Reversing Erasure of Youth and Young Adults Who are LGBTQ and Access Homelessness Services: Asking about Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Pronouns

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Youth and young adults (YYA) who are LGBTQ are overrepresented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness. Youth homelessness service providers need to be able to identify and refer YYA who are LGBTQ to appropriate and competent supportive services that will address their unique needs, ensure that transgender and gender expansive YYA are referred to using accurate names and pronouns, and collect data that can provide a better understanding of the prevalence of homelessness among YYA who are LGBTQ. Enabling YYA to identify sexual orientation, gender identity, and pronouns when seeking homelessness services is one recommended practice for working with YYA who are LGBTQ. Th study aimed to better understand the experience of being asked sexual orientation, gender identity (SOGI) and pronoun questions when accessing YYA housing supports and services, and to center the voices of YYA who are LGBTQ in the conversation regarding SOGI and pronoun questions. While the vast majority of respondents supported asking YYA about their pronouns, they had mixed views about whether or not sexual orientation and gender identity should be asked when YYA access homelessness services.

H omelessness among youth and young adults (YYA) who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) has received recent attention from advocates, policymakers, researchers, and youth-serving systems. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) issued a framework to end youth homelessness by the year 2020. The framework acknowledges YYA who are LGBTQ as a specific population warranting attention, given their disproportionate representation and unique needs (USICH, 2013). Recent research has documented the challenges faced by YYA who are both LGBTQ and experiencing homelessness, including institutional barriers (e.g., provider refusal of service, lack of staff training, binary sex-segregated accommodations and programming) and discrimination when accessing services (Abramovich, 2016a; Shelton, 2015; Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Gattis, 2013). One suggested best practice for serving YYA who are LGBTQ is to enable YYA to self-identify their sexual orientation and gender identity (Ferguson & Maccio, 2012; Lambda Legal, 2009). Asking these questions can be one way to identify and refer YYA who are LGBTQ to appropriate and competent supportive services that will address their unique needs, to ensure that transgender and gender expansive youth are referred to using accurate names and pronouns, and to collect data that can provide a better understanding of the prevalence of homelessness among YYA who are LGBTQ. When delivered in a culturally and linguistically competent manner, these questions can also communicate openness and support for a range of sexual identities, gender identities, and gender expressions.

The practice of integrating questions about sexual orientation and gender identity in health care and child welfare settings has been explored in recent research (Wilson, Cooper, Kastanis, & Choi, 2016; Cahill et al., 2014). However, research has not yet explored how YYA who are LGBTQ accessing homelessness services experience this practice. The goals of this study were (1) to better understand the experience of being asked sexual orientation, gender identity (SOGI) and pronoun questions when accessing YYA housing supports and services, and

(2) to center voices of YYA who are LGBTQ in the conversation regarding SOGI and pronoun questions. Understanding the experience of being asked SOGI and pronoun questions begins to fill a gap in the existing literature about service acquisition and best practices for engaging YYA who are LGBTQ and are experiencing homelessness.

Review of Literature

YYA who are LGBTQ experience homelessness at disproportionate rates. Recent studies estimate that YYA who are LGBTQ comprise between 25–40% of the population of YYA experiencing homelessness (Choi et al., 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012; Maccio & Ferguson, 2016; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010). Family conflict is the most commonly cited cause of homelessness for all young people, regardless of gender or sexual identity (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; Cull, Platzer, & Balloch, 2006; Gaetz, 2014; Karabanow, 2004). However, identity-based family conflict resulting from a young person coming out is one of the most frequently cited pathways leading to homelessness among YYA who are LGBTQ (Abramovich, 2016b; Choi et al., 2015; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). Once homeless, YYA who are LGBTQ are disproportionately impacted by a range of negative outcomes. For instance, YYA who are LGBTQ experiencing homelessness report higher rates of housing instability, mental health concerns, substance use, and physical and sexual exploitation, and are at increased risk for involvement in the criminal legal system in comparison to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; Cochran et al., 2002; Durso & Gates, 2012). In a recent survey of homeless youth service providers, respondents reported that the YYA they serve who are LGBTQ experience longer durations of homelessness compared to their counterparts who are heterosexual and cisgender. Similarly, providers reported that among the YYA they serve, the YYA who are LGBTQ, especially YYA who are transgender, are often in worse physical and mental health than their counterparts who are heterosexual and cisgender (Choi et al., 2015).

