

Transgender Youth of Color and Resilience: Negotiating Oppression and Finding Support

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Abstract This qualitative study explored the resilience of 13 transgender youth of color in the southeastern region of the U.S. The definition of resilience framing this study was a participant's ability to "bounce back" from challenging experiences as transgender youth of color. Using a phenomenological research tradition and a feminist, intersectionality (intercategorical) theoretical framework, the research question guiding the study was: "What are the daily lived experiences of resilience transgender youth of color describe as they negotiate intersections of transprejudice and racism?" The researchers' individuated findings included five major domains of the essence of participants' daily lived experiences of resilience despite experiencing racism and transprejudice: (1) evolving, simultaneous self-definition of racial/ethnic and gender identities, (2) being aware of adultism experiences, (3) self-advocacy in educational systems, (4) finding one's place in the LGBTQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning) youth community, and (5) use of social media to affirm one's identities as a transgender youth of color. Implications for practice, research, and advocacy, in addition to the study's limitations are discussed.

Keywords Transgender · Youth · Resilience · Racism · Coping · Qualitative

Introduction

The overarching purpose of this article is to examine the resilience strategies that transgender youth of color in the

southern United States (U.S.) have despite experiences of racism and transprejudice. Because both racism and transprejudice are societal systems of oppression, the current study used a feminist and intersectionality framework in order to acknowledge and explore the impact of these systems on transgender youth of color's well-being and coping. A phenomenological method was used so that the researcher could collect first-person accounts of the daily lived experiences of resilience that transgender youth of color have. Transgender youth of color have a long history of existence, tradition, and culture across the world (PR Newswire 2011)—yet remain a poorly misunderstood and marginalized group in the U.S. However, their experiences of resilience are important to understand for scholars and practitioners around the globe. The studies cited in the current literature review use U.S. samples.

Transgender youth of color may frequently face significant discrimination and prejudice in the form of transprejudice and racism in the U.S. (Garofalo et al. 2006; Israel and Tarver 1997; Pazos 2009). Recent research has suggested many of the personal and societal barriers that transgender youth of color may experience. Often, these youth may lack family support and engage in high rates of substance abuse and sexual risk-taking. One study of ethnic minority transgender youth in the northwestern U.S. suggested that transgender youth of color are also at an especially high risk for HIV/AIDS (Garofalo et al. 2006). In addition, transgender youth of color may not receive education on issues of gender and sexuality because of U.S. federal education policies that promote abstinence and lack a queer or transgender focus on sexuality education (Fine and McClelland 2006). However, we know less about the unique similarities and differences amongst transgender youth of color with regard to their gender identities (e.g., male-to-female transgender, female-to-male transgender, etc.) as this is an area of research that needs further attention.

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Compounding inability to access comprehensive sexuality education in schools, research has suggested schools are a dangerous place for transgender youth in general. A national survey of transgender youth in the U.S. by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (Gretak et al. 2009) proposed that transgender youth in the sample (23% Northeast, 26% South, 21% Midwest, 30% West), were at high risk to not attend school because they felt concerned about their safety (68%)—as 87% had experienced verbal bullying, 53% had experienced physical bullying, and 26% were physical assaulted. Although this survey did not find significant differences among participants' experiences of harassment by how they identified their gender (e.g., transmen, transwomen), results suggested that participants experienced hearing racist language from school staff (54%) and students (23%) in addition to the transprejudice they faced in schools (Gretak et al. 2009). Because of societal stigma, transgender youth of color may also face issues of discrimination outside of school settings—including homelessness and community and police harassment (Reck 2009).

Although research with transgender youth of color in the U.S. remains nascent in its scope, there seems to be emerging evidence that the intersections of racism (systematic oppression of people of color) and transprejudice (discrimination against transgender people) may place these youth at high risk for many interpersonal and environmental stressors (Garofalo et al. 2006). For instance, Vidal-Ortiz (2008) called for a multidisciplinary investigation of not only gender with regard to transgender people, but also asserted the importance of studying “questions of social location based on ethno-racial, class, and other positionalities” (p. 433). In addition, an important systemic oppression to examine as it influences the lives of transgender youth of color is *adulthood*—the dominance of young people by adults (DeJong and Love 2010; Tate and Copas 2003)—which further complicates the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender identity and expression for transgender youth of color.

Therefore, a framework of intersectionality (Warner 2008) is necessary to understand the complex ways that racism and transprejudice influence the daily lived experiences of U.S. transgender youth of color. Warner (2008), writing on best practices in intersectionality methodology in the Special Issue of *Sex Roles* on “Intersectionality of Social Identities: A Gender Perspective,” stated researchers studying intersectionality “should be able to explicitly state *why* we choose particular intersections rather than simply *that* we do” (p. 456). In response to Warner's call, the purpose and focus of the present study was to investigate the resilience strategies transgender youth of color use to navigate experiences of racism and transprejudice using a phenomenological method and a feminist theoretical framework. Because this study sought to understand the experiences of transgender

youth of color in the U.S., the following review of literature focuses on U.S.-based scholarship.

