

A Case of Abrading Identities: Advocating for a White Transgender Woman in the Land of the
Tlingit

Stacey Reicherzer, PhD, LPC, NCC

Walden University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stacey Reicherzer, PhD, LPC-S, NCC, Assessment Coordinator of Counseling Programs, Faculty- Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision, School of Counseling and Social Service, 155 Fifth Ave. South, Suite 100, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Email: stacey.reicherzer@waldenu.edu

Abstract

In a stratified culture in which human rights are circumscribed by a dominant group, marginalized communities become pitted against each other in their efforts to live basic freedoms. This was the case in my advocacy work for Beth, a White transgender woman, with her job application to serve adolescent girls of the Tlingit community in southeastern Alaska. My experiences in conceptualizing the case and clarifying my steps in advocacy work represented a learned lesson about the greater struggle in developing mutual empathy as a human rights initiative.

A Case of Abrading Identities: Advocacy for a White Transgender Woman in the Land of the
Tlingit

My personal experience as a transgender woman in the South Texas border region has inspired much of my work as a counselor, researcher, and advocate in service to the transgender community. Within the sphere of advocacy, I have had many occasions to address the workplace needs of under-served, or poorly-served, transgender employees, and have provided consultation and diversity training that have aimed to support positive changes in treatment, privacy, and equality-oriented policy-making. Generally, the workplace issues are clear and the solutions workable- an aggrieved transgender employee is in need of improved conditions in a workplace that has treated her or him unjustly. The story of “Beth,” however, reflected a departure from this. In an area of southeastern Alaska, Beth-White and beginning her male-to-female transition- was seeking a workplace promotion to serve as a camp counselor for girls from the indigenous Tlingit community. What follows is my experience of negotiating the dilemma in supporting Beth’s rights in the workplace while also upholding the cultural beliefs of the Tlingit people, whose worldview positioned transgender phenomena as taboo.

Several months after one of my Walden Mental Health Counseling students had finished her field experience, her agency director contacted me with a follow-up request that the agency was making in regard to Beth’s case. The supervisor was trying to make a culturally-competent hiring decision. While Beth’s work history met the qualifications for the position, the job was only open to female applicants.

The director’s dilemma was thus defined: she respected Beth’s identity as a woman, and was committed to creating a safe working environment that would provide Beth the resources she would need for her on-the-job transition. As a director in the service of a marginalized

indigenous Alaskan Native community, however, she held the significant responsibility of choosing a female candidate whose job match included the ability to foster relationships with Tlingit girls and their families. In seeking direction for consideration of Beth's qualification as a female candidate for the position, the director had consulted with agency leadership about the decision. The general response she received through her consultation with colleagues was that gender transitions would be considered taboo by the Tlingits. As such, she came to believe that the Tlingit girls would not respect Beth as female, and that placing a transgender woman in this position might be considered an affront to Tlingit culture.

The director identified two needs of me in consultation for the agency: a) support in the decision-making process for hiring or not hiring Beth, and b) agency training, available to all agency staff, that would introduce the topic of transgender rights in the workplace. In making the decision to consult with the agency and provide training, I needed to sort the issues that seemed to contribute to the problem. Beth's concern of fair treatment in recognition of her gender was familiar and clear to me. What made the matter infinitely more complex was the concern for respecting the Tlingit clients' culture. I empathized with Beth's experience. In midlife, she was transitioning from male-to-female. Undoubtedly, her gender identity had been a lifelong struggle for her, and that she was now beginning to present herself as a woman indicated for me how very important it would be to her if she could be completely recognized as female in her professional role. My experience told me that her application for a position that was only open to women was deeply symbolic of her need to be validated in her female identity. What also felt clear to me was that the potential rejection from the Tlingit community might be disruptive to Beth's validation of her womanhood; she might be placed in an experience in which she would be ridiculed and

tormented for her gender expression-- and all because the agency had tried to support her in hiring her for the position.

