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To cite this article: Jama Shelton, M. Alex Wagaman, Latoya Small & Alex Abramovich (2017): I'm more driven now: Resilience and resistance among transgender and gender expansive youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, International Journal of Transgenderism, DOI: [10.1080/15532739.2017.1374226](https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2017.1374226)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2017.1374226>



Published online: 22 Sep 2017.



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I'm more driven now: Resilience and resistance among transgender and gender expansive youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

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ABSTRACT

Background: Little is known about the resilience strategies of transgender and gender expansive youth and young adults (YYA) experiencing homelessness. In addition to difficulties accessing trans-affirming supports and services, transgender and gender expansive YYA must contend with structural constraints and oppressive messages about who they are and who they can become. Despite these challenges, transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness are finding innovative ways to resist the multiple and overlapping institutionalized challenges they face.

Methods: This qualitative study examined the ways a group of transgender and gender expansive YYA demonstrate resilience and resist dominant narratives about what it means to be young, transgender and experiencing homelessness.

Results: Two primary themes were identified through which transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness demonstrated resilience in the midst of structural constraints and oppressive narratives about who they are and who they can become: personal agency and future orientation. Participants exercised personal agency through self-definition and making their own choices. They oriented themselves to future possibilities through positive meaning-making and re-visioning the meaning of home. Participants engaged in these acts of resilience and resistance despite receiving negative messages about themselves.

Conclusions: Study findings illustrate the capacity of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness to reframe their challenges as positive experiences, integral to the people they have become or will be in the future. Findings point to the need to expand conceptualizations about people experiencing homelessness, and to utilize a strengths-based framework in practice and research.

KEYWORDS

Gender expansive; resilience; transgender; youth homelessness

Background and purpose

Transgender and gender expansive youth and young adults (YYA) are disproportionately represented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness in North America. In a survey of street outreach programs in the United States, 7% of young people surveyed ($N = 656$) self-identified as transgender (Whitbeck, Lazoritz, Crawford, & Hautala, 2014). Similar prevalence rates were found in New York City, where 9% of unstably housed young people surveyed ($N = 317$) self-identified as transgender or gender expansive (Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence, 2015). Transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness frequently experience discrimination and violence, and face systemic barriers including institutional practices that deny their own

understanding and expression of their gender (Abramovich, 2016; Shelton, 2015; Thaler, Bermudez, & Sommer, 2009). Experiences of violence and discrimination towards transgender and gender expansive YYA are prevalent in school settings and within families of origin, resulting in a lack of safety in the very places where YYA spend a large amount of their daily lives. For instance, the U.S. based 2015 School Climate Survey reported that 86% of LGBTQ students surveyed ($N = 10,528$) heard negative remarks about transgender people at school and 51% of transgender students were not allowed to use their chosen name and accurate pronouns (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). However, school is not the only place where transgender and gender expansive YYA experience discrimination and rejection.

Because the family often provides the context within which a transgender or gender expansive YYA begins to assert their emerging gender identity, it is often where they first experience rejection and/or violence based on their gender identity assertion and/or gender expression (Koken, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2009). This violence and rejection can lead to homelessness. Though additional factors, such as other types of family conflict, a lack of affordable housing, and exiting the child welfare system, have been identified as contributing factors to homelessness among transgender and gender expansive YYA, identity based family rejection is the most frequently cited reason for homelessness among transgender and gender expansive YYA (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015).

Once homeless, transgender and gender expansive YYA continue to face discrimination, rejection, and violence in the systems that are meant to help them. These difficulties are often magnified for transgender and gender expansive YYA of color, who navigate systems at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding the experiences of multiply marginalized YYA, positing that social identities (such as race, class, age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, immigration status) intersect and impact one's experiences of oppression, privilege, and power in unique and different ways (Crenshaw, 1993). Housing, employment, health care, and social service systems are often not constructed for nor trained appropriately to meet the specific needs of YYA who have experienced multiple stigmas related to racism, cisgenderism, transphobia, heterosexism, and homophobia (Olivet & Dones, 2016). Young transgender women of color frequently experience severe marginalization in shelters, housing programs, and social services based on their gender identity, race, sexual identity, class, and age (Grant et al., 2011; Mottet & Ohel, 2003; Sakamoto et al., 2010).

Despite the challenges associated with the experience of homelessness, coupled with navigating often hostile social environments, transgender and gender expansive YYA are finding innovative ways to resist the multiple and overlapping institutionalized challenges they face. This qualitative study explores the ways a group of transgender and gender expansive YYA demonstrate resilience and resist dominant narratives about what it means to be young, transgender and experiencing homelessness by exploring the

question: how do transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness demonstrate resilience in the midst of structural constraints and oppressive narratives about who they are and who they can become?

Historical context

It is impossible to understand the experience of transgender and gender expansive YYA homelessness without first understanding the stigmatized status of social deviance historically assigned to youth experiencing homelessness as well as transgender and gender expansive people in the U.S. A brief synopsis of both follows.