Transgender Youth of Color and Societal Stressors

There has been an increase in scholarship with U.S. transgender youth in general (Singh and Burnes 2010). *Transgender* is a word that is used to describe a wide range of people whose gender identity does not conform to societal expectations of their assigned sex (see Lambda 2008 for a thorough glossary of transgender-related terms). Lucal (2008) emphasized that transgender people in the U.S. “challenge [the] easy reliance on categories and the boundaries between those categories” (p. 519); therefore, society pathologizes transgender people because of their existence, which defies societal categories and norms established regarding gender. Transgender people may have gender identities (e.g., genderqueer, bigender, gender-fluid, etc.) and gender expressions (e.g., masculine, feminine, neither) that do not align with the sex (male, female) they were assigned at birth. Much has been written about the conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity and the need to recognize these as separate, but interrelated constructs in practice and research (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; Grossman et al. 2006; Singh et al. 2010; Vanderburgh 2009). For instance, a youth with a genderqueer identity may not identify with the binary labels of “man,” “woman,” “boy,” and “girl”—instead acknowledging the fluidity of their gender identity and expression. Similarly, *bigender* and *gender-fluid* are words that certain transgender youth may feel more accurately describes their relationship to the entirety of their gender identity and expression.

Youth is also an important term to understand. The term youth is described for this study as the periods of early, middle, and late adolescence (Kroger et al. 2010) between the ages of 13 and 25 years old. The identifier—*people of color*—has become an umbrella phrase of empowerment for racially/ethnically diverse groups in the U.S. to connect these groups across racial/ethnic differences and identify similar experiences and challenges in society (Smith and Silva 2011).

Garofalo et al. (2006) investigated the HIV-risk behaviors and societal barriers transgender youth of color in Chicago and Los Angeles faced. In a convenience sample of 51 participants, the median age was 22 years old. Researchers described several life stressors, including not having a stable home (18%), sex work (59%), non-consensual sexual experiences (52%), unemployment (63%), and challenges securing healthcare (41%). Rates of HIV infection were reported as higher for the African American youth in the study, and 22% of the study's participants shared they were HIV-positive. Importantly, this sample noted high rates of use of alcohol and marijuana, with 53% having sex while under the influence of these substances.

In addition, there are issues of suicidality that may impact transgender youth of color. In a study of life-threatening behaviors of 55 transgender youth in the New York City area (Grossman and D'Augelli 2007), 13 participants were youth of color (seven African American, three Multiracial, two Native American, one Asian American/Pacific Islander). Half of the participants reported that they had considered suicide seriously and a quarter of the sample shared they had attempted suicide with 75% of this group attributing these attempts to their gender identity. Suicide risk and attempts were also reported as serious issues for this sample. Because these rates are high, it would also be helpful to further understand the experiences of those whose suicidal ideation or attempts was not related to their gender identity—or what factors supported these transgender youth's resilience to these difficulties. In addition, it would also be important to understand what intra-personal and interpersonal protective factors the transgender youth of color who did not attempt suicide had.

U.S. Transgender Youth of Color and Resilience

Scholars in psychology exploring the construct of resilience have typically used a White, western lens to define the components that comprise resilience (Hartling 2005; Ungar 2010). For instance, resilience has been understood and studied from a perspective of individualism—with factors such as “hardiness” and intelligence among many other individual traits (Benard and Slade 2009; Werner and Smith 2001). Further, many resilience factors are also described as those that are innate and equip individuals with the ability to navigate adversity in their lives (Luthar and Cicchetti 2000; Luthar et al. 2000; Masten 1994, 1999, 2001). However, research on resilience has begun to shift in its focus on the role of community factors and contextual influences that threaten or support resilience (Hall and Zautra 2010; Hartling 2005; Singh et al. 2010; Singh and McKleroy 2011; Zautra et al. 2010). In addition, resilience has become a site of inquiry associated with the positive psychology movement (see Zautra et al. 2010 for a full discussion). From this perspective, resilience is comprised of those individual, positive adaptations that individuals make despite experiencing negative experiences and/or challenging environments (Smith et al. 2010).

There is a growing body of literature on the resilience experiences of transgender people. In a qualitative study investigating the resilience experiences of transgender people of color in the southeastern U.S. who had survived traumatic life events (Singh and McKleroy 2011), researchers worked with participants to collaboratively identify six strategies that helped participants positively cope with challenges in life. The participants—despite facing racism and trans-prejudice—identified that developing racial/ethnic pride and being able to identify and navigate racism were important facets of their resilience. Respondents described

their resilience as learning how to manage and cope with family relationships—from family rejection to family acceptance. Healthcare access and financial resources were important sources of resilience for these particular transgender people of color, especially considering securing necessary medical care and encountering employment discrimination. In addition, interviewees described their connections with an activist community of other transgender people of color helped them increase their own personal resources of resilience. Respondents also described nurturing themselves with their spiritual beliefs and developing a sense of hope for the future as critical components of their resilience. Although this study illuminated some of the particular resilience strategies that may be important for transgender people of color, there remains a need to examine the resilience experiences of transgender youth of color.

Theoretical Framework of Study

The theoretical framework for the current study merges theories of intersectionality and feminism. McCall (2005) described strategies to guide researchers seeking to investigate the relationships amongst individuals' multiple identities. The study also draws from the intercategorical complexity approach McCall noted, which guides researchers to centralize “adopt and work with existing analytical categories” (p. 1774). This approach was appropriate for this study, which aimed to understand existing groupings and rely on previously defined constructs (e.g., transgender, resilience, race/ethnicity, etc.). For instance, the definition of resilience framing this study was a participant's ability to “bounce back” from challenging experiences as transgender youth of color and the intercategorical approach allowed the researcher to investigate how these domains (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender identity and expression) intersected with one another.

Alongside an intercategorical approach to studying intersectionality, the researcher integrated tenets of U.S.-based feminist empowerment therapy (Worell and Remer 2003) so that the specific mechanisms of racism and transprejudice could be acknowledged and understood. The four tenets of Worrel and Remer's feminist empowerment therapy used were: (1) the interdependence of social and personal identities, (2) the personal is political, (3) the recognition of the power differential in the therapeutic relationship (which was adapted to the researcher-participant relationship), and (4) the valuation of women's experiences (which was modified to apply to intentionally valuing transgender people of color's experiences).

