Retrospective Research of the Transgender Experience during Adolescence: Implications for School Counselors

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Goal of the Research in San Francisco

- To learn about the psychosocial issues faced by transgendered people during adolescence by retroactively examining their experiences
Team of Researchers

- Markus Bidell
- John Blando
- Graciela Orozco
- Laura Strom
- Chav Doherty
Methodology

- Quantitative and qualitative data
- Anonymous mailed surveys
- Sample: Adults recruited at Gay Pride events, snowballing techniques
- Survey approved by Institutional Review Board in Feb 2007
- Quantitative data analyzed through SPSS
- Qualitative data analyzed for themes/patterns
Sample Survey Questions

- In your own words, how did you identify/describe your biological gender as an adolescent?

- How did you identify/describe your gender identity as an adolescent?
  - Male-to-Female/Transwomen
  - Female-to-Male/Transman

- In your own words, how did you identify/describe your gender identity now as an adult?
# Diversity of self understanding with regard to gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How you described your gender as an adolescent (n=33)</th>
<th>How you describe your gender as an adult (n=33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (27.3%)</td>
<td>6 (18.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-to-female</td>
<td>Male-to-female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (3.0%)</td>
<td>4 (12.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 (54.6%)</td>
<td>6 (18.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-to-male</td>
<td>Female-to-male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (12.1%)</td>
<td>17 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused/didn’t</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (3.0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnicity & Age

- 25 White, 3 Mixed heritage/biracial; 2 African American; 2 Hispanic; 1 Native American.
- Ages ranged from 21 – 59, with the average age of respondents at 40.5 years.
Level of education achieved

- 27 of the 33 (82%) completed a BA degree or higher.
  - PhD = 2;
  - JD = 1;
  - MA = 8;
  - BA = 16;
  - AA = 1;
  - No degree = 1
  - No response = 4

- 3 dropped out of high school; one later completed a BA; a second completed an MA, and the third does not have a college degree.
Findings and Discussion

- Participants reported first recognizing they were transgender around nine years of age, although the range of responses varied from two through 42 years of age.
Findings

- A majority of respondents reported:
  - family conflict (n = 23, 69.7%),
  - verbal harassment (n = 25, 75.8%),
  - being conflicted with their gender identity (n = 23, 69.7%), and
  - physical assault (n = 17, 51.5%).
Findings

- A large number of respondents reported that as youths they were,
  - depressed (n = 26, 78.8%),
  - anxious (n = 26, 78.8%),
  - suicidal (n = 19, 57.6%), or
  - had problems with drugs/alcohol (n = 15, 45.5%).
Findings

- Large numbers or respondents reported post traumatic stress symptoms as adolescents:
  - Hyper-vigilant (n = 18, 54.5%),
  - Disassociating (n = 17, 51.5%),
  - Difficulty concentrating (n = 21, 63.6%); or,
  - Irritable (n = 16, 48.5%).

- DSM-V diagnosis: Developmental Trauma Disorder; response to chronic exposure to interpersonal trauma in childhood.
Findings

- Utility of contact with school professionals, other mental health providers as an adolescent
  - most (n = 29, 87.8%) never discussed gender with a school professional (including school counselor, school psychologist),
  - of those who discussed gender with outside mental health (non-school based) providers (n = 13, 39.4%), only 2 respondents felt the provider was helpful.
Qualitative Themes and Discussion

- Feeling Different
- Victimization
- Alone and Powerless
- Hope
Theme 1: Feeling Different

- First recognized their gender identity was different from their physical appearance as male or female around 9 years of age (M=9.67)

- What was it like emotionally for you when you realized that your biology and gender identity were not congruent?
  - Experienced sadness, confusion, aloneness, being overwhelmed, withdrawn, depressed, ashamed, self-critical.
“I was very young when I first realized that I felt like a girl, but had the body of a boy. I was probably 3 or 4. At that time it was mostly just confusing. I didn’t understand why I wasn’t going to be a girl. As I got older and entered grade school I had a lot of sadness about having to play with boys and identify as male. I would at times stand alone on the playground watching a group of girls playing and I would feel the deepest sadness that I couldn’t be a girl too.” (Transgender adult, age 33)
Theme 2: Victimization

☐ A national study (Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2012) found that nine in ten of transgender adolescents are harassed in school.