Though housing instability among transgender YYA is only a recently acknowledged social phenomenon, "runaway" youth have been a part of U.S. history since the 1600s. The response at the time was punitive and focused on the delinquency of the "unproductive" youth with often severe legal consequences. The state further developed control of young people throughout American industrialization and urbanization, as expectations of youth began to change during the 1800s and legal and social distinctions emerged between adults and youth. These legal and social distinctions were reinforced through restrictions placed on and protections for American youth. Reform measures were passed regulating child labor and proposing mandatory education. State interventions for runaway youth marked the beginning of state control over the family unit. The development of the juvenile court system in the early part of the twentieth century further formalized the State's power over family matters (Libertoff, 1980). It is important to note that the perception of unhoused youth remained one of delinquency and the reforms of the time centered on mechanisms of control, due to the historic responsibility that police officers and court officials have borne for controlling these youth (Libertoff, 1980). In fact, youth homelessness in America was considered a criminal matter until recent decades (Ray, 2006; Varney & van Vliet, 2008). While being homeless in itself is not a criminal matter today, people experiencing homelessness are criminalized for conducting activities necessary for daily living and survival. Laws restrict where they can sleep, camp, ask for money, obtain food, and even sit down (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2016).

Just as youth have historically been criminalized based on their housing status, transgender identities have also been pathologized and criminalized. The criminalization of gender expression dates back to 1848 when municipal laws were passed in numerous American cities outlawing cross-dressing and placing a US\$500 fine on those appearing in public “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex” (Stryker, 2008, p. 32). Western medical discourses have heavily influenced the theoretical conceptualizations of transgender and gender expansive identities and subsequently the frameworks made available to the world at large (Sanger, 2008). This is not to say that medical intervention has not been beneficial for individual people. Indeed, medical intervention has been critical for many transgender and gender expansive people. Yet, the discourse of disorder that is central to the historical treatment of transgender people contributes to the ongoing oppression and stigmatization of transgender and gender expansive people and communities. Western medical models focus on a binary construction of gender, and a binary construction of transgender identity. The emphasized focus is ‘correcting’ gender deviance through reassignment to the ‘appropriate’ gender (Shelley, 2009, p. 30). This inherently oppressive framework reflects society’s frequent rejection and denial of transgender and gender expansive identities and experiences (Shelley, 2009).

Though not all professions endorse the medical model of correction and reassignment mentioned above, transgender and gender expansive YYA must interface with macro- and micro-systems that subscribe to such pathologically based understandings of transgender and gender expansive identities. Many social systems that should be helpful to transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness are informed by these pathological understandings. The result is a set of systems that either deny their existence (Bauer et al., 2009) or are ill equipped to provide safe and affirming care (Abramovich, 2016; Shelton, 2015). With minimal transgender competent youth programs within social systems, and limited family and community acceptance and connectedness, transgender and gender expansive YYA often find themselves on their own. On their own, they face the increased likelihood of coming into contact with the previously described systems developed for the purpose of controlling youth, particularly youth without housing, through a correctional, deviance-oriented

lens. As such, transgender and gender expansive YYA, particularly transgender and gender expansive YYA of color, are disproportionately involved in the criminal legal system in the U.S. (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012).

Though some progress has been made with regards to protections and representation in mainstream U.S. culture, advances are not guaranteed and are consistently threatened by a conservative backlash, enacted through hetero/ciscentric policies and hetero/cissexist practices (Mertus, 2007). These policies and practices reinforce the systemic oppression of transgender and gender expansive people, subsequently impacting the perception of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness in both the public policy and social spheres. For example, the current debate over bathroom access in states such as North Carolina (i.e., House Bill 2) has led to the creation of anti-trans legislation (e.g., House Bill 142) on the state and local levels, and limits the ability of transgender and gender expansive YYA to fully participate in schools, workplaces, and the public in the same ways as their cisgender counterparts (Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, 2016; Reset of S.L. 2016–3, 2017). The threats to the well-being of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness cannot be overstated, as they exist on every level of U.S. society. They are codified into law, institutionalized into systems, and enacted upon individual transgender and gender expansive people through interpersonal and structural violence (Butler, 2004). They are upheld by and further reinforce oppressive narratives about who transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness are, and who they can become.

Homelessness among transgender and gender expansive YYA

Recent needs assessments of the transgender population at large confirm the housing needs of the population (Grant et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mottet & Ohle, 2003; Hartzell et al., 2009; Xavier, 2000). While these studies are not specific to the subpopulation of transgender and gender expansive YYA, the findings indicate that housing instability is a primary issue among transgender and gender expansive individuals. In the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey ($N = 27,715$), 30% of survey respondents

reported experiencing homelessness at some point in their lives, and 12% within a year of the survey, because they were transgender (James et al., 2016). A similar needs assessment conducted in Washington, DC found that only 26% of participants ($N = 252$) were satisfied with their living situation (Xavier, 2000). Furthermore, housing was ranked as the most immediate important need of the participants. The State of Transgender California Report noted that one in five respondents ($N = 646$) became homeless at some point following their identification as transgender (Hartzell et al., 2009). While the findings underscore the challenges transgender and gender expansive people face with regards to housing stability, they do not speak directly to the experiences of transgender and gender expansive YYA. Transgender and gender expansive YYA likely face similar, if not higher, rates of homelessness given their age, familial dependency, and lack of access to income.