In addition to grounding the study in intersectionality (Butler 2004; McCall 2005) and feminist empowerment theories (Worell and Remer 2003) described above, this qualitative study drew from Butler's (2004) explication of

the insider/outsider positionalities of both “researcher” and “participants.” For instance, qualitative researchers are often challenged to define themselves as sharing identities and experiences with participants or remaining *outside* of a group that is the focus of research—bringing the question of where the researcher and participants rest in a study (which also has implications of feminist conceptions of power, privilege, and oppression). Eppley (2005) further interrogated this insider/outsider debate—or the emic/etic perspectives of qualitative researchers—by asserting, “insider/outsider positions are socially constructed and entail a high level of fluidity that further impacts a research situation” (p. 4). Therefore, in the present study, the researcher named and bracketed her research assumptions of the study’s focus and described the mutual influence of both researcher and participant on research activities. In summary, the overarching question that guided the current study was: What are the resilience strategies transgender youth of color as they negotiate intersections of transprejudice and racism?

Method

The phenomenological method of this study allowed the researchers to examine the essence—or core meaning—of the resilience experiences of transgender youth of color and how racism and transprejudice intersected in their daily lived experiences (Creswell 2007). In phenomenological research, the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, rather than generate theory or generalizability of the data (Hays and Singh 2011). In addition, the researcher used an intersectionality (intercategorical) and feminist theoretical framework, as noted previously, to ground the study. These intersectional and theoretical tenets guided the research activities, from the construction of semi-structured interview protocol questions to data interpretation. These tenets also allowed the researcher to acknowledge that participants not only were experts on their lived experiences of resilience, but also could describe their experiences of empowerment related to their resilience. Together, phenomenology and feminist empowerment theoretical tenets assisted the researcher in developing a lens through which to collect, interpret, and share data with a focus on empowerment that was helpful in order to understand both the construct of resilience for transgender youth of color and the intersections of discrimination that respondents negotiated.

Researcher Bias

Phenomenological traditions require that researchers document or “bracket” their research biases and assumptions

about the phenomena they seek to investigate prior to and throughout the commencement of the research process (Creswell 2007; Moustakas 1994). The researcher has engaged in the research topic of seeking to understand resilience in several studies with transgender people, although the current study’s participants are not a subset of a previous study. Therefore, the researcher identified these previous studies as comprising her research bias in that there was an assumption that resilience was an inherent experience of transgender youth of color. To address this bias, the researcher included questions in the interview protocol to explore participants’ experiences where they did not experience resilience. The researcher also identifies as a queer woman of color, so it was important to identify the research biases she held at the intersection of both racism and oppression based on queer and transgender identities. These biases included the assumption that racism and transprejudice would be intricately linked; therefore, the researcher developed interview questions that sought to understand how these experiences might be separate phenomenon and not interconnected.

Procedure

The researcher circulated paper flyers with information about the study to various organizations serving transgender youth of color in a large southeastern city. An electronic version of the paper flyer was also circulated to electronic listservs where transgender youth were members, such as LGBTQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning) youth-serving nonprofit centers. Potential interviewees contacted the researcher by email or phone to express interest in the study. The researcher then scheduled a common time to discuss the study’s purpose and criteria for participation in the study during this contact. The study’s criteria were that the participants identified as: (a) transgender, (b) youth (ages 15–24 years old), (c) person of color, and (d) resilient. These criteria were included on the study’s recruitment flyer, which contained a definition of resilience (“Resilience is the ability you have to ‘bounce back’ from hard times as a transgender youth of color.”). Eleven youth contacted the researcher directly and 10 of these youth met the study’s criteria and became participants (one person was 26 years old and therefore did not fit the age criteria). Three youth contacted the researcher as a result of being referred by one of the interviewees in the study. For respondents, the researcher explained the focus and purpose of the study and gained informed consent for participation and completion of interview data. Participants were also informed they would receive several invitations to provide feedback on the study’s findings, although this was not a requirement for participation in the study. A stipend of \$20 in the form of a gift card was given to interviewees.

Participants

This study's respondents were recruited specifically for the purposes of the current study and were not participants in the author's previous studies of transgender people's resilience (see Table 1). Of the 13 participants in the study, six identified as having Black/African heritage, three identified as having Latino/Chicano heritage, two identified as having multiracial heritage (one White and Black/African heritage and one Asian/Pacific Islander and Latino heritage), and two identified as having Asian/Pacific Islander heritage. The age range of interviewees was 15 to 24 years old, with the mean age as 19 years old. The participants used a variety of words to define their gender identity, including "trans man" or "trans" (5), transgender woman (4), transsexual woman (2), genderqueer (1), and gender-fluid (1). Of these 13 participants, 5 were trans-masculine, 5 were trans-feminine, and 3 did not relate to the use of these terms to describe their gender expressions or identities (genderqueer or gender-fluid). Respondents described their sexual orientation as straight (6), queer (4), gay (2), and lesbian (1). Six participants were in undergraduate studies in a college or university setting, five participants were in their final year of high school, and two participants had graduated from high school and were working a full-time job. Seven respondents reported a collective family income of \$30,000/year or less, whereas three reported a family income between \$40,000–\$50,000/year. Three respondents received no family support and made individual incomes of less than \$20,000/year. Ten of the participants lived in an urban environment, whereas three were living in a suburban setting. Each of the participants lived in the southeast.