As much as I both identified with Beth's need and yearned for her to have the validation that she seemed to seek, I recognized that the cultural specifics of the indigenous Tlingit culture, the client community, were central to the issue. Positioning a male-to-female camp counselor for work with Tlingit girls could be seen as imposing one more White cultural transgression on a culture whose history has suffered significant abuse in the history of White colonialism.

I began the task of researching Tlingit culture to gain a better understanding of their norms and values. Although my search yielded little that would guide my understanding of their perspective on transgender issues, it became clear to me that my advocacy task here was unique. In other consulting circumstances, I had always advocated with the point of persuasion: creating an environment that would most support transgender rights and interests. In this instance, I came to realize that my task was to equally support both Beth and the Tlingit girls, and that rather than advocating for one side or the other, I was advocating for mutual understanding in the agency's hiring process.

The agency's indecision had stemmed from a lack of understanding of how best to support a transgender employee and the desire to negotiate competing cultural competencies. This information dearth seemed the most significant area to target. My sense was that by providing information about transgender experiences, including the process for transitioning that includes living and working in the person's identified gender role, the experiences of social pain and isolation that occur along the way, and workplace direction for providing a trans-educated and inclusive environment, I was working to create better organizational decision-making abilities for the agency's leadership. During the 4-month period from which I was first contacted

until I was scheduled to arrive in Alaska to present this training, I worked closely with the agency director to construct the training to meet the agency's needs. The hiring decision was deferred during this time.

Sadly, over the course of this period, Beth quit the agency and relocated- deciding that life in southeastern Alaska was not supportive of her needs for her transition. As disappointed as I was that she left unaware of the effort that the agency was putting into meeting her needs, I was pleased when the agency decided to move forward with the training initiative. Many of the staff, including a number of Beth's former colleagues, attended my 2 days of workshops. On the second day, one of the former colleagues announced to the workshop attendees that he had spoken to Beth, who had asked that he share with them how honored and appreciative she was that they were attending this workshop. Indeed, many of the employees who attended the workshops were members of the Tlingit community. Although I understood Beth's reasons for leaving this rural community, I had to wonder what might have been possible if all of these engaged people had been able to continue working at meeting the needs of both Beth and the Tlingit girls. Could something transformational have taken place that would have been healing for all? Would the community have been made richer?

This experience gave nuance to my understanding of advocacy. Disenfranchisement and marginalization often appear to be one-dimensional, in which there is both a clear oppressor and a person or group who is being oppressed. Sadly, history has often brought us stark examples of this, leading counselor-advocates to quickly assume the worst and take up a familiar refrain for justice. However, in the case of Beth, the oppressor was neither Beth nor the Tlingit community. The oppressor was a greater force: the systemic marginalization of both communities had created a situation in which a transwoman's yearning for gender rights was positioned in opposition to a

colonized culture who were working desperately to maintain their identity. In such a situation, in which so few resources are offered to either group, the inevitable outcome is one in which scarcity leads to an abrasion of social freedoms that hinders both groups.

This experience worked to clarify my position as a counselor advocate. We do not create advancement by focusing exclusively on the needs of one group at the exclusion of others. Rather, we seek to dismantle the social structure of marginalization and opprobrium as it serves to hold human rights abuses in place. In doing so, we are all advanced—we grow in mutual respect and our ability to foster dialogue.

Lessons Learned in Social Justice:

- Advocacy work is not always focused on representing a clearly oppressed person within a clearly oppressive context
- One oppressed person's source of legitimization and growth can be positioned to oppress another group, thus maintaining sociopolitical divisions between oppressed persons and communities
- In a system of White capitalist patriarchy, oppressed persons, both intentionally and unintentionally, often recreate the system of hierarchy that has been taught to them by the dominant group. Thus, they enforce their own agendas and privilege without regard for other marginalized persons or communities
- In cultural double-binds in which it is impossible to champion the cause of one marginalized person without harming another, advocate for education
- Better informed systems of understanding between oppressed groups lead to better collective understandings that serve the larger community