Once homeless, transgender and gender expansive YYA face multiple unique challenges. For example, they have difficulty accessing services such as shelter and employment support due to structural barriers that limit their safe access (Abramovich 2013, 2016; Shelton, 2015). Without access to these services, they are more likely to end up on the street or in public places where they may be victimized or engage in survival strategies that are criminalized.

In a recent survey of homeless youth service providers in the U.S., respondents reported that the transgender YYA they serve experience longer periods of homelessness than the cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) YYA they serve. They also reported that the transgender and gender expansive YYA they serve often present with greater mental and physical health needs than their cisgender and LGB counterparts (Choi et al., 2015). This is not because transgender and gender expansive YYA are inherently less healthy or inherently less able to obtain stable housing. Rather, it is the result of systemic oppression. Kidd and Davidson (2006) point to the need to examine larger social processes and social policies as they affect youth experiencing homelessness. To that end, studies of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness must be contextualized within a cissexist society that systematically marginalizes transgender and gender expansive people.

Resilience among transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness

Despite the challenges they face, many transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness demonstrate exceptional resilience, finding ways to survive and thrive while navigating a society that places seemingly insurmountable barriers in their path. Though research examining the specific resilience strategies of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness is scant, a burgeoning literature exists regarding resilience strategies of transgender youth. For instance, Singh and McKleroy (2011) reported that for transgender people of color, recognizing their gender and racial/ethnic oppression helped them to develop the ability to speak up for themselves, providing them with the language to assert themselves. For many, developing a sense of pride in their ethnic/racial and gender identities was a key component of their resilience to traumatic life events (Singh & McKleroy, 2011). Grossman, D'Augelli and Frank (2011) found that high self-esteem, perceived social support, and sense of personal mastery predicted positive mental health outcomes among a group of 55 transgender youth. Singh, Mengh, and Hansen (2014) described five supports to resilience for transgender youth, including self-definition of one's gender, connection to a community that is affirming of one's transgender identity, the ability to reframe mental health challenges, exercising agency within educational systems, and having supportive family and friends (Singh et al., 2014). Though not focused specifically on transgender and gender expansive youth, Asakura (2016) also identified five resilience processes of LGBTQ youth, including embracing their socially stigmatized identities, creating meaningful relationships, exercising personal agency, navigating safety in multiple contexts, and taking part in collective action and/or healing.

Similarly, researchers have examined the resilience strategies of youth experiencing homelessness (Bender, Thompson, McManus, & Lantry, 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Youth experiencing homelessness in Bender and colleagues' study ($N = 60$) demonstrated personal strengths such as motivation, coping skills, spirituality, and developing attitudes that helped them survive life on the streets. In addition to these internal resources, participants also identified peer supports and societal resources as key facilitators of

Table 1. Participant demographic data – age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation.

Descriptor	N	%
Age		
18–20	8	30
21–25	19	70
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	10	37
Mixed race	9	33
Hispanic	4	15
White	4	15
Gender		
Transgender woman/Female	10	37
Transgender man/Male	3	11
Woman/Female	5	19
Man/Male	2	7
Chose multiple labels	5	19
Don't care about gender	1	4
Boy-Girl	1	4
Sexual Orientation		
Queer	2	7
Gay	5	19
Lesbian	3	11
Bisexual	2	7
Heterosexual	8	30
Demisexual	1	4
Multiple labels	4	15
No label	2	7

survival (Bender et al., 2007). Finding internal strength, experiencing individual growth, gaining a stronger sense of self, and being connected to others have been identified as themes among youth struggling to make sense of their lives on the street (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Importantly, the duration of homelessness has been identified as a threat to resilience among youth experiencing homelessness. Cleverley and Kidd (2011) found lower rates of reported resilience among youth who experienced homelessness for longer periods of time.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the resilience strategies of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness and exploring the following research question: How do transgender and gender expansive youth experiencing homelessness demonstrate resilience in the midst of structural constraints and oppressive narratives about who they are and who they can become?

Methods

A primary aim of this research was to center the voices and privilege the self-described experiences of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. As such, an exploratory qualitative approach was utilized to achieve this purpose and to answer the research question. Secondary data analysis

was conducted on data collected for a larger project aimed at understanding the significance of housing instability and gender identity assertion among a group of transgender and gender expansive YYA with histories of homelessness.

Data were collected by a transgender/gender expansive researcher with extensive experience working with transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. Face to face interviews were conducted, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Participant narratives totaled 1,629 recorded minutes, for an average length of 60 minutes per interview. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ask participants to describe their experiences as transgender and gender expansive youth without stable housing. Participants were not asked specifically about resilience strategies, nor were they asked specifically about common risk factors associated with the experience of homelessness. Rather, the open-ended questions were broad in nature, allowing the participants to guide the conversation to the dimensions of their experience most salient at the time. Sample questions included: *Tell me about how you identify; What is it like to be* [the words they use to identify themselves]?; *Describe your journey from the time you left home until now; What is the meaning of home [and homelessness] to you?* Because these data were collected for an exploratory study seeking to understand the interplay between gender identity assertion and homelessness, no specific questions or probes regarding resilience strategies were employed.