It is important to note that these health disparities are not inherent among YYA who are LGBTQ and experiencing homelessness. Rather, they are often the result of societal oppression rooted in heterosexism and cisgenderism, widespread discrimination, and the negative attitudes associated with homophobia and transbias (Shelton, Wagaman, Small, & Abramovich, 2017). For YYA who are transgender, structural barriers create additional challenges to program engagement, retention, and successful outcomes (Shelton, 2015). Ultimately, YYA who are LGBTQ are less likely than YYA who are heterosexual and cisgender to access services, often due to societal and institutional stigma, fear, harassment, and discrimination (Abramovich, 2016b; Gattis, 2013).

Homelessness Services as Locations Where LGBTQ Identities are Erased

> Institutional erasure occurs through a lack of policies that accommodate trans identities or trans bodies, including the lack of knowledge that such policies are even necessary. This form of erasure is actualized in several ways. The possibility of trans identities can be excluded from the outset in bureaucratic applications such as texts and forms. (Bauer et al., 2009, p. 354)

Namaste (2000) describes institutional erasure as the conceptual and institutional relations (p. 137) that result in the invisibility of transgender people. She describes the institutional world and institutional practices as continuously and deliberately erasing people who are transgender by denying their existence and excluding them from employment, education, health care, and housing. Also, Namaste (2000) argues that the erasure of people who are transgender occurs in several different ways, such as when services do not allow them to self-identify on forms, but rather force them to identify according to the gender binary in predetermined categories (e.g., "male/man" or "female/woman"). An intake form that asks a single, binary question about sex or gender is one example. Such a form presumes all service users will be cisgender.

As a result, any identity that does not fit into the "female/woman" or "male/man" binary is not captured and therefore, seen to not exist. Likewise, institutions can erase people who are LGB through exclusionary policies and practices that disregard or silence sexual orientation.

Institutional erasure often occurs through an absence of organizational policies that acknowledge and honor the existence and experiences of people who are transgender and gender expansive (Bauer et al., 2009) and/or people who are LGBQ. Key institutional documents such as forms play a major role in rendering people invisible and thereby erasing their identities (Abramovich, 2016a). Similar to Namaste's (2000) conceptualization of the erasure of people who are transgender, institutions like the shelter system may effectively erase YYA who are LGBTQ through their exclusion from key forms, programs (e.g., by refusing services), policies (e.g., by not having inclusive nondiscrimination policies and guidelines for providing LGBTQ-affi ming services), reports, and statistics.

Abramovich (2016a) describes shelters as sites of normalized oppression, where the frequent verbal harassment of YYA who are LGBTQ, a lack of LGBTQ-affirming policies, and the absence of LGBTQ-focused cultural competency training are considered acceptable. The normalization of oppression in this context makes it difficult for the staff and administration of shelters to recognize heterosexism and transbias when it occurs (Abramovich, 2016a). YYA who are transgender and gender expansive face significant barriers when attempting to access safe and affirming shelter and housing services. Heterosexism and cisgenderism, and the norms they produce, create systemic challenges to affirming service acquisition for YYA who are LGBTQ—particularly for YYA who are transgender and gender expansive (Shelton, 2015). Further, YYA of color who are transgender and gender expansive must contend with racism, as well as cisgenderism and heterosexism, when attempting to access shelter and supportive services (Page, 2017; Olivet & Dones, 2016). When working with YYA who are LGBTQ, programmatic approaches that address multiple forms of oppression—including the impact of racism, classism, heterosexism, and cisgenderism—should be developed and implemented (Wagaman, 2016).

Reversing Erasure: Emerging Policy and Practice

As policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and researchers have gained an awareness of the diffi   facing YYA who are LGBTQ experiencing homelessness in the past decade, attention to this population has grown and a new body of work has emerged. Trainings, toolkits, and best practices (Ferguson & Maccio, 2012; Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006); policy recommendations (Page, 2017; Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014; Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013, Mottet & Ohle, 2003); and reports (Price, Wheeler, Shelton, & Maury, 2016; Hussey, 2015; Ray, 2006) have collectively aimed to address the unique needs and experiences of YYA who are LGBTQ and experiencing homelessness, and to prepare the youth homelessness service sector for competent and affi ming care with this population of YYA. Signifi antly, national organizations such as the True Colors Fund (www.truecolorsfund.org) were created to expand national and local focus on the needs of and services for YYA who are LGBTQ and are experiencing or at risk for homelessness. Furthermore, research and evaluation has aimed to build new understanding about the population and service-related needs (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; Choi et al., 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012; Gattis, 2013; Maccio & Ferguson, 2016; Poirier & Rummell, 2016; Rosario, Scrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012).

