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Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming College Students' Challenges, Supports, and Successes: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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We report findings from an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) college students' perceptions of their on-campus experiences. Participants reported their lived experiences of campus culture at PWIs Deep South. The data was viewed through a minority stress theory framework. Four major themes emerged: a) supports for students; b) barriers for students; c) undergoing personal change; and d) influencing systemic change.

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Researchers have noted a dearth of literature on transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) populations (e.g., Olson-Kennedy et al., 2016) and a need to identify training models, policies, and promising practices for higher education professionals working with TGNC students (e.g., Wagner et al., 2018). Herman et al. (2017) estimated that .6% of adults in the United States (U.S.) self-identify as transgender, and .7% of youth ages 13-17 self-identify as transgender. This number may be conservative. A Minnesota study involving 80,929 youth found that 2.7% of the respondents self-identified as TGNC (Rider et al., 2016). In higher education, the success of all students, and the nuances of the challenges that prohibit educational attainment are important to understand. TGNC students are a unique subpopulation in higher education. In this study, we utilized a phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences of TGNC students attending a PWI in the Deep South.

Literature Review

TGNC individuals are holistically impacted by their gender identities. We begin by reviewing physical and mental health impacts. Next, we review school outcomes. We conclude with literature about TGNC students on university campuses.

TGNC Health & Well-Being

James et al. (2016) reported the results of a national study of transgender individuals' experiences related to home, work, health, and school. Respondents reported psychological distress (39%), attempted suicide (40%), and five times the rate of HIV compared with the U.S. population (James et al., 2016). Indeed, TGNC populations have been shown to have largely disparate mental health outcomes compared to the general population, including elevated depression, suicidality, anxiety, trauma exposure, and substance use symptomology Valentine and Shipherd (2018). Tankersley et al. (2021) found that TGNC individuals 25 and under had negative mental health outcomes associated with discrimination, low social support, isolation, poor peer relations, and low self-esteem.

In a study of data collected from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, Lefevor et al. (2019) identified health differences between genderqueer, defined by Lefevor et al. as gender non-conforming, transgender, and cisgender participants men and women. All four groups had the same number of participants (N=892). Comparatively, the genderqueer group experienced greater systemic disparities (e.g., bullying, harassment, sexual abuse), distress symptomology (e.g., anxiety, depression), and self-harm frequency (i.e., self-injury and suicide attempt). Lefevor et al. (2019) also found that

transgender individuals gained mental health relief as they expressed and received affirmation for their newly emerged identities. Conversely, GNC individuals' use of they/them pronouns created conflict with the surrounding binary-centric culture as they continued to be misunderstood, resulting in elevated distress symptomology (Lefevor et al., 2019).

Although in need of support, TGNC individuals faced barriers to mental health care, including (a) (un)welcoming environments; (b) provider /staff lack of knowledge about TGNC; (c) stigma within the clinical setting (e.g., microinvalidations, ignoring pronouns); and (d) racial disparities and intersectional insensitivity (White & Fontenot, 2019). As they enter college campuses, TGNC individuals continue to face unique roadblocks.

TGNC Students on Campus

BrckaLorenz, et al. (2017) conducted a study of gender-variant students that attend U.S. universities (*N*=376,076). First-year and senior students were surveyed (1% identified as non-cisgender). BrckaLorenz et al. (2017) found that compared to cisgender peers, gender variant students were significantly more likely to major in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences but were underrepresented in Business, Education, and Health majors. BrckaLorenz et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of faculty affirming gender identities, using gender-inclusive pedagogy, and respecting students' indicated pronouns. Similarly, Maloy et al. (2022) found that TGNC students were represented at a 10% lower rate than cisgender peers in STEM majors.

Pryor (2015) studied student-faculty and peer relationships at universities. Pryor (2015) found concerning trends, including transgender participants reporting "*harassment, bullying, and apathy from classmates*" (p. 452). Other findings included being misgendered by faculty and withdrawing from class to avoid negative interactions with others (Pryor, 2015).

Seelman (2016) used National Transgender Discrimination Survey results to study the relationship between gender-appropriate campus housing, bathrooms, and suicidality. Seelman (2016) found that 25% of respondents were denied access to gender-appropriate bathrooms, and 21% were denied housing. Being denied access to gender-appropriate bathrooms and housing were found to have statistically significant associations with lifetime suicide attempt (Seelman, 2016).

