectfully and productively with trans students (Beemyn, 2005; Lombardi, 2001). The survey "Injustice at Every Turn" showed that 28% of trans students at any educational level had postponed important medical attention due to discrimination (Grant et al., 2011).

For many postsecondary institutions, the scope of change necessary to increase accessibility and inclusion for trans and gender non-conforming students may be daunting. Given the breadth of the issues that directly affect these students, productive change cannot be achieved overnight; it requires time, dedication, and a thorough analysis of the current state and structure of the institution, including restrooms, residences, athletic facilities, and practices related to health and wellness. When many elements which serve to oppress and erase trans identities are deeply entrenched in the structure of the establishment, it is vital that the framework be addressed carefully and comprehensively. Postsecondary institutions can address this by converting a portion of existing spaces into

accessible, gender neutral facilities and committing to including neutral facilities in future renovations or builds. Further, they can work towards establishing safe and inclusive residence options for trans and gender non-conforming students and ensure that all residence staff is trained accordingly. All staff and service providers involved in health and disability services should also be provided with the education and resources necessary to ensure gender diverse students are able to access knowledgeable and respectful support and care. Addressing the binary division of space, which serves to both restrict access and render trans bodies invisible, is a vital step towards the inclusion of gender minorities in postsecondary spaces and the affirmation of trans identities and experiences on campus.

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