Data Collection and Analysis

Respondents completed a semi-structured interview (see Table 2) over the phone (4) or in person (9) that ranged

between 65 and 80 min. Rather than completing a demographic sheet where there might be limited selection on "boxes" to describe their personal identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, etc.), the interviewees were asked to describe their salient identities at the beginning of each interview. The primary researcher audiotaped and transcribed each interview.

Overall, there were seven steps to the data collection and analysis process. First, two researchers bracketed their assumptions and biases about the focus of the study (which occurred at each research coding meeting) (Marshall and Rossman 2006). Then, the primary researcher interviewed the first participant and then transcribed the interview. The interview was then sent to this participant to verify its accuracy and provide additional feedback. In the second step, the researchers engaged in open coding (Patton 2002) to identify the major domains related to resilience in the first participant's interview. After completing open coding, the researchers developed a codebook, with definitions and examples of the major domains from the first participant's interview (overall inter-coder reliability was between 82% and 94% for the entire data set). In the third step, the primary researcher interviewed the second participant and the researchers separately used the phenomenological coding process of horizontalization, where they each identified a list of non-overlapping themes in the second participant's interview (Creswell 2007). The researchers then compared and contrasted their individual horizontalization to identify major domains that become part of the codebook.

In step four, a structural description of the phenomenon of resilience as described by each participant was developed (which was revised after each participant interview). In step five, the meaning of resilience for each participant was further refined into a few words that captured the overall essence of the phenomena. The researchers repeated steps three through five for each subsequent interview until the

Table 1 Participant demographic information

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender identity
1	Jack	18	African American	Trans Man
2	Maria	16	Chicana	Transgender Woman
3	Adrianna	19	Chicana	Trans Man
4	Tracy	19	African American	Transgender Woman
5	Teva	17	AAPI	Boi/Genderqueer
6	Meera	22	AAPI	Transgender Woman
7	Brian	21	Multiracial (White-Black/African)	Trans Man
8	Elijah	19	African American	Trans Man
9	LaTonya	17	African American	Transgender Woman
10	Deryl	18	Multiracial (AAPI/Latino)	Trans Man
11	Kerry	24	Black	Transsexual Woman
12	Tomas	15	Black	Genderqueer
13	Erik	23	Latino	Gender-Fluid

Table 2 Transgender Youth of Color Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How do you define your gender identity—what words do you use?
2. How do you define your race/ethnicity—what words are important to you?
3. How have others in your life reacted to both your gender identity and your race/ethnicity? How do you feel about your gender identity and your race/ethnicity?
4. For these experiences you have shared, which experiences have been helpful and which have not been helpful?
5. What would you like others to know about being a transgender young person of color?
6. How have you gotten through tough times as a transgender youth of color?
7. What are your experiences in school and community settings that have helped you as a transgender youth of color?
8. If resilience is the ability to “bounce back” from hard times, what specifically about your race/ethnicity and gender identity has helped you be resilient?
9. When you think about the strengths you have and the challenges or opportunities in your life, what helps you as a transgender youth of color?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about being a transgender youth of color?

final participant’s was collected and analyzed. In step six, the researchers reviewed each of the participant’s data (individual interview) to identify any contradictions in the data corpus, in addition to verifying overall domains of resilience identified (Marshall and Rossman 2006). In this internal audit of the data, the data from the researchers’ reflexive journals were analyzed in tandem with the respondents’ data. In step seven, an external auditor reviewed all artifacts from the research process (e.g., interview questions, participant interview transcripts, etc.).

Methods of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is the extent to which a researcher addresses issues of credibility into the research process (Patton 2002). The researcher sought to increase the study’s trustworthiness through maintaining a reflexive journal prior to and during the research process to document assumptions and biases about the study and participants, in addition to thoughts and feelings about the data collection and interpretation process. This reflexive journal became a data source along with the respondents’ interview transcripts. For example, the researcher’s biases included an assumption that all people have resilience of some sort and may differ in degree from one another due to various oppressive systems. In this instance, the researcher coded the entire reflexive journal seeking to identify how this and other biases influenced data interpretation and identified findings.

Additionally, member checking was used to ensure the accuracy and meaning of participants’ transcripts. Rather than merely sending the transcripts back to participants so they could verify the content of what they shared, the interviewees were invited to provide feedback and input on the final research findings via emailing back their comments on their transcripts to ensure the researcher had captured the essence of their daily lived experiences and thus served as internal auditors for the data interpretation. For instance, four of the 13 respondents added more resilience

strategies involving friendships and community support. Two of the 13 respondents added racial/ethnic words to the gender identity self-descriptors they used (e.g., “Black” in front of “trans man”). An external auditor was used to verify the findings of the study. The external auditor identified as a White, lesbian woman and reviewed the materials of the research process, including the participants’ transcripts, researcher’s reflexive journal, debriefing and memo notes from data analysis, and case displays used to manage interviewees’ individual and collective data. The auditor confirmed the identified themes, and made additional observations about the specific types of social media the participants used (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Twitter) and the difference in their access. As a result, the researcher returned to the data to further elucidate the social media theme for respondents.

Results

There were five major themes underlying the resilience strategies the transgender youth of color participants described to navigate the intersections of racism and transprejudice in their daily lived experiences (see Table 3): (1) evolving, simultaneous self-definition of gender and racial/ethnic identities, (2) being aware of adultism experiences, (3) self-advocacy in educational systems, (4) finding one’s place in the LGBTQQ youth community, and (5) use of social media to affirm one’s identities as a transgender youth of color. In the findings below, participants are referred to by the pseudonym they selected for themselves and the words they used to describe their gender identity.