One recommendation emerging from this growing body of work is to enable YYA to self-identify their sexual orientation and gender identity (Maccio & Ferguson, 2012; Lambda Legal, 2009). Th reasons are multifold: to identify YYA who are LGBTQ for referral to appropriate and competent supportive services that will address their unique needs, to ensure that YYA who are transgender and gender expansive are referred to using accurate names and pronouns, and to collect data that can provide a better understanding of the prevalence of homelessness among YYA who are LGBTQ. When delivered in a culturally and linguistically competent manner, these questions can also communicate openness and support for a range of sexual identities, gender identities, and gender expressions.

SOGI questions have been developed and tested with a range of populations, including in schools (Temkin et al., 2017), youth in contact

with child welfare systems (Wilson et al., 2016) and people who are LGBTQ in health care settings (Cahill et al., 2014). Guidance exists for asking SOGI questions in population-based surveys (Badgett & Goldberg, 2009; Herman, 2014) and for asking about and managing SOGI data in child welfare systems (Wilson et al., 2016). The emerging literature in this area has influenced the practice of asking SOGI in youth homelessness services; however, little is known about the effectiveness of the practice or about the experiences of YYA themselves when asked these questions while seeking housing and supportive services. Further, research has yet to examine the practice of asking YYA experiencing homelessness about the pronouns they use. To continue working to eliminate the erasure and silencing of YYA who are LGBTQ, this article adds new research to the emerging body of work concerning YYA who are LGBTQ and experiencing homelessness. Specifically, it reports findings from a study that sought to (1) better understand the experience of being asked sexual orientation, gender identity (SOGI), and pronoun questions when accessing YYA housing supports and services; and (2) center voices of YYA who are LGBTQ in shaping recommendations about how to ask about SOGI and accurate pronoun usage.

Methods

This study aimed to explore how YYA who are LGBTQ experience being asked SOGI and pronoun questions when accessing homelessness services. Data were collected through a survey that the True Colors Fund designed and administered to inform its technical assistance to service providers working with YYA experiencing homelessness. True Colors Fund collected data during April and May 2016 via SurveyMonkey. The survey was sent via email to a convenience sample of young people who are LGBTQ , had histories of homelessness, and had been included in the organization's work within the previous two years. All respondents were involved in varying degrees with the True Colors Fund. They became involved with the organization after being nominated for recognition by a service provider or community member in their communities.

The 30-item survey was distributed to a total of 80 YYA; 36 responded yielding a 45% response rate. Of those 36 responses, 32 surveys were complete and included in the analysis (40% of the original sample).

Respondents were asked open-ended questions ("What words do you use to describe your….") about their sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. The open-ended nature of these questions provided the flexibility for respondents to share the words they use to describe themselves, rather than fitting within existing categories of sexual orientation, gender identity, and race. The survey also included questions about when and how they were asked SOGI and pronoun questions when accessing services for youth experiencing homelessness. Response options for when they were asked included: as soon as I arrived, on the same day I arrived, within one week, after one week, I don't remember, and N/A (I wasn't asked). Response options for how they were asked included: it was on a form I filled out, a staff person asked in an intake interview, my case manager asked me in a meeting, I wasn't directly asked—it just came up, it happened another way, I don't remember, and N/A (I wasn't asked). Respondents were also asked if they recalled the specific questions they were asked, how they felt when being asked SOGI and pronoun questions, and what, if anything, they would have liked to have happened differently. The survey also asked respondents about whether or not, and how, such questions should be asked (using the same response options as above) and their recommendations for service providers regarding asking SOGI and pronoun questions of YYA experiencing homelessness.

Data Analysis

After receiving the secondary dataset, data were input into SPSS for descriptive analysis. Open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic analytic approach (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2008). The first step of the analytic approach involved familiarization with the data. The researchers separated the open-ended responses from the survey items, compiled the responses into a single document, and reviewed the responses. Because the study aim was to

understand respondents' experiences of being asked SOGI and pronoun questions, the researchers first utilized an inductive process of open coding, allowing the content of the data to guide code development. One researcher engaged in the process of open coding of the responses, from which 11 initial codes related to respondents' experiences being asked SOGI and pronoun questions were developed. A codebook was developed, with a single survey excerpt illustrative of each code. The codebook and the open-ended responses were shared with the second researcher, who then independently applied the codes. Once complete, both researchers compared their application of the codes with 93% interrater reliability. The researchers discussed the instances when their codes differed and came to a consensus on how to code the data. The 11 initial codes were then condensed into three overarching themes, which included affirmed, afraid/uncomfortable, and erased. Respondents were also asked to share recommendations for service providers when asking SOGI and pronoun questions. The recommendations were not included in the thematic analysis, but are reported in this article, following the presentation of the primary themes. The next section describes the findings.