Finally, Messman and Leslie (2019) used a national sample (*N*=32,964) to study the academic resilience and health outcomes of transgender college students compared to cisgender peers. Transgender

students had significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, suicide attempt, self-harm, anxiety, trauma, and stress (Messman & Leslie, 2019). Transgender students reported higher incidents of physical assault, binge drinking, illicit substance use, and non-prescription drug use. Messman and Leslie's results (2019) matched other researchers (James et al., 2016; Lefevor et al., 2019; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). Yet, transgender students tended to be academically resilient, having grade point averages (GPAs) and academic efficacy equivocal to their cisgender peers (Maloy et al., 2022; Messman & Leslie, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) has been used in queer research to provide a framework for understanding outcomes and experiences faced by gender and sexual minorities (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2019; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2021; Rao & Mason, 2018; Tankersley et al., 2021; Velez et al., 2016). According to Meyer (2003), sexual and gender minorities experience two major types of stress: distal and proximal stress. Distal stress occurs external to the individual (e.g., discrimination or violence). Proximal stress occurs internally. Proximal processes may include internalized transphobia, feelings of self-loathing, or expectations that others will reject or disapprove of one's gender or sexual identity (Meyer, 2003). Proximal processes experienced by minorities may lead to poor mental and physical health outcomes.

For gender and sexual minorities, constant exposure to cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and pursuant discrimination and prejudices are a source of distal stress. Minority stress theory allows researchers to consider the ways that minorities have been viewed from a deficit perspective as well as the ways intersectionality plays a role in that deficit perspective (Tan et al., 2019). Further, environments that are more expressive and expectant of cisnormative and heteronormative standards, such as geographical areas where laws and policies are enacted that support such standards (e.g., the Deep South), may create more distal stress. One might consider states where "Don't Say Gay" bills have been proposed as a potential marker for such geographical spaces. Beyond geographical locations, specific spaces (e.g., medical centers) have been found to trigger stress experiences from sexual and gender minorities due to expectations of rejection (Rood et al., 2016). However, communities of support and relationships that provide encouragement and affirmation for minority identities can promote positive coping, health, and well-being (Meyer, 1995, 2003).

Operational Definitions

Key terms were used in this research study.

Deep South. The Deep South is a geographical area defined as five states: Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Some scholars include Florida and Texas in this area also. The area is defined by its antebellum history, poverty and racial demarcations, and conservative pollical leaning (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.).

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). PWIs are "institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollments" (Encyclopedia of African American Education, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The transition to college is a critical time to ensure students' physical health, mental well-being, and social needs are met. For TGNC students, such support may be even more critical. The purpose of this study was to gather contextualized information about the unique experiences of TGNC students to understand better the supports they might find useful throughout their college career. For students at PWIS in the Deep South, the context of being in a minority group in a situated conservative environment (based on Minority Stress Theory), will likely yield greater distal stress resulting in increased proximal processes that increase poorer health outcomes.

Research Questions:

1. How do TGNC students perceive their initial transition to campus life?
2. How do TGNC students describe their observations of campus culture at predominantly white institutions (PWI) in the Deep South during their time at their university?

Methods

For this study, we chose qualitative methods and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the study design (Smith et al., 2009). We chose this design because we wanted to access rich and contextual stories that would allow us to understand the personal nature of the participants' experiences (i.e., phenomenology) (Smith et al., 2009) and the commonalities that emerged from the group based on their lived experiences (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenon we studied was the lived experiences of TGNC students at PWI universities and colleges in the Deep South. The purpose of this study was primarily exploratory (Noon, 2018), that is to establish meanings through IPA (Alase, 2017) that might add to the extant body of research and the larger dialogue of ways to support TGNC populations on university campuses. As noted by Smith and

Osborn (2015), IPA is a design that is particularly useful when topics are complicated and emotional. Unlike other phenomenological approaches, IPA designs do not require as many participants as the analysis is inductive and is conducted with an interpretivist lens. We could focus on the participants' meaning-making using such a lens. Further, as noted by Alase (2017), IPA allows the participants to guide much of the interview flow without judgment and to explore their own stories without others narrating their stories for them. This is very important within a minority stress framework with the populations we were studying (TGNC) who may already feel marginalized by cisnormative and heteronormative cultures. A secondary purpose was to inform the development of a much larger mixed methods study of university policies and practices related to TGNC students led by this research team. We hoped to gain needed insights for developing future research by conducting this study.