Participants were recruited through homeless youth serving organizations and LGBTQ youth serving organizations in New York City. A brief demographic questionnaire determined eligibility. Eligibility requirements included age (between 18–25 years old), a history of homelessness lasting at least 60 consecutive days within the previous 18 months, and self-identification as transgender or gender expansive. Participants received a \$10 gift card to a local food establishment for their participation.

The institutional review board of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, USA approved the protocol for this study. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Analysis

Analysis in the original study was guided by the heuristic process of phenomenological inquiry (Patton, 2002).

Findings from the initial study illuminated programmatic barriers rooted in cisgenderism (Shelton, 2015), highlighted experiences participants perceived as positive (Shelton, 2016), and described participants' understanding of their pathways into homelessness (Shelton & Bond, 2017). An emergent theme of resilience was noted, and that theme specifically was explored in more depth in the current study. The Principal Investigator (PI) returned to the raw data to further explore the concept of resilience among the study participants. As in the initial study, a phenomenological framework was employed in the analysis. Phenomenological research is the study of what people experience and how they understand the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1983). The multi-step process of phenomenological inquiry outlined by Moustakas (Patton, 2002) guided analysis. The first step of analysis included data immersion. Transcripts were read through twice, and memos were recorded during the readings to guard against the threat of researcher bias (Padgett, 2008).

Following this immersive process, and with the concept of resilience in mind, the PI used an inductive, open-coding process to identify the ways participants made meaning of their experiences that demonstrated resilience. This process resulted in seven initial codes specifically related to the construct of resilience. The PI developed a codebook, with a single excerpt illustrative of each code. A random selection of excerpts was then selected and shared with the Co-PI, a queer scholar and practitioner with transgender and gender expansive YYA, along with the codebook. The Co-PI independently coded the excerpts. The PI and Co-PI then met to discuss the codes and came to a consensus regarding the instances when the codes did not match up. These initial codes were synthesized into two overarching thematic categories by grouping together related subthemes. For instance, "self-definition" (which included the codes "I'm different" and "Not homeless"), "making choices", and "self-love" were grouped together to form the overarching thematic category of personal agency. The subthemes "it had to be," "the future/home," and "positive meaning" were grouped together to form the overarching thematic category of future orientation.

Findings

The final sample included 27 transgender and gender expansive YYA with histories of homelessness.

Participants ranged in age from 18 – 25 ($M_{age} = 21.5$). The majority of participants identified their race as African American/Black ($n = 10$) or mixed race ($n = 9$). The over representation of YYA of color in this sample is reflective of larger studies of youth experiencing homelessness in New York City (Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence, 2015; Freeman & Hamilton, 2013).

Two primary themes were identified through which transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness demonstrated resilience in the midst of structural constraints and oppressive narratives about who they are and who they can become—personal agency and future orientation. Participants exercised personal agency through self-definition and making their own choices. They oriented themselves to future possibilities through positive meaning-making and re-visioning the meaning of home. Participants engaged in these acts of resilience and resistance despite receiving negative messages about themselves. The following sections describe each thematic category, utilizing verbatim quotes from the participants. Participants' initial and age are included with each quote. Prior to the presentation of the thematic categories, the oppressive narratives that participants were acting against are described.

Societal messages

Participants were aware of negative societal views related to transgender and gender expansive identities. They spoke generally of "society" being a harsh place that "doesn't want you" and of feeling misjudged based solely on their identity. N. (age 23) discussed the pressure to "fit in." For her, this meant it was important to be read as a cisgender woman when navigating society on a daily basis. She was aware of the potential danger she would face if she were to be "clocked," or read as a transgender person by people she came into contact with:

Like, being in society, you gotta worry about getting clocked and spooked, and um...I mean, just fitting in, basically. In society.

T. (age 23), relayed the messages she's received about societal perceptions of transgender women, particularly transgender women of color, as sex workers. T. communicated how difficult it was for her to not be seen in a positive light:

This is how society sees us is like, being hoes...prostitutes, but they don't see us in a positive way like working, have a house, have a car, have kids, they don't see us in that way. So that's the one of the hardest things for me right now.

Similarly, participants were keenly aware of their place in larger society as young people experiencing homelessness. They described feeling devalued and underestimated:

As soon as you're seen as homeless, you're seen as someone who's not able to collaborate. Whose voice doesn't count. (J., age 24)

R. (age 22) explained how it feels to deal with the dehumanization that can accompany an experience of homelessness and how it can take a toll on one's sense of self-worth:

Basically being told indirectly and directly by society and by politicians and by everyone around you that you're less than human because you're homeless and having to deal with the dehumanization that happens and being looked at like you're scum because you're homeless. People look at you like you're, like you're an annoyance. People look at you like you shouldn't be there, you know, you feel a lot of times that you are undeserving. You start really believing that.