Findings

The final sample consisted of 32 YYA who are LGBTQ with histories of homelessness. The majority of respondents were YYA of color, including YYA who described their race/ethnicity as Black/African American (38%), Hispanic/Latinx (16%), mixed race (13%), and Native American (9%). Respondents were between the ages of 18 and 26 (mean age 23). Table 1 provides complete demographic information. The category Transgender Man/Male includes respondents who self-identified as transgender man, as well as two respondents who identified as trans masculine and transgender/agender transman. Gender expansive includes respondents who identified as genderqueer, gender fluid, two-spirit, and agender. The survey also asked respondents to identify their sex assigned at birth. We used this data to identify respondents with a transgender history, even though they did not self-identify as such. This enabled

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**Table 1. Respondent Demographic Data—Gender Identity,
          Race/Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation**

Descriptor	N	%
Gender Identity		
Transgender Woman/Female	5	15.6
Transgender Man/Male	6	18.8
Gender Expansive	4	12.5
Cisgender Woman/Female	5	15.6
Cisgender Man/Male	12	37.5
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	12	37.5
Native American	3	9.4
Mixed race	4	12.5
Hispanic/Latinx	5	15.6
White	7	21.9
No answer	1	3.1
Sexual Orientation		
Gay, lesbian, homosexual	12	37.5
Pansexual	2	6.3
Bisexual	4	12.5
Queer	5	15.6
Straight	4	12.5
Something else	3	9.4
No answer	2	6.2

respondents who have a transgender history to be included in analyses comparing responses of respondents who are transgender and cisgender.

Of the 32 respondents, 28 reported having accessed social services for youth experiencing homelessness. Though four respondents did not access social services for YYA experiencing homelessness, they provided answers to survey questions about if, when, and how they believe these questions should be asked; thus, they are included in the analysis.

Of the 28 respondents who accessed social services for youth experiencing homelessness, experiences varied. See Table 2 for respondent

Table 2. Respondent Report of Being Asked about SOGI & Pronouns

Descriptor	N
Asked about…	
All 3 (SOGI & pronouns)	6
A combination of SOGI & pronouns (but not all 3)	6
Sexual orientation only	6
Gender identity only	3
Pronouns only	1
Not asked about SOGI or pronouns	6

reports. For example, six reported that they were asked about all three: sexual orientation, gender identity, and pronouns. In contrast, six respondents were asked about their sexual orientation only, while another six reported not being asked any questions about their sexual orientation, gender identity, or pronouns. Most reported being asked these questions either as soon as they arrived or on the same day they arrived to access services, and most reported either being asked directly by a staff person during an intake interview or filling out the information on a paper form.

Three primary themes emerged from the analysis regarding how respondents experienced being asked about their sexual orientation, gender identity, and pronouns. Being "out" about their SOGI, or being visible as LGBTQ, created feelings of safety and affimation for some respondents and added to fears and feelings of discomfort for others. Respondents described feeling affimed, erased, or afraid when considering their experiences being asked SOGI and pronoun questions while accessing services for youth experiencing homelessness. Respondents also provided recommendations for service providers regarding how and when to ask SOGI and pronoun questions. Each theme is described in this section, followed by the respondent's recommendations. Verbatim excerpts from the open-ended questions are included, along with respondents' age, and the words they used to describe their sexual orientation and gender identity. Next we explore each of the three core themes.

Affirmed

Being asked about their SOGI and pronouns made some respondents feel affirmed, communicating to them that they were in an inclusive place where they could be open about these aspects of their identity. Of the 16 respondents who elaborated on their experiences being asked SOGI and/or pronoun questions, 11 respondents made statements exemplifying the theme of being affirmed. For example, one respondent shared the following:

> I appreciated it. I felt like it was an inclusive place… When I spoke of my girlfriend, they didn't flinch like most people did and it was a world that I realized I wanted to live in. Where I wasn't looked like a strange creature for having a girlfriend and being feminine presenting. (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

For another respondent, being able to disclose their sexual orientation facilitated a feeling of safety. Th y said: "[I felt] safe, because they knew (23 year old, queer, genderqueer person)." Similarly, a third YYA responded:

> I felt entitled to using services at a place for the first time, finally, as it was mostly to serve LGBT+ youth. It was a space for me. It felt great. (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

For some respondents, asking SOGI and pronoun questions and making space for youth to share who they are fostered a positive experience that left them feeling safe and affirmed. One respondent shared:

> I believe that it creates a space where a person has the option of discussing who they are seeing, who they are more freely and openly. After all, a person may be experiencing homelessness for lack of openness in a previous home, which was the case for me. A person does not have to discuss but I know I was hesitant a lot because it was "taboo" or I wasn't sure if it was safe to do so. I didn't want to be treated differently or like I had leprosy. The shelter I was in made it known that it was accepting and it made me feel safe and entitled— a new and refreshing feeling. (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

The welcoming environment in the shelter "made it known" that she could openly be herself without worrying that she would be treated differently. Yet another respondent emphasized the ways in which asking YYA specifically about their gender identity can be affirming and can normalize YYA whose identities and experiences are often marginalized.

> It normalizes trans experiences AND gives youth the chance to vocalize how they identify themselves. (26-year-old, queer, trans-masculine person)

Afraid/Uncomfortable

The experience of being asked SOGI and pronoun questions did not result in feelings of affirmation for all YYA participating in the survey, though. Seven of the 16 respondents who elaborated on their experiences being asked SOGI and pronoun questions shared instances that resulted in feelings of fear and discomfort. As several respondents noted, with disclosure often comes risk—risk of marginalization, victimization, or disappointment when despite disclosure, an affirming environment cannot be provided. Further, some respondents were concerned about how their identity disclosure would impact their accommodations. This fear was reflected in the words of the following respondent:

> [I felt] a little scared it would affect my placement. [I felt] terrified I would be put in a 'girls' room no matter my answer. (18-year-old, queer, agender person)

Although some respondents may have felt affirmed sharing their SOGI and pronouns, this feeling did not always extend beyond their interaction with staff. As some respondents noted, when accessing services they also interacted with their peers within the program, who may not have reflected the same openness toward diverse SOGI as the staff members. The following respondent experienced fear in relation to other YYA in the program.

> I wish they would have warned LGBT clients of other clients who have displayed homophobic behavior. (23-year-old, queer, genderqueer person)

The same young person offered the following suggestion to reduce the amount of fear and discomfort they felt within the program:

> It would have been better for me to meet other folk in the program that could have acted as ambassadors. That would have helped me feel more comfortable with what I was getting myself into (I trust young people more than case managers when it comes to my safety). (23-year-old, queer, genderqueer person)

Several respondents also questioned staff knowledge and comfort with asking about SOGI. For example, one respondent shared: "They seemed confused about my sexual orientation and gender identity" (23 year old, straight, transgender woman). The knowledge and comfort level of staff asking SOGI questions impacted the experience of another respondent, who stated:

> I felt terrible. They asked the question so shyly and beated around the bush. (19-year-old, queer, femme/demi-girl)

Additionally, several respondents experienced discomfort when asked about their pronouns when accessing services. They reported their discomfort to be a result of staff lack of knowledge. For example, one respondent noted that she didn't think staff members understood the concept of asking about pronouns. Another described an awkward encounter when discussing their pronouns with the staff member. They were not directly asked about their pronouns, but when it "came up," the respondent described the experience as:

> …awkward 'cause they assumed my pronouns. 'Oh so you use (blank) pronouns instead of (blank) pronouns?' (18-year-old, queer, agender person)

Respondents also expressed a desire for staff members to be familiar with terminology and to demonstrate competence discussing issues

related to exploring SOGI and the coming-out process. Several respondents reported being in the midst of figuring out their gender identities and wished they could have engaged in a discussion with staff about their process.

> I felt the staff member was empathetic, but I wish they were better equipped to describe what it all meant because I was still figuring it out. (23-year-old, queer, genderqueer person)

Erased

> I wish they would have asked. (20-year-old, bisexual, transgender/ agender transgender man)

As the quote above illustrates, erasure was a third core theme in the data. Respondents described feeling erased both when they were not asked SOGI and pronoun questions, and also during interactions when their identities were not validated or respected. These interactions included both instances when their SOGI was assumed, and also instances when they were asked about their SOGI, but their responses were not affirmed. In the following example, a respondent wrote about being asked how she identified her sexual orientation, but was categorized differently than her response. She stated:

> When I responded I was queer, they asked me if that was like bisexual and then marked bisexual anyway. I would like to have more freedom to identify and to be asked in a confident, inviting, and polite way. (19-year-old, queer, femme/demi-girl)

As demonstrated in this quote, a lack of familiarity with the terminology YYA use to describe their SOGI left some respondents feeling unheard, invalidated, and erased. Likewise, asking only about sexual orientation but not about gender identity acted as a form of erasure for some with diverse gender identities. For instance, when being asked her sexual orientation, one respondent felt the staff member was challenging the validity of her gender identity. She stated:

> I felt that she was implying that I'm not a woman but a homosexual man. (20-year-old, straight, transgender female)

Some respondents addressed how they decided not to disclose their SOGI when asked because of their own internal processes related to their identities. Below, a respondent described how shame impacted her ability to disclose her sexual orientation when asked.