Procedures/Analysis

We conducted five interviews and treated the data as a singular phenomenon. We used a semi-structured interview protocol and recorded and transcribed interviews. During analysis, we searched for the threads of meaning that the participants found in their experiences given their location (campus life, residence halls); changing life roles (coming out/gender transitioning; transition to campus; roles on campus); relationships (relationships with staff, faculty, peers on campus); and context (i.e., the campus culture). Our purpose was to look at the participants' experiences for commonalities or particular occurrences for this sample (positive or negative) and the meanings they assigned to these phenomena that influenced how they reacted to and with their environments. Transcriptions were read independently by a team of researchers. Each quote was considered, and codes were established through numerous discussions about the meanings and intentions of the participants. As with IPA, the individual quotes and data were considered within the larger context of the entire data set and the phenomenon being studied (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA is flexible, fluid, and allows for nuance, so the researchers shared many discussions and ideas to discover participants' words' importance and meaning. Once codes were established, the transcripts were read and coded separately by each research team member. For a code to be accepted, two out of three researchers agreed that the code was present in a particular quote. When one researcher only assigned a code out of three on the research team, the code was reconciled through review by the entire research team. If the researchers agreed that the code should be assigned to the quote, then the

code was added; if not, the code was deleted. Thus, all codes that made the final code count had the agreement of two or more researchers.

Participants. Participants were recruited for this study through snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria for study participation were to: (1) identify as transgender or gender non-conforming; (2) have already transitioned to TGNC identity (not considering a transition); (3) full-time enrollment at a PWI in the Deep South at the time of the study; 4) live on campus at the time of the study and 5) have lived on campus for a minimum of one semester while in transition or after having transitioned to TGNC identity. Five participants met these criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym and pronouns	Gender Identity (self-identified)	Age Range	Student Status	Sexual Identity	Types of Involvement
Atliss (he, him, his)	Transgender, Female to Male	18-20	Sophomore	Queer	Spectrum, Women's center, State Transgender Association
Alex (them, they, theirs)	Gender non-conforming	23-25	Senior	Queer	Queer Alliance equivalent
Aiden (he, him, his)	Transgender Female to Male	18-20	First year	Straight	Student Government, Residential College
Taylor (them, they, theirs)	Gender Non-conforming	20-22	Senior	Queer	RA, Residence Hall Association
Sage (them, they, theirs)	Gender Non-conforming	18-20	First year	Queer	Unknown

Trustworthiness and Rigor. To establish trustworthiness, all participants were interviewed either face-to-face or by Zoom. Interviews were transcribed before coding, and member checks were conducted to ensure accuracy. Participants were allowed to change, add, or delete comments. Analytic memos were kept during data collection and

referenced during analysis to assist in distinguishing the meanings derived by participants (e.g., notes taken on body language, vocal tone, and long pauses).

Ethics. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, and participants signed informed consent. Participants' universities were masked, and they chose pseudonyms for this study. In addition, participants' involvement in campus organizations was documented as part of this study; therefore, the organizations were also masked so as not to reveal participant identities.

Positionality

The first author (she, her, hers), is a national expert on career and college readiness counseling and studies college transitions, particularly for underrepresented, low income, and marginalized students. She has worked in student services and as a faculty member with K-12 and undergraduate students including college access and college support programming. The second author (he, him, his) has worked in clinical mental health counseling with LGBTQIA populations, adolescents, and other underrepresented groups and in the college setting. The third author (she, her, hers) identifies as Queer and has worked in Residential Life and student conduct. Through this work, she has encountered many different types of students in distress, including LGBTQIA+ identified students. We acknowledge that our prior work with students can lead to biases. Therefore, we used analytic memos, journaling, and member checking to mitigate these biases. Further, reflexivity includes reflecting on our data and the knowledge and feelings we have about our findings and research. We discussed throughout our analysis: 1) What do we know; 2) How have we come to know it; and 3) How have our previous experiences and biases shaped this knowing?

Findings

The findings are based on themes derived from the final code list. The codes were collapsed into the following theme categories: 1) positive supports for TGNC students, 2) barriers for TGNC students, 3) undergoing personal change, and 4) influencing systems change.

Theme #1: Positive Supports for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students

Participants described the individuals, resources, and organizations that fostered feelings of support, validation and a sense of belonging (*N*=141 total quotes coded within this theme). All five participants described how they identified a group of friends who were also TGNC after transitioning to

college. These friendships provided a safe space to discuss common problems, share information, and openly embrace their identities. Atliss described how he met his friends,

> We had five trans people in [our dorm] and we were all friends …it was awesome just to be surrounded by people like me. I'm still close friends with them, we just understand each other. We could talk about our dysphoria… how we felt about our bodies... We would go eat family dinner every day …the sense of community really made it work.