Evolving, Simultaneous Self-Definition of Racial/Ethnic and Gender Identities

The majority of participants (84%) in this study described that the ways their racial/ethnic and gender identity

Table 3 Frequency distribution of transgender youth of color's experiences of resilience

Code	Frequency (%)
Evolving, simultaneous self-definition of gender and racial/ethnic identities	11 (84)
Racial/ethnic descriptors changed	9 (69)
Gender identity descriptors changed	13 (100)
Could not separate race/ethnicity and gender	13 (100)
Family and friendship acceptance helped define both race/ethnicity and gender	11 (84)
Connected to a sense of empowerment and pride	12 (92)
Negotiating adulthood	13 (100)
Interacting with healthcare services	10 (78)
Interacting with social service organizations	9 (69)
Interacting with helping service professionals	10 (78)
Being told to "wait" until she or he "grew up"	12 (92)
Feeling like schools were not supportive	13 (100)
Self-advocacy in educational systems	11 (84)
Member of a GSA in high school/college	8 (61)
Advocated for trans-positive policy in high school	5 (38)
Advocated for trans-positive policy in college	3 (23)
Felt too many barriers for school policy change	5 (38)
Finding one's place in the LGBTQQ youth community	10 (78)
First contact in high school	8 (61)
First contact in college	2 (15)
Wanting a transgender youth of color community	13 (100)
Finding a "home" of supportive friends/peers	11 (84)
Being able to talk about racism and transprejudice	13 (100)
Valued for their racial/ethnic and gender identities	12 (92)
Use of Social Media to Affirm One's identity as a Transgender Youth of Color	13 (100)
Helped find someone "like them"	13 (100)
Findings models of inspiration and mentors	8 (61)
Having access to a computer at home	9 (69)
Difficulty accessing trans-positive websites at school	8 (61)

development influenced one another was a major component of their resilience—especially as this related to living in the South. Not only was the awareness of their racial/ethnic and gender identity development important, but also the recognition that their identities had and would evolve over time. Thirteen respondents (100%) shared their gender identity descriptors changed over time and nine shared their racial/ethnic descriptors changed over time, while 13 (100%) described being unable to separate their racial/ethnic identity from their gender identity. For instance, Jack (African American trans man, age=18) shared,

I used to use words like 'genderqueer' or 'transgender' only to describe myself. Today, I would say I am a 'Black trans youth'—and these words are more specific to what is going on with me and my body right

now. I used to describe as 'genderqueer' or 'Black', almost like being different things depending on where I was [community setting]. That sometimes still happens, but being Black *and* trans is more important to me than being genderqueer or Black. And that could change tomorrow.

Family and friendship networks most closely influenced participants' (84%) evolving sense of racial/ethnic and gender identity was influenced. Maria (age=16) shared her resilience in defining her identity as a transgender woman became stronger as her family accepted her gender identity and expression. She shared:

They [my family] had taught me to Chicano pride. Our people work hard. My mom and dad's families took so many risks to be here so I could get an education. I felt proud—and feel proud—of being Chicano. Not being able to share with them who I was didn't cut me off from that pride, so I just became proud to be Chicana. I'm a proud Chicana femme girl. That is what I feel now.

Other respondents shared they did not have as much access to their resilience because racism and transprejudice made them "doubt themselves." For instance, Adrianna (Chicana trans women, age=19) shared:

I was just a kid when I first knew I wasn't a boy. I didn't have words to describe anything. I want other trans kids to feel good about themselves and not doubt themselves. I just didn't know how to talk about things with anyone—without words to say no matter who I am, I am worth being who I am.

For 12 (92%) of the participants feeling they could define their own words to describe their racial/ethnic and gender identities helped instill a sense of empowerment and pride in themselves. Overall, the respondents learned the more they accepted and valued their unique and multiple identities as transgender youth of color, the more they were able to connect and express both their racial/ethnic and gender identities. Interestingly, participants were also defining these identities within a Southern context—which might typically be laden with assumptions of higher degrees of racism and transprejudice. Despite this context, participants described an ongoing and active self-definition process of defining their own racial/ethnic and gender identities regardless of whether they identified as trans-masculine, trans-feminine, or neither.

Being Aware of Adulthood Experiences

Although many other oppressive systems intersected with both racism and transprejudice in the participants' lives,

respondents described adultism an overarching umbrella in which interviewees experienced racism and transprejudice in the South. Adultism—the system where adults hold privilege and power in youths’ lives—was woven through participants’ “coming out” stories (100%), their social interactions with schools (69%) (e.g., school teachers and principals), and the relationships they (78%) had with healthcare professionals (such as counselors, social workers, psychologists, and endocrinologists). Twelve (92%) participants described being acutely aware they were receiving a message to “wait until [she or he] grew up” to make decisions about their gender identities. Tracy (African American trans woman, age=19) shared the following about adultism, racism, and transprejudice:

It’s like adults—they get in the way. It’s like they just can’t accept that you know anything about anything... especially about trans-ness. There are more trans people in the media, but it’s all adults and no kids. I think that documentary [Transgeneration] about trans youth in college was good because I could show my parents—‘There are trans people who are *not* White.’