> I told them I was straight and then later on bi but I felt ashamed for being bi, so I hid the fact. (23-year-old, bisexual, cisgender female)

Several respondents reported not being asked about their gender identity, but rather having a staff member make assumptions based on their government issued identification or a subjective interpretation of their gender expression. Several YYA shared the experience of having their gender assumed. They reported:

> All they did was look at my license and assume. (24-year-old, bisexual, transgender male)
>
> I would have liked to have been asked instead of them assuming. (22-year-old, queer/pansexual, transmasculine/genderqueer person)
>
> They confirmed the gender identity they assumed I was and marked me as female. 'You're a female…' (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

Recommendations for Asking about SOGI and Pronouns

Respondents' opinions varied regarding whether or not SOGI and pronoun questions should be asked when YYA seek housing and supportive services, however the majority of respondents were in favor of the questions being asked. In particular, respondents indicated that they should be asked their pronouns. Table 3 presents the responses to the question: *Do you think young people should be asked about their sexual orientation/identity, gender identity, and the pronouns they use when accessing services for people experiencing homelessness?* by respondents' gender identity.

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Table 3. Should You be Asked SOGI and Pronoun Questions?

	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Pronouns
Cisgender YYA (*n* = 17)			
Yes	9	11	12
No	4	1	1
I don't know	1	2	1
Missing	3	3	3
Transgender/Gender Expansive YYA (*n* = 15)			
Yes	7	9	12
No	5	2	0
I don't know	3	4	3

Th   not all YYA believed SOGI and pronoun questions should be asked when accessing services, the majority of respondents did. Respondents also indicated the importance of being asked about gender identity specifically. YYA who are transgender and gender expansive often face extreme discrimination and structural barriers when attempting to access shelter services (Shelton, 2015; Abramovich, 2016a, b). A respondent who was not asked about his gender identity stated:

> Th   would have been great for them to know, since, you know, it's actually very important. (20-year-old, bisexual, transgender/agender man)

On the other hand, some respondents commented that whether or not they share their SOGI should be a personal and individual choice and should not be asked when they are seeking housing or supportive services. Other respondents were undecided about whether or not SOGI and pronoun questions should be asked, or thought that identity related questions should only be asked for specific purposes, as illustrated in the following response:

> I think only for the purpose of placing young people into housing situations where they feel safe being their true selves. Otherwise,

> I don't. Identity should not play a role. (23-year-old, [sexual orientation not provided], cisgender male)

Respondents made a variety of comments about how and when SOGI and pronoun question should be asked (see Tables 4 and 5). Responses were mixed about the appropriate timing for asking SOGI questions. More respondents suggested being asked about gender identity than sexual orientation upon their arrival at a program. Regarding the preferred methods for asking SOGI questions, responses were almost evenly divided between asking SOGI questions on a paper form, computer, or tablet and asking face-to-face. An important finding to guide practice can be found in the survey responses related to pronouns: A majority of respondents reported that pronouns should be asked upon their arrival to the program, and that they should be asked about their pronouns face-to-face.

Table 4. When Should You be Asked SOGI and Pronoun Questions?

	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Pronouns
Upon arrival	9	13	19
After getting to know program	12	11	7
Some other time	1	2	1
Shouldn't be asked at all	6	3	2

Table 5. How Should You be Asked SOGI and Pronoun Questions?

	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Pronouns
On a paper form, computer, or tablet	11	12	8
Ask me face-to-face	11	11	17
Ask in another way	5	4	2
Shouldn't be asked at all	2	2	2

Respondents also provided specific recommendations for service providers regarding asking SOGI and pronoun questions, such as being "polite" and "assertive." Additional suggestions included:

- "Include room for people who do not want to respond or don't fit in those boxes." (25-year-old, gay, cisgender male)

- "Always ask if they are comfortable enough for you to ask such personal questions." (23-year-old, bisexual, cisgender female)

- "Have the other youth be educated on LGBT topics." (23-year-old, homosexual, two-spirited person)

- "Ask pronouns of everyone not just queer obvious youth." (18-year-old, queer, agender person)

One respondent elaborated on her recommendations by providing specific language suggestions for staff members asking YYA SOGI and pronoun questions. She recommended the following:

> We give the option for youth to disclose their sexual orientation/ identity to better serve them, including but not limited to referring them to appropriate resources. You may disclose this now or at a later time. (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

> What is your gender identity? You have the option of opting out or disclosing at a later time. (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

> Staff member: 'Hello, my name is   and my pronouns are   , what are your pronouns?' (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

Several respondents also emphasized the importance of allowing YYA to disclose SOGI information when they are ready, rather than at a prescribed time which may create discomfort. They emphasized the right of YYA to choose if, when and how they share their SOGI.

