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English 1000

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They Belong Too: Increasing Accommodations to Combat Poor Mental Health in the Transgender Community

Your youth is meant to be enjoyed: time spent perusing toy aisles looking for that perfect barbie or platoon of plastic soldiers, camping with your scout troop, trying on fun clothes and playing with peers in gym class. But some of our nations youth have much different experiences; Transgender and gender diverse youth are often deprived of these luxuries, simply because they don't really fit in. What starts as playground exclusion later evolves into an increased risk of discrimination, violence, and victimization when compared to their cisgender cohorts (Newcomb). Naturally, one could expect this to take a toll on the mental health of the trans community, and indeed it does: transgender youth exhibit significantly higher risks of substance abuse issues, serious mental health problems, and even suicide (Newcomb). Simple short term solutions might include increasing the accessibility of mental health professionals, but that doesn't really solve the root of the problem. These issues really stem from a lack of accommodation and acceptance for transgender people. The long term solution I've proposed is comprehensive and should not only lessen the mental health issues plaguing the community today, but also reduce the transphobia that leads to those issues in the first place.

In our society today, we have a social construct we refer to as "the gender binary." Simply put, the gender binary is the idea that there are two genders: man and woman, and no in between. This idea is functionally applicable to a majority of the population and thus has

remained unchallenged until recent years. But it doesn't adequately cover the entire spectrum of what gender and sex really is. For example, people born with XY chromosomes are considered male, and people born with XX chromosomes are considered female. But what about those with genetic mutations? Are people with XXY chromosomes (Klinefelter's syndrome) men? Are people with XYY chromosomes the same gender as those with XY chromosomes? Which bathrooms should these individuals use? These are all questions forced upon us simply because we choose to cling to this outdated notion that there are only two genders, and that gender and sex are somehow inextricably linked. As a matter of fact, "gender" and "sex" are two completely different terms with completely different definitions: sex is defined as "the sum of the structural, functional, and sometimes behavioral characteristics of organisms that distinguish males and females" whereas gender is defined as "the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex." Gender is a social construct based upon sex, hence the aforementioned "gender binary."

In the previous paragraph I asked a question that probably flew under the radar of most cisgender readers, but was certainly noticed by my gender non-conforming audience: "Which bathrooms should these individuals use?" The issue of public restrooms is one that is often underestimated by cisgender folks, as it's not even something they've ever had to consider. But to trans people and others whose bodies don't reflect their internal concept of themselves, every trip to the toilet poses a series of uncomfortable questions that weighs on them heavily. "Do I pass enough to use my preferred restroom? Is this place LGBT friendly, or am I in danger for using the 'wrong' restroom?" Some folks don't feel comfortable using either restroom, not identifying with either side of the binary particularly strongly and thus feeling unwelcome no

matter which restroom they use. All of these issues can be circumvented by simply shifting from segregated restrooms to gender neutral ones, where everyone is welcome regardless of gender expression. In fact, transgender folks themselves advocate very strongly for this solution (Tobia). There are also those who oppose this solution, of integrating transgender people into the same bathroom spaces as their cisgender peers, citing concerns that transgender women may pose a threat to cisgender women. These concerns are completely unfounded though, with a complete and utter lack of any scholarly evidence suggesting an increased risk of harassment for cisgender women or children when trans women are integrated into spaces reserved for cis women (Blumell).

This fear of transgender folk clearly doesn't stem from any body of meaningful evidence, so it must be a result of something else. I think it's likely a lack of understanding, as transgender representation is a relatively new phenomenon. For many years, transgenderism was considered to be a mental illness, and thus wasn't treated as a normal, reasonable thing for a person to be. As a result, our sexual education system is wholly unprepared to accommodate transgender youths and their many questions (which is not to say that it's much better for cisgender youths either, but that's a discussion for a different day). Our sexual education must be expanded greatly, in order to educate transgender kids about their own bodies, but also as a means to expose cisgender kids to the same information and hopefully help normalize gender nonconformity. Specifically, sex ed classes should cover topics along the lines of gender affirmation surgery, hormone replacement therapy, chest binding, and gender exploration. The classes should also make a serious effort to "un-gender" discussions of body parts and how they function (e.g., instead of saying "women", say "people with vaginas").

For those readers unfamiliar, gender affirmation surgery is exactly what it sounds like: surgical procedures meant to alter primary and secondary sex characteristics (breast tissue, genitalia, shoulder/hip width) so that they better fit the person's gender identity. One could assume that those who suffer from gender dysphoria (a disconnect between the physical body and internal gender identity) would greatly benefit from these procedures, and indeed they do: one year after gender affirmation procedures, transgender women were found to have a marked increase in quality of life assessments across the board (Lindqvist). Increasing accessibility to these procedures then, would logically increase the quality of life of transgender folks. Being able to look in the mirror and identify with what you see is something cisgender people often take for granted.