Other respondents described adultist social interactions with their teachers, principals, and school counselors as challenging to their racial/ethnic and gender identity (69%). One participant, Teva (Asian American/Pacific Islander trans boi, age=17) shared a harrowing experience. He used the word “boi,” because he felt the word described his empowerment as a transgender person who “wasn’t looking to get rid of [his] transgender-ness.” Teva was called in to meet with the principal and the school nurse to “prove [his] gender.” Because Teva’s parents were immigrants to the U.S. and spoke very little English, they had very little interaction with the school. Teva described feeling “disrespected. The principal didn’t care—he just didn’t want a ‘freak’ in his school. If my parents would have been there, I think he wouldn’t have gotten away with treating me that way.” Another participant Meera (Asian American/Pacific Islander, age=22) shared experiencing adultism within the healthcare system:

If you bring your parents, they don’t ‘get it.’ Then, you’re 18 years old finally and you go to a psychologist and have to make a case to get a hormone letter. Everywhere you better be careful with what you say. When do you ever get trusted? You *have to know yourself* to get through the world.

Overall, each of the 13 (100%) respondents described their schools as being non-supportive of both their racial/ethnic and gender identities, and that their own awareness of their school’s deficits in this area motivated them to find support elsewhere. Participants attributed some of the lack

of support to living in a Southern context (100%). However, the process of “seeing” the utter lack of resources and validating the adultism in their lives ultimately empowered them to establish other support of their racial/ethnic and gender identities.

Self-Advocacy in Educational System

Educational systems within a Southern context—both schools and universities—provided impetus for interviewees to develop self-advocacy skills (84%). Some participants were more able to develop self-advocacy skills than others. Eight were members of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) type organization in high school or college, and others advocates for trans-positive policy change in high school (38%) or college (23%). For example, Brian (multiracial White/Black trans man, age=21) shared that there was a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in his high school. Although Brian identified at the time as “straight,” knowing there was a GSA in his school “helped [him] make friends and talk about being trans.” After Brian joined the GSA, he “came out as trans to teachers and a school counselor” and became a leader of the GSA. He advocated for a designated gender-neutral bathroom in his high school with his peers in the GSA: “It turned out they only gave us—or me really—one bathroom stall to use, which was the teacher’s bathroom [laughs]. But it was like, ‘Hey, we did it!’

Another participant, Elijah (African American trans man, age=19) described becoming a student leader at his university:

I lived on campus the first semester—it was pretty bad. My roommates were racist, homophobic—and didn’t know trans people at all. I talked to me residence hall advisor about moving and she was like ‘Oh no. You can’t do that unless there is a real problem’. I was taking a women’s studies class and we had this feminist student group. We went and talked to the Dean of Students about housing issues for transgender students. My professors were pretty helpful too—they tried hard even if they got pronouns wrong sometimes.

Participants described that developing these self-advocacy skills helped them “stand up” for themselves in other challenging situations in their life—whether explaining what being a transgender youth of color was like to family and friends or interacting with school personnel. Other respondents had a more difficult time with self-advocacy (100%). Five participants (38%) described experiencing too many barriers for school policy change, with three (23%) transferring schools or universities because of transphobic attitudes of staff or faculty—or because of a lack of response to the interviewees’ needs.

No matter where the strength and skill of the students’ self-advocacy rested, participants described Southern educational

systems as settings that more often challenged than supported their resilience. Respondents also clearly delineated the importance of wanting a positive school environment to be a component of their resilience. For participants, having this positive school environment would (and for many did) mean that their identities were not only valued, but that the experiences of racism and transprejudice they had were taken seriously. There was a slight difference within this theme amongst those who identified as trans-masculine and those who identified as trans-feminine. In terms of their self-advocacy, trans-masculine participants discussed being aware of acquiring “male” privilege; whereas, trans-feminine participants did not discuss how a “loss” of gender privilege affected their self-advocacy.

Finding One’s Place in the LGBTQQ Youth Community

For this sample, participants described social interactions within the larger LGBTQQ youth community (78%). For some interviewees (61%), they joined LGBTQQ youth-serving organizations in their schools (e.g., GSAs) or communities (e.g., nonprofits) as high school students. For others, their first interaction with the LGBTQQ youth community was in college or university settings (15%). The degree to which participants interacted with other LGBTQQ youth of color in these settings influenced their resilience. LaTonya (African American, age=17) shared the following:

I started going to this youth group at the Gay Center four months ago. There is a computer room where we go after school. Thursday nights are movie night. There’s a queer youth of color group on Tuesdays. I was the only trans kid at first—that was ok. And I really like my group leaders on Tuesday night. We talk about things other kids in the Gay Center don’t always ‘get.’

Another participant, Deryl (Asian/Pacific Islander and Latino heritage, age=18) described being troubled by some of the “racial tensions” that he saw in his university LGBTQQ group. He shared:

I’m the only mixed race person—plus, I’m trans. I joined this Asian student group on campus—and they are all straight and cisgender [assigned sex in alignment with one’s gender identity and expression]. I have a few ‘homes’ on campus, but never know how much I can really be myself. But I went to this queer and trans people of color conference at the end of the semester—I didn’t have to filter anything.

Respondents (84%) described the degree to which they felt “at home” in these LGBTQQ youth settings was related to whether they were able to talk about their everyday lives with peers and friends about racism and transprejudice.

They described wanting a transgender youth of color community (100%); however, even when this community was not present in their lives, participants described finding their place within larger LGBTQQ youth communities translated to them being valued for both their racial/ethnic and gender identities (92%). This valuation was a place of unlearning of Southern societal norms about gender and race/ethnicity, fostering resilience, liberation, and empowerment. Trans-feminine, trans-masculine, and participants who did not identify with these terms all (100%) reported spending time in multi-gender social support groups.