Atliss spoke openly about his concerns, including feelings about his body, with other TGNC students going through similar experiences. He ate dinner daily with friends, which he called family dinner, indicating it provided a safe space that felt like home. In essence, his sense of belonging to a group was enhanced through meeting these peers. He felt a sense of universality: they were all going through similar experiences with their bodies and could talk about it openly. Conversely, Aiden entered college at an institution with no gender-inclusive housing. Yet, he described making the most of his experience transitioning that first year,

> I lived on an all-girls floor … They were all sweet, accepting. Everyone used pronouns …. accepted me for who I was. I became the boy on the hall. I had a positive experience. My RA never made me feel less … I had no issues living with girls. I enjoyed it.

As Aiden transitioned, he felt supported by students in his residence hall. He added that the acceptance proffered by others might have been facilitated by his resident assistant (RA), "The activities that [RAs] do every month, one time she tailored one to have more gender inclusiveness because she knew about me. I had a really positive living experience."

Aiden did not find his entire campus experience supportive or welcoming, but his residential hall experience provided support during his transition. Aiden experienced his hallmates as accepting and his RA as welcoming and inclusive. In a sense, Aiden felt special. When he described himself as the "boy on the hall," he seemed to exude a sense that he was the one everyone accepted as both different but also admired for being his authentic self.

Similarly, Sage, a gender-nonconforming student, described a pleasant surprise on the first day of class.

> My [professor] asked our names and if you have a nickname to tell her. She said, 'If you also have a preferred pronoun, let me know.' She took the roll, she gets to me, and I say, 'Yes, I use they/them pronouns.' It was just totally cool.

Sage, the youngest of the participants in this study, repeatedly pointed out how college life differed from high school. They stated, "At [my university], everybody is on the same page...students are super motivated to get out or graduate and get on with what they want to do. There's really just no time to be hateful." When referring to high school, Sage used terms like "*cliquey*" and indicated that students "didn't want to be there." Throughout the interview, it appeared that Sage felt comfortable and accepted in the college atmosphere by faculty, students, and staff as compared to high school. According to Sage, college afforded an atmosphere that felt less judgmental.

In sum, the participants listed positive supports they received on campus; however, they focused more on barriers they had faced.

Theme #2: Barriers for Transgender and Genderqueer Students

Participants faced barriers, and most of the quotes were in this category (N=329 coded quotes). Barriers manifested in many forms and meanings. This theme had four main subthemes: structural issues, violence and safety concerns, disaffirming experiences, and marginalization within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Structural issues. Atliss described a structural issue related to his campus identification card. The card, coded by his birth gender (female), was manually coded each month by residential staff to reflect his transgender identity (male). This allowed Atliss access to his all-male residential hall. However, the university updated the system mainframe monthly, and his card would revert to his birth gender (female). If Atliss was out of the residence hall at the time of the system update, he could not enter upon return because the system did not recognize him as a male when he swiped his identification card. Therefore, he was locked out of the building. The staff would have to manually override the system again so he could use his card to enter the building. Similar structural frustrations involved showing up on class rosters with birth names that could not be changed unless students paid to change their names legally. Taylor explained,

> [My university] does not have a good name change process... I could put a preferred name so it would show up on their roster as my name, and in parentheses, Taylor. Professors didn't know what the parentheses meant. So, I was having to constantly correct professors. They would just read down the list, they weren't interested in knowing my name. Literally every day, 'No, that's not my name, we've been through this 30 times.'

Taylor's frustration was palpable. Having to repeatedly remind professors conveyed two things to Taylor: this issue was a marginal problem. In other words, only a few students were facing this challenge, so it was not a priority for the university. The second was that although his professor took roll consistently, his name was not important enough for his professor to write down or commit to memory. These types of encounters are confirmatory for students who are already experiencing marginalization. Alex described another structural barrier regarding gender-appropriate restrooms, "There are gender-neutral bathrooms stowed away in corners of buildings and not really easy to find." The implication was that gender-neutral restrooms might have been placed strategically in hidden places so that they were made available but not accessible. From Alex's perspective, the university purposefully did not give visibility to the needs of the TGNC community. From Alex's frame of reference, providing gender-neutral restrooms was more an act by the university to placate TGNC students rather than a step toward creating an inclusive environment.