On the topic of relating to the things you're exposed to, we must also discuss transgender representation in media (or the lack thereof). As mentioned previously, being transgender was long considered to be in the same vain as having multiple personalities, or exhibiting psychotic tendencies. As such, we elect to keep transgenderism out of our television and movies, and when trans people are represented they're often the butt of the joke. Changing this could be an invaluable tool in both fighting transphobia and alleviating transgender mental health issues. More positive representation for trans folk would give transgender people more characters they can identify closely with, and allows them to feel more welcome in society. Aside from that, there's substantial evidence that suggests positive transgender representation lessens transphobic attitudes, increases support for transgender people, and can even help to disconnect opinions of the transgender community from political

party views (Gillig). Transgender representation could be one of the biggest keys to increasing acceptance and reducing transphobia.

There is one tool that is even more effective than that: doing your part to make it clear that transphobia will not be tolerated. To truly eradicate transphobia from our society, we must be militant and unwavering in our defense of trans folks and their rights. Humans are an inherently social creature, and social disapproval is a powerfully impactful tool, as evidenced by the impact it has had on the transgender community. If we reclaim this social rejection and use it for good, it could be the most effective method of reducing transphobia at our disposal. So next time you hear someone use the incorrect pronouns for one of your transgender peers, correct them! If your gentle corrections fall on deaf ears, don't be afraid to be stern. Next time you hear transphobic sentiments, make it clear that this is unacceptable behavior; make them as uncomfortable as they make your transgender peers. Make it clear that accepting transgender people is not optional, just like accepting anyone is not optional. They're no different from you or I, and deserve to be treated as such.

On the topic of acceptance, Mizzou has made quite a commitment to being an open and accepting campus, and yet most dorms still have two bathrooms on every floor: men's and women's. Our university's supportive environment only goes as far as it's accommodations do, and the fact that transgender and nonbinary students may have to descend more than 7 stories to simply use the restroom is indicative of poor accommodation. Every floor of every residence hall should at least be equipped with a gender neutral bathroom, if not also a showering space. Every dining hall should have a gender neutral bathroom installed as well, so as to provide similar accommodations as there are for cisgender students. The university could also consider

the implementation of/expansion of a gender neutral Greek life scene, so as to truly maximize inclusion and make the college experience as good for transgender and nonbinary students as it is for cisgender students.

Our society isn't one built to accommodate those who don't fit into the gender binary. Our sex ed doesn't do enough to help them, our media sweeps them under the rug, we deny them the access to the surgeries and medical procedures they need, and we don't even let them go to the bathroom in peace. Of course there's an epidemic of poor mental health in the genderqueer community, we seem to make every effort to reject them and keep them out of our "normal" way of life. Changing these things will fix this issue, but at the end of the day we all must do our part to ensure that positive change gets made. There is a path to a brighter tomorrow, but uncomfortable conversations must be had.

References

Tobia, J. (2017). Why All Bathrooms Should Be Gender-Neutral. Time.Com, 1.

This article talks about the recent repeal of the trans bathroom protections bill, as well as the fallout of this decision and the implications it has for transgender folks the nation over. It also provides a firsthand account of the difficulties presented to trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people every time they go to use a restroom with regards to identity and where they belong. It reveals the solution presented by gender neutral bathrooms and reveals the significance this holds for trans folks. Finally, it discusses the implications of this last vestige of rigid gender-based segregation in modern society, and the way these gendered bathrooms serve to uphold the gender binary and teach harmful gender roles to our youth.

This will serve my essay quite well, as it provides a well worded, strong validation of the positives of gender neutral bathrooms as well as a firsthand account of the effect of an absence of neutral bathrooms. This will serve as a strong evidential basis for claims of the harms of the enforcement of gender segregation in our bathrooms. The final arguments about the psychological effects this segregation has on us will also make a good addition to my paper.

Newcomb, M. E., Hill, R., Buehler, K., Ryan, D. T., Whitton, S. W., & Mustanski, B. (2020). High Burden of Mental Health Problems, Substance Use, Violence, and Related Psychosocial Factors in Transgender, Non-Binary, and Gender Diverse Youth and Young Adults. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(2), 645. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01533-9>

This journal article outlines discrepancies between the mental health outcomes of cisgendered youth and that of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth. It shows that statistically, cis youths are more mentally healthy, showing less suicidality, depression, violence, and substance use issues. It shows that AFAB youth get along the best of TGD people, with AMAB people having worse mental health.