Use of Social Media to Affirm One’s Identity as a Transgender Youth of Color

The transgender youth of color in this sample described a significant use of social media as they began to understand the connections between their racial/ethnic and gender identities (100%) and access support resources outside of their immediate Southern context. Respondents used of social media—which ranged from Facebook and Myspace—to Twitter and Transgender-specific social media platforms, where they were able to more closely “connect” (100%) or served as models of inspiration for them (61%). For instance, Jack (African American trans man, age=18) shared the following:

I didn’t know other people who were trans *and* Black. When I was coming out as trans, I was online all the time. I subscribed to these YouTubes and watched stories about hormones, surgery, family, partners—you name it, it was there. I’m not always strong even though I feel like I have to be. And that’s when I will get on one of those youtube channels. It’s another world even online.

For Maria (Chicana, age=16), even when she didn’t have a computer, she could get online and visit some social media at school—and eventually on her cellphone. At school, some of the websites Maria wanted to visit were blocked because the words “sex” were on the website even if the website was only about transgender people. Maria shared she “wished there was more access at school to trans sites—it’s cool to have people to look up too and follow on Twitter.” A total of eight (61%) participants had significant challenges accessing transgender-positive websites at school. Maria further shared, “At lunch, I tweet about school—sometimes about kids who are mean. One person I follow—she’s like a mom to me—and helps me know I’m normal [laughs].”

Eight (61%) participants discussed following models of inspiration (e.g., mentors, celebrities) on social media, such as Twitter, and reported receiving responses from them at times when they needed support as transgender youth of

color living in the South. Although the majority (69%) had computer access at home, the remaining respondents found creative ways to access social media. Across participants, their use of social media helped them see new perspectives—namely transgender-positive and racial/ethnic-affirming ones. They described integrating these new perspectives into how they viewed themselves—which not only empowered them to feel good about their multiple identities, but also gave them new strategies for addressing racism and transprejudice in their lives. Trans-masculine participants reported using sites such as YouTube and transgender listservs, whereas trans-feminine participants shared utilizing Facebook and other trans-feminine specific social networking sites.

Discussion

In the discussion of the current study's findings, the studies cited used U.S. samples. As the findings suggest, there are numerous resilience strategies the transgender youth of color in this study shared they used to navigate racism and transprejudice in the southern U.S. In particular for this sample of transgender youth of color, the racial/ethnic and gender identity development they experienced both contributed to their sense of resilience in being able to recognize and navigate racism and transprejudice. This finding aligns with literature examining the salience of intersecting identity development and experiences of multiple identity development for LGBTQQ youth (Adams et al. 2005; Parks et al. 2004; Poteat et al. 2009). The intercategory approach to investigating intersectionality allowed the study to individuate that the resilience strategies for these youth were often relational in nature—finding one's place within the LGBTQQ youth community and using social media to connect with other transgender youth of color and adults to affirm their identity. Because previous research has historically examined the barriers and mental health challenges transgender youth have experienced and rarely explore the lives of transgender youth of color in particular, the voices of the respondents in this study help address many gaps in the literature.

In addition to the importance of these youths' multiple identity development processes, the youths' resilience was also comprised by their ability to develop self-advocacy skills in educational settings. Although this self-advocacy theme had a predominant school focus, the youth also seemed to use self-advocacy skills were important in community settings, as well as within their families and peer networks. The theme of the youths' self-advocacy skills appeared to have some overlaps with several other themes. For instance, adultism was a major barrier the transgender youth of color in this study experienced, and

their specific ability to recognize adultism was also a significant aspect of their resilience. In navigating adultism, youth described being able to advocacy for themselves at different levels and with varying levels of success.

It was also important for this sample of transgender youth of color to find their specific place within the LGBTQQ community. This finding is similar to research conducted with LGBTQQ youth of color (Aleman 2005; Arnold and Bailey 2009) and transgender adults of color (Singh and McKleroy 2011). These studies have identified that racism often positions LGBTQQ youth and adults of color within a marginalized position within the LGBTQQ community as a whole and can be marginalizing for LGBTQQ youth and adults of color. Similarly for the transgender youth of color in this study, a critical aspect of their resilience comprised of not only identifying their "place" within the LGBTQQ community, but also being able to finding other transgender youth and/or adults of color. Connecting with other transgender people of color in this manner helped the youth in this sample validate their experiences of racism within the LGBTQQ community, in addition to affirming their "whole" self. This particular sample was also a sample that was connected with and well-versed in the use of social media for affirming their identity as transgender youth of color. Although the use of social media has been more widely researched with cisgender youth (McHale et al. 2009), there has been little research on how transgender youth of color in particular use social media. The voices of this study's sample point to the importance of not only having access to the Internet to use social media to connect with other transgender youth and adults of color, but also as a potential skill in community-building that might be considered in intervention and prevention programs designed for transgender youth of color.

After data collection and analysis was complete, the author revisited the data to examine the major themes according to race/ethnicity and sexual identification to determine if there were any noticeable themes. The author identified several trends in the data with regards to the intersection of these domains. First, the multiracial trans-masculine and African American transgender women participants did not report engaging in self-advocacy in the educational systems to the extent that the other participants shared. Second, the multiracial trans-masculine and Chicana transgender woman reported interacting less with social support services. Third, the two AAPI participants (boi/genderqueer, transgender woman) did not use the resilience strategy of "finding a 'home' of supportive friends/peers." Because each of these trends reflects much complexity, future research is warranted on how to support transgender youth of color in developing resilience in these areas.