“the verbal and physical harassment by my peers in school was severe. ... Afraid of others because I understood how dangerous it was to be this way” (Transwoman, 46 years old)
Theme 3: Alone and Powerless

“Despair. I used to sob at night in my bed when I was 9 or 10. I had never heard of a transperson so I never even thought I could become a boy. I knew I was trapped for the rest of my life and I could never have a body or name that I wanted and I would always feel humiliated, everywhere I went…. ” (Female-to-male, 28 years old)
An overwhelming majority (n = 29, 87.9%) of survey respondents never talked about their gender identity issues with a teacher, school counselor, administrator, coach, social worker, or school psychologist while attending the K-12 schools.

Only 4 of the 33 respondents (n = 4; 12.1%) talked to an adult in the schools about being trans or feeling different:
- one spoke to the school counselor about having feelings of womanliness,
- another respondent was able to connect with a caring coach,
- a third respondent came out to a teacher and a small group of students in a supportive class, and
- a fourth respondent discussed feeling like a girl with a teacher.
Mental health providers were not helpful

- 13 participants (39.4%) had access to mental health providers outside of school settings, but the services were not helpful. Participants did not feel comfortable.

- The professional “kept steering me into why I wasn’t more like what my parents wanted me to be” and “it wasn’t helpful to go to professionals who did not want to hear what I had to say because of their own discomfort.”
One participant found mental health provider who was helpful

- I saw one school counselor, one psychologist and three psychiatrists, only the last of whom was helpful. I talked all about gender with him: from how I felt about my body, what I would like, and my relationship with my parents regarding gender. His direct, unashamed manner of talking about things was a real relief and made me feel more comfortable talking about sex. (Female-to-male, 22 years old)
Need more advocates in the schools

- What could high school counselors, teachers, and administrators have done to be helpful to trans children and teens during their adolescence?
  - Information and role models would have been helpful to them
  - Schools could work on creating a climate accepting of transgenderism and transpeople.
  - The need for school counselors who can develop trusting relationships with transchildren; affirm that trans kids are OK; a need for school counselors to be knowledgeable about gender non-conformity.
Needs in the schools

- A few female teachers offered me safe haven in their classrooms when I was being chased and beaten. I wish there had been more of those teachers. (I wish they) had included LGBT issues/educators in the curriculum to lessen the violence and bring in support for youth. (Female-to-male, 35 years old)
Theme 4: Hope

- There was a shift to alignment. A beginning to feel whole. Since identifying my problem, I have been able to approach my life in a more genuine manner rather than guessing at how I should be. The male thought began to flow freely, not stuffed down by the expected female thought. I began to feel free since I had a definition. (34-year-old Male)
Despite two decades of bulimia, I now don’t hate my body. I respect it and even sometimes like it, despite the conflict with feeling male. I also don’t hate my female side. I have always liked being a very masculine female. Perhaps I am a two-spirited person who wants to be male physically/sexually?...Yes, I wish I had realized this truth 20+ years ago… My dream/goal is to be authentic, to know who I am and who I want to be in the world. … Now, I am free to do/behave/dress/talk/express in ways natural to me! (Female-to-male/transman, 44 years old)
Conclusion

- Results from our research indicate that transgender youth endure many psychosocial problems growing up and have few adults to turn to.

- I was afraid. I’d always been afraid at “seeing” the hidden truth. Once exposed and shared initially with therapists and close friends, I felt an incredible sense of freedom and joy. I’d finally hit upon the truth. I believe my denial, hiding of this, was at the core of my eating disorder, alcohol abuse and gambling addiction. (Female-to-male, 44 years old)