> If they're not comfortable answering then pressure should NOT be applied. They will open up in time (or not). Either way it's their choice. (20-year-old, bisexual, transgender/agender man)

> A person should also be told that if they prefer not to disclose that
> they don't have to. (26-year-old, queer, cisgender female)

Discussion

In the absence of literature describing the experiences of YYA who are LGBTQ being asked SOGI and pronoun questions when accessing youth homelessness services, the findings from this study provide an important contribution for service providers seeking to ask SOGI and pronoun questions of program participants. This study centered the voices of YYA who are LGBTQ with histories of homelessness, providing a first-hand account of their experiences, their opinions, and their recommendations for asking SOGI and pronoun questions of YYA experiencing homelessness.

Respondents experienced a range of feelings when they were asked SOGI and pronoun questions by staff members at agencies serving YYA experiencing homelessness. The varied responses could be due to several factors, including how comfortable the respondents felt when accessing services, the respondents' history of trauma and rejection related to their identities, a desire for privacy and confidentiality, their own developing understanding of their SOGI, a fear of discrimination, and/or the social context within which they exist. Wagaman (2016) suggests that those working with YYA who are LGBTQ consider the contextual factors impacting how and when YYA who are LGBTQ identify themselves as such. With the above factors in mind, providers can give YYA the option to answer SOGI and pronoun questions, but not require they do so in order to gain entry into the program. Providers can also foster an open agency environment where SOGI is regularly discussed, so that YYA who are questioning their SOGI or who are not comfortable sharing their SOGI upon arrival may have opportunities to do so at another time. YYA may disclose their SOGI when they are comfortable and ready to do so, often after assessing their surroundings—both individuals within the agency and the agency environment—for signs of acceptance (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006).

Findings reflect diverse feelings from YYA who are LGBTQ about the practice of asking SOGI and pronoun questions. For some respondents, being asked about their SOGI or pronouns was validating and affirming, communicating respect and facilitating a sense of safety. When YYA feel validated and comfortable, they may be more able to more fully engage in services rather than constantly worry about the impact their identity may have on their experiences and safety. For other respondents, the experience was the opposite—they felt erased, afraid, unsafe, and uncomfortable. YYA often connected these experiences to the perceived comfort level and competency of the staff. For example, multiple respondents commented that staff members either seemed confused by their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and/or pronouns, or seemed to feel uncomfortable when asking questions about SOGI. This finding emphasizes the importance of staff training regarding SOGI. Understanding the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity is of critical importance for staff asking SOGI and pronoun questions, as is the ability to reflect and affirm the identities shared by YYA. Further, several respondents expressed a desire to have specific concepts explained to them in greater detail when being asked SOGI and pronoun questions, and wished they could have had a discussion with staff members about their identities. For YYA who are in the process of exploring their identities, having a knowledgeable and non-judgmental staff member with whom to discuss identity related topics could be beneficial. Additionally, an important finding to guide practice can be found in the survey responses related to pronouns: A majority of respondents reported that pronouns should be asked upon their arrival to the program, and that they should be asked about their pronouns face-to-face.

YYA who are LGBTQ may have dealt with having their identities disavowed and disparaged and may carry those traumatic experiences with them. Th y may be questioning their SOGI, especially if they have experienced rejection or discrimination related to their identities. Some of the YYA in this study reported feeling afraid to disclose or ashamed of their emerging identities when they were

asked SOGI questions. Th fear and shame could be the result of societal oppression, and/or community and familial rejection, and may prevent YYA from disclosing their SOGI, which may then prevent them for gaining access to the identity affi ming care and support that would be benefi and contribute to their overall well-being. Th fi   indicates that asking SOGI and pronoun questions alone is not enough to communicate a welcoming space and to ensure the responses from YYA are accurate representations of their identities.

Further, most respondents who were not asked SOGI and pronoun questions reported wishing that they had been asked. It is unclear if not being asked these questions is connected to staff knowledge and comfort or to organizational practices, or a combination of both. One organizational practice to examine is the reliance on government issued identification for information about YYA entering a program. The gender marker on a YYA's government-issued ID card should not be assumed to be an accurate representation of their gender identity, nor as an indicator of what pronouns they use.