R. went on to describe the staff of youth homelessness programs in a positive light, however, another participant noted the ways in which the negative dominant messages portraying YYA experiencing homelessness solely as victims are sometimes perpetuated by organizations that work with this population. J. (age 24) recollected visiting the website of the agency from which he was accessing services. He was bothered by the portrayal of the agency's clients as destitute, lonely, and relying on underground economies for survival. He commented:

You think we don't see what they put on their website about us? What they say about us? We do. We visit the website. We see what they really think about us. How do you think that makes us feel? Terrible. Just terrible.

In addition to the oppressive societal messages young people received, they were also given negative messages about their gender identity and expression from people in their lives – about who they are and who they could become. For example, I. (age 23) relayed the messages he received from his family of origin throughout his adolescence:

The messages that I grew up with, you know, from my mother like, you're stupid, you're a dyke, you're this, that and the third, you're not gonna amount up to anything.

Personal agency

Exercising personal agency showed up in participant narratives in two primary ways – through self-definition and through exercising choice. In defining themselves, they rejected negative societal narratives by differentiating themselves from what others thought about them – including family or friends who had given them specific messages about what they could and could not be – as well as larger cultural messages they had received and internalized. They also rejected these narratives through actively making choices that were counter to their understanding of societal expectations. Findings related to personal agency through self-definition are presented first, followed by findings related to personal agency through exercising choice.

Self-definition

Most of the YYA interviewed did not identify themselves as homeless. Some rejected the word outright, creating other words to describe their housing situation:

I came up with the term 'home unfortunate.' And my definition for that term is, it's unfortunate I don't have a real home. (T.C., age 24)

See I don't say homeless, I'm just leaseless. I'm just leaseless at the time. Homeless is like, like you don't have nowhere else to go. You have no resources. You have nothing. You're just a bum on the street begging for change. Leaseless means you just, you had your apartment at one time. You gonna get it but you using the resources to get it. And you're doing your hardest to get the lease (T., age 23).

Others shared their conceptual understanding of homelessness, and differentiated themselves from that understanding:

Nobody care for them, nobody don't even think of them, they're just like a ghost. It's like they deceased, but they still here in the natural. That's the way I look at it. Because people see you but then again they don't see you because you're homeless and they think less of you. It's like people, when they pass by you, it's your funeral. When they don't say nothing to you it's because you're deceased. They don't care nothing for you, that's the way I look at it. And I wouldn't say that I'm deceased, nor even homeless (Z.K., age 19).

One participant did categorize himself as homeless, but only after altering his conceptualization of what being homeless meant. He shared:

My image of homelessness it's like, I used to think old dirty guy, sitting on a corner, begging for change. Whereas now, it's...I look in the mirror and I'm like, well I'm not dirty, I don't smell, I don't have a scraggly beard, but I'm homeless. (C., age 21)

In addition to defining themselves in resistance to societal notions of what “homeless” means, participants also separated themselves from their transgender and gender expansive peers experiencing homelessness. Some of the participants internalized the negative messages they consumed every day, and used these messages as one way to differentiate themselves from their peers. For instance, T. (age 23), internalized negative messages about what it means to be “trans” as compared to what she referred to as “a genuine woman.” She said:

I don't see myself as being trans. I hate the word trans, 'cuz I don't see myself being trans. You want to see trans? You go on West 4th. As you come to me you see a woman. You see a genuine woman. Who works hard for her shit.

B. (age 23) shared her understanding of why transgender and gender expansive YYA may be critical of one another. She explained:

Around any social setting, like, even with people that are like yourselves because naturally we programmed to be so critical because everyone is so critical of us. Naturally we were very critical around each other so we always want to present as a certain way, act as a certain way and it just seems very shady and it was just...ugh.

While participants discussed the importance of finding others like them, others who reflected and affirmed their identities (Shelton, 2016), they also separated themselves from their transgender and gender expansive peers. This separation must be understood in the larger social context of the oppressive messages they have received and internalized. In making these distinctions, the participants often reinforced for others the same negative societal messages they refused to adopt as their own. R.E. (age 20) viewed the need to separate herself from her peers as a matter of life and death, she stated:

I don't get clocked on the street. People don't, like, see me, because I don't go all crazy. I'm very conservative. I

just do what I have to do. I walk down the street just like you do. And then some of the girls in New York like to do a little snap (snaps fingers) you know and I don't. I try to stay under the radar as much as possible, 'cuz I don't want to...I don't want to be on channel 4 news tomorrow for being in the alley dead or you know, have a Lifetime movie made after myself, so I'm just kind of, um, on the smallest radar down, all the way down there, you know.

