Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

NICOLA TEMMEL

BA (Carleton University, 2011)

“TRANS-FORMING WOMEN’S SHELTERS: Making Transition Houses Safe and Accessible for Trans Women”

Department of Sociology

Friday, August 21, 2020
1:30 P.M.
Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Aaron Devor, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Andre Smith, Department of Sociology, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Erica Woodin, Department of Psychology, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Kristin Semmens, Department of History, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

For over two decades, the inclusion of trans women in women’s spaces and organizations such as transition houses has been discussed and debated by women-only organizations, feminists, trans activists, and the broader public. Drawing on an interpretive description approach, my research examines the experiences of transition house counsellors (“counsellors”) who have worked with trans women accessing residential support.

My research topic and questions emerged from my experience as a counsellor and are informed by a desire to better meet the needs of trans women affected by intimate partner violence (“IPV”), and to help fill gaps in available research, information, and practical resources to help service providers meet the needs of trans women affected by IPV. Specifically, my research questions are: (1) what challenges, opportunities and insights do counsellors experience when working with trans women clients, and (2) how do counsellors adjust and adapt their practices in response to these challenges, opportunities, and insights when working with trans women accessing transition house support?

Using purposive sampling, I recruited nine counsellors who have worked with trans women accessing transition house support. Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth-interviews of these participants to gain an understanding of their experiences and perspectives related to working with trans women accessing transition house support. Consistent with an interpretive description approach to research, I analyzed my data by drawing on both my experience as a counsellor and through thematic qualitative analysis.

My research finds that participants unanimously supported the inclusion of trans women in transition house settings. While the majority of participants emphatically stated that they did not respond to trans women any differently than they did to cis women, my findings show that how participants responded to trans women was informed by how well they perceived a trans client’s gender expression to match her gender identity. As such, my analysis reveals that participants’ responses to trans women was mediated by their unconscious adoption of a broader dominant heteronormative cisgenderist IPV framework that operates at both an individual and institutional level. My research therefore highlights some of the limitations that affect trans women accessing transition house support when counsellors and organizations respond to IPV through a heteronormative cisgenderist framework.