Th study highlighted the value of asking YYA experiencing homelessness what they want and need in relation to the disclosure of their identities. While the vast majority of respondents supported asking YYA about their pronouns, they had mixed views about whether or not sexual orientation and gender identity should be asked when YYA access homelessness services. Exploring when and how to ask these questions with YYA can provide an opportunity for authentic YYA-adult partnerships. Partnering with YYA to determine when and how to ask SOGI and pronoun questions within an agency recognizes that YYA possess knowledge and expertise resulting from their lived experiences (Shelton, Price, & VanCleefe, 2017). When YYA are able to share power with adults in service settings and are engaged in the process of developing programmatic policies and practices, they may have greater ownership over the policies and practices, may experience more motivation to participate in the program, and may become more empowered to improve their own lives

and communities through the collaborative experience (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011).

Future Directions

Findings from this study illuminate areas for future research to improve the process of asking YYA experiencing homelessness SOGI and pronoun questions. This study focused on the experiences of YYA who are LGBTQ. Asking the same questions of heterosexual and cisgender YYA is an important step in developing SOGI and pronoun questions that are affirming and comprehensible to all YYA experiencing homelessness. Research needs to explore existing barriers and challenges to asking SOGI and pronouns questions among staff of organizations serving youth experiencing homelessness. Understanding barriers and challenges at the individual staff level, as well as the organizational level, could inform the development of professional development opportunities to support staff and organizations as they work to identify, engage, affirm, and retain YYA with diverse SOGI in their programs.

While SOGI questions have been developed and tested with a range of populations, including school based youth (Temkin et al., 2017), child welfare involved youth (Wilson et al., 2016) and LGBTQ people in health care settings (Cahill et al., 2014), such questions have not been tested with YYA experiencing homelessness. Given the unique backgrounds and experiences of YYA who are LGBTQ experiencing homelessness, testing SOGI and pronoun questions with this population would be a beneficial step to ensuring these data are being collected in the most appropriate manner. This is especially important given that the terms YYA use to identify themselves vary widely and may be dependent on a number of sociodemographic categories (McInroy & Craig, 2012).

Lastly, findings indicated that YYA who are LGBTQ reported feeling unsafe and erased both when being asked SOGI and pronoun questions, as well as when these questions were not asked. Future research could explore notions of visibility, safety, engagement and retention in youth homelessness services in relation to being asked/disclosing SOGI.

For instance, when asked in a culturally and linguistically competent manner, does the act of asking SOGI and pronoun questions contribute to a feeling of safety for program participants? Does a feeling of safety contribute to engagement and retention in program services?

Limitations

Several limitations must be noted when interpreting the study's fi
The study utilized secondary data and as such, analysis was limited to the data collected by the organization. No data were collected about where the services were accessed, therefore, regional differences could not be examined. Additionally, respondents were not asked when they accessed services. Several could not recall whether or not they were asked SOGI and pronoun questions, or how or when SOGI and pronoun questions were asked. The small sample size also limits the generalizability of these fi   Further, the group of YYA who participated in the study were involved, through a nomination process, with the True Colors Fund, a national nonprofit organization addressing LGBTQ youth home-lessness. The responses of this particular group of YYA may differ from responses from YYA who are less connected to leadership and advocacy opportunities. Additionally, the sample was comprised of YYA who iden-tified as LGBTQ, therefore, the fi   cannot be generalized to YYA who are heterosexual and cisgender experiencing homelessness, who may have had different experiences with SOGI and pronoun questions and different opinions about the utility of such questions. Lastly, the charac-teristics of survey nonrespondents are not known (or why they didn't par-ticipate), so an assessment of potential non-response bias is not feasible. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the literature and identifi   key areas to explore in future research.

Conclusion

This study explored how YYA who are LGBTQ experience being asked SOGI and pronoun questions when accessing homelessness services.

Significantly, it highlights the importance of asking what these young people want and need in relation to the disclosure of their sexual orientation and gender identities. While the vast majority of respondents supported asking YYA about their pronouns, they had mixed views about whether or not sexual orientation and gender identity should be asked when YYA access homelessness services. Exploring when and how to ask these questions with YYA can provide an opportunity for authentic YYA-adult partnerships. Importantly, along with more research on these issues, this study has the potential to strengthen practice among youth homelessness service providers, and improve the experiences of and outcomes among those YYA accessing their services who are LGBTQ.

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