Exercising choice

Participant narratives were populated with examples of exercising personal agency through making their own decisions. They described making decisions about where they would live, what they would do, and regarding how they chose to think about themselves and their experiences. Participants discussed deciding not to be angry about their housing status, because to be angry about it took too much energy that would be better channeled into their survival. C. (age 21) described how he decided to think about himself:

And pretty much like, realizing that if you go through life hating yourself then of course, life is gonna suck for you. But if you get past all that and refuse to let yourself be the result of just other people's reactions to you then I guess you can be happier as a person. You are not other people's reactions to you. You are not other people's opinions, you dictate who you see yourself as. Not other people. So I decided to make the point of seeing myself as someone who's pretty awesome.

YYA also made decisions about the steps they would take to improve their lives. Working against the structural barriers to employment, T. (age 23), enrolled in a program to become a peer educator. This decision was in part because she did not want to rely on the sex industry for income. She shared a story of running into some friends on her way to work:

Actually I saw two of them [old friends] when I was going to work. And it was like, really what are you doing now? I guess they expected me to say tricking. I guess that's what they expect. No. I'm going to the class to be a peer educator. And when, their, their mouths dropped when they heard that. They was like, really? I said yeah, and this is my coworker...I'm not gonna be one of them girls who have to sell my body (T., age 23).

Exercising choice also showed up in the YYA narratives related to where they chose to live. For system-involved YYA, exercising choice in this way is often perceived as non-compliance. However, when faced with consistent transphobia, running away or leaving

a housing placement can be viewed through a different lens. K. (age 19) described her experiences with child welfare placements:

When I came here it was like, when you go to church you gonna be a boy. When you go to school, you gonna be a boy. You gonna dress like a boy, you gonna act like a boy. When you go to the store...I'm like you know, you not fixing to tell me what I'm gonna be and what I'm gonna do in what place. I decide what, you know. I'm like ok. I'm going, I'm leaving. I refuse to change for anybody. I'm gonna be myself and y'all not fixing to put me... 'cuz they'll be quick to put you in one of them mental places for depression and I'm like, I'm really gonna be depressed if I do what y'all want me to do. So you know, I'm like no.

It is easy to imagine a young person like K. being labeled as noncompliant, or oppositional and for these traits to be viewed negatively, adding to her level of vulnerability or making her more "at-risk." However, K. explicitly described the ways her risk would increase – she would become depressed – if she did "what ya'll want me to do." Describing the need to be in places where they felt safe and comfortable was common among the participants. If they were in a particular housing situation in which those things were not true, they made their own determination to leave:

I don't feel very comfortable, I'm gonna leave. I'm gonna leave. Um....and that's what, that's what I do. (L., age 21)

These choices made by YYA can be viewed as a strength, as YYA knowing what is right for them and actively pursuing that through intentional choices, rather than as non-compliance with housing placements. Actively pursuing what one believes will work best for them is a sign of strength and motivation to carve out a future for oneself in the context of a world that does not readily provide affirming spaces.

Orienting towards the future

One day I'm not going to be homeless, so.... (C., age 21)

The narratives of transgender and gender expansive YYA study participants demonstrated their capacity to not only survive the life-challenging experience of homelessness, but to also make those experiences part of an inspiring life journey that was still unfolding. All of the participants were able to envision a future for themselves. Part of envisioning their future involved

making positive meaning out of their experiences, and by reimagining home.

Positive meaning

Though the participants described experiences on the street that were often scary, isolating, and dangerous, they also discussed ways they believed their experiences were beneficial. They emphasized that their lives would certainly be easier had they not experienced homelessness, yet they also described ways in which their experience of homelessness contributed to their growth and made them who they are today. At times, these benefits were directly related to their identification as transgender or gender expansive. For instance, A.J. (age 20) connected her experience of homelessness to her self-acceptance:

[...]part of like me becoming homeless was it became a part of me accepting who I was and like the process, I wouldn't have had been transitioning if I wasn't like, away from my family because they wouldn't have let me. It wouldn't have been as easy as it is now.

Similarly, R. (age 22) reflected positively not only about the people he met but also the way that meeting these people impacted his own development as a person, particularly as a man:

I would never have met the people, would never met my family, would have never run into the people that I've run into on the street. I really have been able to build up this kind of, like, life around me and build up this, like, a family around me. And it's just...and you know, I've also blossomed into, you know, into the man I am today.

Both R. and A.J. are two of several participants who experienced their homelessness as facilitating a pathway to assert their gender identity. Many transgender and gender expansive YYA in this study were unable to assert their gender identities in their homes and communities of origin. They found strength in their identities, as articulated by A. (age 22):

I mean the fact that I am transgender I think that's the only thing that keeps me strong in who I am, you know.

In addition to finding positive meaning related to their gender identity and assertion, participants shared the ways in which their experiences of homelessness made them stronger and able to cope with life's challenges. Participants took pride in their ability to survive and take care of themselves. One participant described herself as a "fighter." They also described

feeling grateful for what they had, even if “it’s not much” and feeling capable to handle life’s challenges. This capacity to manage the challenges of daily life as transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness helped participants like C. (age 21) and T.C. (age 24) to carry on, and to even look forward to the future. T.C. said “I’m a little more positive about life. And I look forward to it now.” C. shared:

I guess you’d say that I’m more driven now. ‘Cuz like, I’d say more driven to make a bright future for myself.