This will serve as hard scientific evidence that trans folks do in fact face extra difficulties beyond what we as cis people do, and thus serve as better justification for an increase in investment into TGD accommodations. It does also serve as a pre-existing, science based direct call for intervention, which will only strengthen any claims I may make with regard to the importance of gender neutral facilities.

Blumell, L. E., Huemmer, J., & Sternadori, M. (2019). Protecting the Ladies: Benevolent Sexism, Heteronormativity, and Partisanship in Online Discussions of Gender-Neutral Bathrooms. *Mass Communication & Society*, 22(3), 365–388.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1547833>

This article analyzes numerous internet comments in the debate about gender neutral bathrooms, and finds trends of “benevolent sexism”, heteronormativity, and extreme partisanship amongst the arguments opposing restroom liberty. It found that left-leaning sites tended to be proponents of the gender neutral bathrooms, while right-leaning outlets tended to oppose gender neutral bathrooms. Most of the sexist

argumentation is found to come from right-wing sights, with very little emerging from left-leaning sites.

This source will help to discredit opposition to gender neutral bathroom proliferation, and will outline how this opposition is predicated on outdated fundamentalist views that have no place in a modern society. This will help show how the opposition to this simple solution is based upon a disregard for the marginalized TGD groups and an unflinching, nationalistic allegiance to one's political party.

Outten, H. R., Lee, T., & Lawrence, M. E. (2019). Heterosexual women's support for trans-inclusive bathroom legislation depends on the degree to which they perceive trans women as a threat. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 22(8), 1094.

This academic journal reveals the correlation between heterosexual women's support for a gender neutral bathroom bill and their perception of the threat posed by trans women to the female community as a whole. If heterosexual women believe that trans women are a threat, they're more likely to oppose a bill described as "allowing trans women to use women only restrooms" than they are to oppose a bill described as "increasing the number of gender neutral bathrooms." Hetero women who didn't feel threatened were found to support the allowance of trans women to use women-only restrooms more.

This correlation between perceived threat and opposition to trans assimilation would seem to suggest that one of the driving factors behind the opposition to restroom selection liberty would be fear, which is based upon a lack of knowledge or

misunderstanding of the subject at hand. We fear what we do not understand and this would suggest that a key tool in the fight for transgender rights would be re-educating the masses on trans issues and doing away with common misconceptions of the community as a whole.

Richardson, A., Richard, L., Gunter, K., Cunningham, R., Hamer, H., Lockett, H., Wyeth, E., Stokes, T., Burke, M., Green, M., Cox, A., & Derrett, S. (2020). A systematic scoping review of interventions to integrate physical and mental healthcare for people with serious mental illness and substance use disorders. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 128, 52–67. <https://doi-org.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.05.021>

This journal article examines and compiles information from 25 studies that suggest an improved mental and physical health outcome when the care services for each are integrated together. The studies examine effects of co-location, self management, and a streamlined connection to specialists.

This will be useful, as it offers a solution to general mental health issues not specific to the trans community. I intend to pass along suggestions made here, as they offer a solution to many of the mental health issues that plague the trans community.

Lindqvist, E., Sigurjonsson, H., Möllermark, C., Rinder, J., Farnebo, F., & Lundgren, T. (2017). Quality of life improves early after gender reassignment surgery in transgender women. *European Journal of Plastic Surgery*, 40(3), 223–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00238-016-1252-0>

This source presents scientific evidence that gender affirmation surgery does in fact improve the quality of life for transgender women. These findings can be used to make the extrapolation that gender affirmation surgery is a positive thing for transgender individuals overall, and is worth further investment.

This is a valuable piece of evidence for my essay, as it provides a straightforward solution for improving trans quality of life and subsequently mental health, which is the problem this essay is trying to solve.

Gillig, T. K., Rosenthal, E. L., Murphy, S. T., & Folb, K. L. (2018). More than a Media Moment: The Influence of Televised Storylines on Viewers' Attitudes toward Transgender People and Policies. *Sex Roles*, 78(7–8), 515–527. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0816-1>

This source shows that opinions of transgender individuals can be influenced very deeply by the media portrayals of transgender people. This is very important, as it shows one very clear way to help combat transphobia and help with that problem.

This will be very good for my essay as it offers a very direct solution for combatting transphobia and making public opinion improve quickly. Less transphobia means an improved situation for trans individuals, and subsequently improved mental health.