Violence and safety concerns. Participants experienced various forms of violence or safety concerns. Sage shared,

> One time I did go on a date with this guy…We're just talking about stuff. He seemed cool. I was like, yeah, actually I use they, them pronouns. This boy looked me dead in the eyes and told me to go lynch myself.

Alex noted that campus culture lent to the feeling that TGNC students were not safe. These messages were often blatant, such as messages and images written on sidewalks in chalk (e.g., homophobic statements, transphobic statements, transphobic drawings). Alex shared, "The transphobia on campus has been boiling up. We'll have awful chalkings…I don't feel safe walking around at night or after football games or before football games." This feeling of danger imposed by transphobia, and a GNC-phobic culture, kept Alex from fully accessing campus life (i.e., enjoying ball games). Even in the absence of a direct threat, the presence of chalkings was a continued reminder that a transphobic and heteronormative dominant culture was a continued presence on campus. Safety concerns didn't stop with intimidating signs and graffiti. Aiden shared how he was nearly attacked,

> I was at [a bar] one time, and some guy jumped on me to attack me…One of my best friends jumped on top of him and said, "You do not touch him." You have to surround yourself with a safety net, especially in a culture that...I don't think it's right to say that necessarily they're dumb

> or anything, they just don't understand.

Aiden seemed to recognize that things might have turned out much worse if his friend had not intervened. He attributed the attacker's motive to not understanding. Still, a lingering shadow of violence was ever-present for participants. Atliss shared a story that exemplified this subtheme:

> I was biking back from my boyfriend's house…it was like 8:30 at night, and two dudes start chasing me and calling me a tranny and all that. I was biking fast, like looking behind me and they were running after my bike. But it was just scary. They're still running after me, and I ran into a pole and broke my knee.

For participants in this study, violence had a range. It came in many forms, including disparaging jokes from heteronormative and cisgendered peers, threats of violence, to physical injury. Violence felt ever present, lingering, malicious. The ongoing threat added was stressful and cast a shadow of anxiety over participants.

Disaffirming experiences. Beyond safety concerns, participants also had disaffirming experiences that involved interactions with others that left them feeling discouraged, invalidated, or angry. All the participants experienced some form of disaffirmation, such as others refusing to use their preferred names or pronouns, microaggressions and microinvalidations, and constant exposure to heteronormative culture. Alex described the following argument with a roommate,

> The things my roommate would say were hurtful and I remember one time, we had this knockdown, drag-out fight and she kept saying the gender binary doesn't exist. She's religious and she was talking about how God made everyone perfect. I was like, "Stop."

This argument left Alex feeling drained and angry. Their roommate's denial of their identity left Alex thinking there was no way to make progress in this discussion, and they eventually ended the relationship. Atliss described disaffirming experiences at the university health center,

> The worst experience I've had with staff has been in counseling and in mental health, or the student health center in general. The way they talk about me and my body, it doesn't make me comfortable. I tell them my preferred name, they have it written three times in the notes. But repeatedly, when counselors talk to me, they call me after our birth name.

Students may already feel vulnerable speaking with someone about their feelings or their

health, and this experience caused Atliss to avoid visiting the health center altogether. This was unfortunate, given the need by all university students to stay abreast of personal health needs.

Another disaffirming experience Alex described was regarding a student organization's dress code. The dress code did not match Alex's non-binary,

> I'm in an organization where there are two of us non-binary folk…The dress code is still binary and heteronormative. But you know we're here and we haven't been quiet about our pronouns. People know how we identify but they're like, "Girls wear white dresses, boys wear white shirts and khakis." And we're like, "And we just go naked, apparently."

Alex was given a binary dress code despite making their GNC status known. Their frustration with how the leadership handled their concern underscored problems beyond dress codes. The privilege of dominant groups to ignore the experiences of TGNC students is a consistent pattern.

Marginalization within the LGBTQ community. The LGBTQIA+ community did not always support TGNC students; there were times when TGNC students felt marginalized as a sub-population. Atliss gave an example,

> My biggest fear coming to college was that I wouldn't have a place here at all. That's one of the big reasons that I started [a transgender organization], because I still felt even in [LGBTQ groups] that there wasn't really a place. The constitution that I went through wasn't gender neutral, it said he or she…I was just like... y'all claim to be for everybody but... your constitution isn't even gender neutral.