Revisoning home

One way that transgender and gender expansive YYA in this study oriented themselves to the future was by describing their visions of home. While some participants described obtaining an apartment or a house one day, other participants described home in a more conceptual way. They emphasized people over places:

It’s really not the place, it’s the people (A.J., 23).

Safety and comfort were common threads in their discussions of home, illustrating the importance of being able to freely live as oneself, without judgment or fear. Because many of these participants were not living in their homes of origin for reasons related to their gender identity and expression, visioning of home as a safe place where one can be themselves was particularly salient.

Interestingly, two participants referenced their homelessness as instances when they felt at home. When talking about home, K. (age 19) shared:

Home is a neutral space. Where I can be comfortable, feel safe, feel you know, just... be me. I won’t have to worry about anything. Anything like people just, ugh, the normal stuff. I won’t have to feel like I have to leave. I won’t have to feel like I have to hide certain stuff. You know, I could just feel free. Like I feel when I’m homeless, or I’ve ran away. That’s what I want to feel like when I have a place to stay – like I’m homeless. Like I don’t have a care in the world.

Similarly, R. (age 22) stated:

Well to me home is, home is subjective. ‘Cuz I would say that there were places that I considered home even when I was on the street. I guess to me home is somewhere where you can go and that you will be ok and that there are people that are kind of there for you.

J. (age 23) discussed the purpose of home. And that, once home, she will be free to give to others. Her

vision of home is one that sustains her, as well as other people. She said:

To me the purpose of the home...it’s almost like a, it’s like a generator almost. For the things that you want to go on outside of you. After you. It’s a place that you, it’s where you put your heart. It’s the little box you make for your heart. Whatever that may be. Where you’re safe and where you can freely give. Because you’ve made this place and this place helps sustain you, you can freely give to anything that’s in the space.

A longing for home was also present in the participants’ narratives. They had clear visions of what their home would be like, and they longed to obtain it. Z.R. (age 19) had difficulty describing her home, but the importance of home to her future success was evident in her narrative:

When I think about home, I think about a place, a relaxation place...where you can’t be judged. A place where everything is perfect, your own perfect domain. A place where you can just be yourself. A place where you’re surrounded by love, you know what I’m saying. A place... home, oh my god, oh. I can’t wait until I have a home. Like, when I cry or when I be depressed, that’s the only thing I want to say is, ‘I just want to go home.’ But I can’t say it because I don’t have one. Which makes me even more depressed, you know. But, home should be...I...I want to try and describe it then, like, I can’t. A home is just everything. I believe everybody should have a home, not a house, but a home. You know what I’m saying? A home...will get you far. To me, it’ll get me far, I know that much.

Discussion

This study explored the ways in which a group of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness demonstrate resilience in the midst of structural constraints and oppressive narratives about who they are and who they can become. Findings indicate that the participants were aware of negative societal messages regarding both their gender identities and expressions as well as their housing status. Participants resisted these dominant narratives through processes that can be understood as resilience strategies. Though literature is scant on the specific resilience strategies of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness, study findings are similar to previous research into the resilience strategies of transgender YYA and the resilience strategies of youth experiencing homelessness, such as exercising personal agency (Asakura, 2016; Singh et al., 2014),

developing attitudes that helped them survive (Bender et al., 2007) and developing a sense of identity and mastery (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). The findings from this study extend the research literature by offering unique insight into the resilience strategies of YYA at the intersections of these populations.

Findings reflect the importance of understanding the terminology that transgender and gender expansive YYA use to describe their housing status. Understanding terminology has implications for research and programmatic interventions. Phrasing questions about their experiences of homelessness requires YYA to identify as homeless. The data demonstrate that this is not a universal conceptualization of their experiences of housing instability. Point-in-Time (PIT) counts are the primary method used by the United States government to enumerate populations of people experiencing homelessness and to track progress towards addressing homelessness. When large scale efforts such as PIT counts rely on individual identification as “homeless,” they may inadvertently underestimate the number of people, in particular YYA, in need of housing and related services and support. Similarly, research recruitment strategies and programmatic outreach strategies that target the “homeless” may leave out YYA who do not identify as such. Further, self-definition emerged as one way participants exercised personal agency. This finding is consistent with the literature (Sing, Mengh, & Hanson, 2014) that postulates the act of self-theorizing one’s own gender and developing a stronger sense of identity (Kidd & Davidson, 2007) are resilience strategies among transgender youth and youth experiencing homelessness, respectively.

Study participants were aware of societal views related to transgender and gender expansive identities and related to homelessness. Societal views can impact the ability of a transgender and gender expansive YYA to obtain and maintain employment, necessitating they find alternative methods for earning an income. For many YYA experiencing homelessness, particularly young transgender women, structural barriers limit access to employment. In the U.S., no federal employment protections exist for transgender and gender expansive people. Further, transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness have limited access to resources necessary for authentic gender presentation. Additionally, a young person’s success on the job market is also highly contingent

upon where they are staying. If they are in a shelter, they have access to a shower (though they may not have ample time or privacy to complete grooming rituals). If they are couch surfing or sleeping on the subways, parks, or street, their ability to be presentable for an interview or a job is likely to be severely compromised. When transgender and gender expansive YYA are able to secure employment, they face high rates of discrimination and mistreatment (Grant et al., 2011). As such, their engagement in street economies can be viewed as resourcefulness, and the determination to survive.