Implications for Practice, Research, and Advocacy

There are several practice, research, and advocacy implications from this study. It is important to keep in mind the southern U.S. context of the study, yet there are potentially important insights for transgender youth of color in other geographic contexts. In terms of practice, understanding the resilience strategies of transgender youth of color may help strengthen HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention programs. For instance, a previous qualitative study of 55 transgender youth of color and their HIV/AIDS risks (Garofalo et al. 2006) identified the need to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of transgender youth of color, especially as these needs relate to risk factors for these youth. The current study's findings provide information on various resilience strategies that may be integrated into HIV/AIDS prevention with this group. Researchers have also identified important school and community interventions for U.S. transgender youth in general (Singh and Burnes 2009; Gonzalez and McNulty 2010). The voices of the youth of color in this study may help inform these interventions in school and community settings so that consideration of multiple identity development, cross-cultural training about racism and transprejudice, support of self-advocacy skills, and use of social media may be prioritized as supports of the resilience of transgender youth of color. Because there appeared to be some differences between how trans-masculine and trans-feminine youth of color experienced their resilience related to self-advocacy, future research should further investigate the unique supports both need.

With regards to research, this study provides a unique glimpse into what transgender youth of color themselves identify as their resilience. This research may be best understood when also acknowledging the hostile school and community climates that transgender youth of color often face (McGuire et al. 2010). This study additionally provided new insights on the role of family support or lack of support in the lives of transgender youth of color, building on previous literature (Grossman et al. 2005). Future research should also seek to understand the resilience experiences of transgender youth of color who have complex experiences of discrimination due to multiple intersections of identities and contexts (e.g., transgender youth of color who engage in sex work or survival sex, experience homelessness, etc.). To investigate these areas, mixed method designs examining both the resilience and barriers that transgender youth of color may help better understand the dynamic processes these youth experience in the development of resilience. Although this study specifically used a feminist and phenomenological method to understand the voices of youth in this sample because of the early nature of the literature in this area, future research could also build on this study's

findings to conduct an in-depth grounded theory design and begin to develop quantitative studies that assess the resilience of this group. This research might also utilize diverse theories of feminism (e.g., multiracial feminism as discussed by Zinn and Dill 1996) in order to gain a more complex understanding of the diversity that exists within transgender youth of color communities. Building the literature in the study of resilience for transgender youth of color will assist researchers and helping professionals understand how to most effectively explore and integrate resilience strategies of these youth into and support their personal and academic success.

Advocacy was a major theme for this study's participants. Particularly, self-advocacy in various forms reflected the youths' resilience—in educational systems and also in other social interactions. In understanding this theme and its relation possibly to the adultism, racism, and transprejudice these youth also experienced (often simultaneously), it is also becomes critical to identify how adults may become advocates for transgender youth of color to address these oppressive systems. The safe schools movement, for instance, has long advocated for the safety of LGBTQQ youth, and there has been increased attention to the bullying these youth experience (Singh and Burnes 2010). However, there has been less attention to the dynamics underlying these bullying and safety concerns in schools—which often occur in response to LGBTQQ youth stepping outside of “binary” gender roles whether these youth are cisgender or transgender. Therefore, advocacy for transgender youth of color could include more depth in attention to gender identity and expression and valuing of these youth, in addition to also acknowledging the deleterious effects of racism on these youths' lives and racism's unique intersection with transprejudice for them.

Overall, the intersectionality and feminist empowerment theoretical framework shaped how the researcher viewed the topic, interpreted the data, and presented the findings. This theoretical approach allowed previously defined categories (intercategorical approach) of race/ethnicity, transgender, age, and their intersections to be understood for the sample (McCall 2005). In addition, the feminist tenets (Worell and Remer 2003) focused specifically on the mechanisms of power (e.g., adults, school systems, healthcare providers) and conceptions of liberation, empowerment, and valuation of their racial/ethnic and gender identities as they related to resilience.

Limitations of Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, the interviewees in this study responded to the call for this study because of their own resilience, as it was a criteria for study participation. Therefore, understanding the youth in this study requires being mindful of this factor. Future research

should also explore further the barriers to resilience and the more complicated intersections of racism and transprejudice that are more challenging for transgender youth of color to recognize and negotiate. For instance, the resilience of youth of color who engage in sex work or survival sex due to employment discrimination or other barriers may have very distinct experiences of resilience that this study did not capture. In addition, this study might have sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of the differences between and similarities amongst transgender youth of color who are trans-masculine or trans-feminine, and this is an important area of study for future research. Second, the findings of this study reflect the voices of the participants in this sample only. Qualitative research in general does not seek generalizability as its goal (Hays and Singh 2011); however, there may be some transferability of these findings to other transgender youth of color. Transferability in qualitative designs refers to the extent to which readers may “transfer” qualitative findings from a particular study to similar participants and contexts in practice and research (Marshall and Rossman 2006).

Third, the sample size of this study reflects the early nature of both access to and recruitment of transgender youth of color. Future strategies of sample recruitment might include working more closely with organizations serving transgender youth of color. Fourth, the respondents in this study were uniquely positioned in mostly urban environments in the South. Hence, the supports and barriers to their resilience were intricately tied to the unique access to or lack of transgender-positive resources in the large southeastern city in which they lived. A sample of transgender youth of color in a different geographic region may identify resilience strategies in different ways from this sample depending on their geographic context (e.g., LGBTQQ community support, sociopolitical environment, etc.). Finally, the research biases and assumptions of the researchers are both a strength and a limitation of this study. The findings of this study were analyzed from a feminist and intersectionality framework and a phenomenological tradition, which also reflect a value perspective on empowerment and resilience that may have obscured the ways that participants may not have been resilient.

Conclusion

The findings of this study address a gap in the literature with transgender youth of color as it relates to the resilience strategies these youth use to negotiate racism and transprejudice. The voices of this study’s findings provide a unique perspective on how researchers, practitioners, and advocates may better understand and ultimately serve transgender youth of color from a strength-based perspective.

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