Atliss pointed out this unique relationship between gender and sexual minorities that rarely gets attention. The need for safe spaces for all these populations is often compromised when they are lumped together. But four out of five had a sense of marginalization within LGBTQIA communities that led them to seek outlets for support. Atliss had even started a state-level Transgender organization, sometimes called a microcommunity in LGBTQIA literature.

Further, Aiden regarded the unique marginality of TGNC students of color. He speculated,

> I can't imagine being a trans person of color on this campus. Even white trans people have so much privilege over trans people of color. There definitely needs to be mandatory diversity trainings. People don't understand the privilege that they come from.

Aiden was the only participant to discuss intersectionality and privilege. This may have been because four out of five of the participants were white. However, the intersectionality of color and gender minoritization is a potential stressor practitioners and researchers should consider.

Theme #3: Undergoing Personal Changes

Within this theme, the participants shared lived experiences of an intrapersonal nature (*N*=84) while at their respective universities. These changes ranged from shifts in self-perceptions to physical, emotional, and cognitive transformations. Taylor described the emotional changes that occurred, specifically while transitioning and altering their physical appearance to match their gender identity,

> I think that having to come out was the hardest part… having to admit it to myself and then finding someone else to tell, because I needed to tell someone so that I felt more validated, and felt I was supported. Finding that outlet was a challenge, but not too much of a challenge.

Taylor described how the impact of their residential hall experience changed the way they viewed their future career choice. Specifically, Taylor had worked as a resident assistant which had introduced them to opportunities to change the residence life system and make it more gender inclusive for students. Taylor had decided after finishing their bachelor's degree to apply for a master's degree in Student Affairs. Their goal was to specialize in Residence Life to help create positive situations for future students. The experience of working in Residence Life gave Taylor a space where they felt validated and liberated to transition to their true identity.

Sage discussed how their gender non-binary roommate helped with learning to make physical changes. "I have a binder and when I put it on, I can be 'Hey, does this look flat? Do I look less curvy?' Sage described their roommate's assistance as supportive and encouraging. By having a space to try on the binder, experience how it looked, and receive feedback, Sage was given the freedom to express their identity and transform in privacy while being affirmed.

Atliss described feeling more self-confident when speaking to others and educating them. He gave an example of being asked to define transgender and gender non-conforming,

> Defining it is difficult…I do workshops to teach other students about [gender identity], and I can never get a concrete definition down. You're different than most of your peers which isn't bad, and a lot of people are receptive. I had one person tell me he didn't

> believe in me because of his religion, and I was like 'okay'.

Atliss gained the self-confidence, despite feeling different from others, to provide training on campus. He did not need the validation of other people. Rather, he found the support he needed to continue to grow and gained a sense that being unique was not negative. This changing mindset empowered him to advocate and love himself regardless of the opinions of others.

Theme #4: Influencing Systems Change

Within this theme, the codes (*N*=158) reflected participants' shift from facing challenges to changing systems to address barriers. After facing their own struggles, these participants developed a sense of meaning and purpose. All the participants, except Sage, had joined, taken leadership roles, or started organizations that supported TGNC students. Participants discussed advocacy, educating others, and leading reform within this theme. Aiden connected his advocacy to the support he had received on campus and the strength he derived from his new "family." He thought of his voice as special and carrying a unique, metaphoric power:

> I don't come from a supportive family. Coming [to college] and finding a family that was supportive was important. I think that gender non-conforming people have this special voice, far beyond being non-conforming gender, it goes into how men view women and how women view themselves in society. It's a much bigger subject and the fact that we are actively saying these gender constructs that you have created maybe aren't the most concrete… that's important… on college campuses where people are going to get an education I think making sure that we extend past the typical bathroom issue or something like that, extended to a conversation about feminism and what does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be neither? That's something that a gender non-conforming student can represent at universities.

Although raised in a home where his family had not accepted his transgender identity, Aiden had found a new family that supported who he was, including his ideals and voice for change. This fortified Aiden's resolve to make an impact well beyond the TGNC community.

Similarly, Alex noted that attending an institution in the Deep South, where conservative values surround them, might lend to a greater need for advocacy. However, they embraced this challenge and appeared

to relish the opportunity to have an impact. They stated,

> It's a lot of good advocating, not only for my organization, but a lot of minority organizations on campus. I think the largest impact is seen here in the Deep South because there's so much resistance. My friend said, "You could go to the northeast, where people are more accepting and the discrimination and bigotry are subtle but still present, obviously." It would've been easier in a sense... That's just our perception. But you wouldn't have that experience of really being on the ground fighting those battles.