YYA experiencing homelessness are often viewed through a one-dimensional lens as victims both by society at large as well as by service providers that are seeking to help (Bender et al., 2007). The way service providers, researchers, and activists talk about homelessness matters. Public messages that focus solely on risk and victimization may perpetuate stigma and reinforce oppressive narratives about transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017). YYA in this study were impacted by negative messages about their homelessness and about their gender identities. The YYA in this study were sometimes hypercritical of one another. One of the byproducts of living within an oppressive society and navigating discriminatory systems is internalized oppression. Helping transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness understand and respond to the oppressive narratives they encounter may enable them to engage in collective healing and action, a resilience strategy identified by Asakura (2016). It takes immense fortitude to navigate daily life as a transgender or gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. Understanding and communicating both the challenges and the strengths of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homeless may open up possibilities for their further success by countering stigma, focusing on their potential, reinforcing their strengths, and altering public perceptions (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017).

Participants in this study asserted personal agency by making their own choices about how they would think about themselves and also about the type of living situation that would be the best for them. The ability to make these choices, to resist the messages they had received, is indicative of extraordinary strength. Findings point to the need to support the self-determination of transgender and gender expansive YYA

experiencing homelessness, particularly when they must navigate cisnormative systems that are not able to provide safe and affirming accommodations. Whereas the act of leaving a housing placement or refusing to follow instructions regarding how one “should” act or dress may be viewed as non-compliance, findings suggest a different interpretation. Leaving non-affirming living situations was a resilience strategy for participants in this study. When constructions of success and positive outcomes fail to take the historical and current sociopolitical context into account, we risk diminishing the tremendous strength employed by transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. This strength was further illustrated by the participants’ ability to envision a future for themselves by making positive meaning out of their experiences and revising the meaning of home. It is our hope that with transgender affirming supports, informed by an understanding of oppression, that transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness can better attain the homes and the futures they imagine.

Implications

Study findings offer implications for both practice and research. First, both practitioners and researchers alike may better reach transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness by expanding the commonly used term “homeless,” with which many of the study participants did not identify. For instance, asking questions such as “Do you have a key to the place you stay?” may identify YYA who are in unstable housing situations or are experiencing homelessness. Likewise, both practitioners and researchers can work against oppressive societal messages about transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness, and the internalization of such messages, by working from a strengths-based perspective. A strengths-based perspective will enable practitioners and researchers to identify, work with, and elevate the strengths of transgender and gender expansive YYA, rather than focusing solely on their challenges (Saleeby, 1996). Such a perspective broadens the risk paradigm often used to describe and provide services to transgender and gender expansive YYA, and can provide opportunities to foster the resourcefulness and strengths of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness (Shelton, 2016).

Due to its exploratory design, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine contextual and identity related variations among the types of resilience strategies utilized by transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. More research is needed that examines the intersections of race and gender identity and expression among transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. Future research could examine if and how resilience strategies vary among study participants of different gender expressions and of different races, and could seek to identify factors that support the development of resilience strategies among transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness. Similarly, future research could explore the types of strategies that transgender and gender expansive YYA find most useful to employ when faced with specific forms of adversity.

Limitations

The findings offer a contextually-specific look into the resilience strategies of the participants and may shift as the environmental and socio-political context shifts. For example, findings from this study cannot be generalized to transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness in other geographic locations due to the purposive sampling strategy from a single metropolitan area in the U.S. However, there may be aspects of the findings that are transferrable, which can be explored through future research. Because this study utilized data collected for another purpose, the participants were not asked explicitly about the resilience strategies they utilize in their daily lives. If asked, the results may differ from what emerged in the narratives. For instance, participants may have discussed their connections to individual people for support, or they may have referenced spirituality as a way to cope with life’s challenges. Both of these resilience strategies have been noted in the literature (Asakura, 2016; Bender et al., 2007). An additional limitation is that participants were interviewed only once, and no member-checking occurred. Despite these limitations, this study filled an important gap in the literature by centering the voices of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness to provide insight into their resilience strategies in their own words.

Conclusion

Study findings illustrate the capacity of transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness to reframe their challenges as positive experiences, integral to the people they have become or will be in the future. This is an example of the participants' resilience, and is also an act of resistance. Participants refused to accept stereotypes and negative messages about what it means to be young, transgender, and experiencing homelessness. Findings suggest potential areas for strengths-building interventions for transgender and gender expansive YYA experiencing homelessness, including identifying ways to engage this population from an asset-based framework and harnessing the motivation and hopeful visioning of the future to guide interventions.

Declaration of conflict of interest/ethical approval

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the youth and young adults who participated in this research by graciously sharing their stories.

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