The feeling of fighting the battles and making a difference motivated Alex. Although they perceived that moving to another geographical location might be personally easier, the need to advocate for TGNC rights was paramount to them. They also acknowledged that although discrimination may not be explicit somewhere else, it was likely still present.

Taylor described how making systems changes was a powerful change in their life. Taylor had given a presentation on equity and access to residential halls after having difficulty gaining access to a residential hall as a gender non-conforming person.

> I did my training presentation for the spring, and everyone said, "Let's figure out what else we can do to help." I was like, "I helped initiate this thought process." I like making people realize they can do something, and they have the power to make a change. That was something that I never thought I was going to have the opportunity to do here.

Taylor had found meaning in changing the system so that other students would more easily navigate residential halls in two ways: (1) logistically (i.e., finding a gender-inclusive residential hall) and (b) by creating inclusion through supportive networks. By working with residence life and creating this training presentation for staff, they had influenced change. More so, they recognized that they had the power to make a change, something that previously seemed unlikely.

Discussion

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine (1) How do TGNC students perceive their initial transition to campus life? and (2) How do transgender and gender nonconforming students describe their observations of campus culture at a PWI in the Deep South? Four themes emerged: a) supports for TGNC students, b) barriers for TGNC students, c) personal changes, and d) influencing systems change. Findings were analyzed through a minority stress framework. Implications for future research were discussed.

Participants described their experiences in nuanced ways. Regarding research question one, a major transition barrier for TGNC students was the room selection process and on-campus living options. None of the participants had the option for gender-inclusive housing during the application and enrollment process. Only two of the participants were able to move into gender-inclusive housing by request after moving onto campus. This finding echoed previous research indicating that students may be able to find gender-inclusive housing. Still, often, it is not openly advertised so as not to offend cisgender parents and students (Wagner et al., 2018). Another participant transitioned after arriving on campus in the first semester (female to male) and remained in a female hall post-transition due to having no other housing option. Other problems existed, such as concerns about safety and violence, student identity cards not matching names, and emerging difficulty with mental health professionals lending appropriate support, which paralleled the findings of other researchers (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017; Seelman, 2016; White & Fontenot, 2019). Beemyn (2019) and Siegel (2019) both noted that digital misgendering occurs when universities and colleges have no mechanism in place to accommodate students preferred pronouns, new names, nicknames, or non-legal names within software systems for the purposes of university identification cards, class rosters, and so on.

As a result, gender is a fixed structure in many institutions, even if individuals are more fluid in their gender identities. For research question two, the majority of participants described their campus cultures as predominantly challenging. However, participants also described positive supports found on campus, including staff, faculty, or friends. Several participants found this support particularly comforting during their transition or coming out process, and some had created communities of support that felt like families. Yet, even when participants felt supported, some supports were problematic. For example, the instructor in Sage's story asked students their preferred nicknames or pronouns during the initial course roll call. The professor in Sage's story, although attempting to be inclusive, asked students to disclose nicknames and pronouns publicly. We assumed the instructor made this request in the spirit of welcoming all students. However, some TGNC students might feel outed by such a public overture. This might have been better handled by sending an email to students on the roster ahead of the class and asking for this information or allowing students to meet privately before class to share this information so that students don't have to share their preferred pronouns openly in public. This is especially true considering some

transgender students may have already transitioned between initial enrollment in the institution under their birth name and gender and the first day of any given course. Another case in which support was problematic involved participants joining organizations that included them (even LGBTQIA++ organizations) but did not acknowledge their unique gender identities in specific aspects. Examples included having a constitution with gendered language or a binary dress code policy. Another example was given by Atliss, who had begun a peer education program and was told by an audience member that religion kept the individual from believing in Atliss.

Having affirming and disaffirming experiences on campus matched findings by other researchers (e.g., Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). However, a predominant pattern within the current study is that there was almost three times the number of codes (N=329) for barriers participants faced on campus compared to supports. This ratio of negative to positive experiences fit with Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003). Although there were many difficulties faced, some that were particularly concerning included: being outed by professors, having professors and staff refuse or forget to use new names or pronouns (including mental health counselors), not having access to gender-inclusive housing; not having a formal name change process through the university; not having an opportunity to change names on course rosters; not being able to change names or gender assigned on the university issued student identification card; limited access to seemingly “hidden” gender-inclusive restrooms; and feeling unsafe on campus. The sheer number of difficulties faced by participants reflected their experience of distal stress as described by Meyer’s minority stress theory (2003) and paralleled the findings of other researchers (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2019; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017; Rao & Mason, 2018; Seelman, 2016; Tankersley et al., 2021; Velez et al., 2016).

Noteworthy, participants derived many different meanings from the challenges that they faced. These meanings manifested in two distinct ways. The first was through undergoing personal changes, and the second was through influencing systems changes. The participants changed such as physical transformation to their self-proclaimed true identities (e.g., female-to-male physical transition, change to gender non-conforming). Another self-change was the development of self-confidence. Several participants noted that these changes occurred once they reached their respective universities and established a peer group of support. This finding corresponds to the academic conclusions made by Messman and Leslie (2019) that

despite TGNC students' challenges, they built a lot of grit and resilience that led to self-confidence. This grittiness manifested through leadership, advocacy, and work to educate others. For participants from homes where their new gender identities had not been accepted, finding the support of other TGNC individuals appeared to create a corrective recapitulation of the family unit, which in turn appeared to liberate these participants and allowed them to take on challenging these injustices (Yalom, 2005). These recapitulative experiences appeared to mitigate the proximal processes that might lead to the internalization of distal stress and poor mental health outcomes (e.g., internalized transphobia and depression) (Meyer, 1995, 2003).

Another meaning that emerged for all the participants was the importance of advocacy and education on behalf of TGNC. Participants sought actionable ways to mitigate the challenges they had faced for others. Most sought leadership opportunities, even chartering new organizations, to address concerns of the TGNC population separate from global LGBTQ groups. Others sought to change organizations they were affiliated with or to become employed in housing and other on-campus groups. Two participants had become resident assistants, and one decided to pursue a Master's degree in Student Affairs with a specialization in Residence Life to impact policies and practices for TGNC students in residence halls. Again, these experiences appeared to alleviate distal stress and improve mental health outcomes for these participants.

Four out of five participants had negative mental and emotional experiences on their campuses, yet they used these challenges to induce change (e.g., leading workshops and training seminars). This finding matches a supposition of Minority Stress Theory that communities of support and positive relationships can provide the validation and assistance needed to foster optimal wellness, including social, mental, and emotional functioning (Meyer, 1995, 2003). This may explain why participants could leverage the support and encouragement received from their peer networks into leadership and community engagement.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, our study is not meant to be generalized, but the findings are possibly transferrable. However, these participants' experiences are contextualized to universities in the Deep South and PWIs only. It is often difficult to find TGNC individuals to interview as these groups are a small subpopulation. Many potential participants may fear being outed or be leery of researchers and their intentions. Therefore, we used snowball sampling and could only get five

participants for our study. We also likely attracted participants who were most prone to leadership and advocacy rather than those who had not found support systems or a voice to lead and advocate on their respective campuses.

Implications

Practice

Participants underscored the importance of having an infrastructure of support for TGNC students upon their arrival to university campuses. This infrastructure should include high-impact practices such as a TGNC specific gender inclusive application and enrollment process for housing, a way to indicate preferred name, pronouns, and gender choice changed in the university identification system without expensive legal changes, and university faculty and staff training on culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusion protocols (BrckaLorenz et al., 2017). In addition, as was indicated previously by White and Fontenot (2019), having mental health services and medical staff on campus trained for TGNC student concerns is critical.

Research

Future research might include a review of university inclusion policies, specifically university housing, research on staff and faculty perceptions of their roles in supporting TGNC students, and a review of training provided to faculty and staff for addressing TGNC students' needs. Finally, a study of TGNC students' leadership and post-graduation plans may be warranted, given the leadership roles of participants in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine TGNC students' lived experience at PWIs in the Deep South. The findings were analyzed through an interpretivist lens using a Minority Stress Theory framework (Meyer, 1995, 2003). Students described a range of experiences, including positive supports, barriers, personal changes, and how they influenced systemic change. Distal stress (Meyer, 1995, 2003) was confirmed primarily through violence and other perceived ongoing lack of safety and belonging and through institutional structures that were largely cisnormative (e.g., registering under the legal name with no way to change that name—digital misgendering). However, proximal processes (e.g., internalizing transphobia) were mitigated through positive supportive relationships, feelings of inclusion in a group, leadership-building capacity, and self-advocacy.

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