

Preferred Name Use and Suicide and Mental Health Risks among Transgender Youth

Gu Li¹, Carley Flores¹, Arnold H. Grossman², & Stephen T. Russell¹

¹University of Arizona; ²New York University

Do You Know?

- ❖ *Transgender* is an umbrella term referring to people with gender identities and/or expressions that are not traditionally aligned with their assigned sex (White & Townsend, 1998).
- ❖ Estimated size of the transgender adult population, based on the number of transgender adults at specialty clinics, is 1:100,000 for transgender women and 1:400,000 for transgender men in the U.S. (Pauly, 1968), and the number of adults seeking treatment appears to be increasing (Zucker & Lawrence, 2009).

Abstract

Many transgender people choose a new first name according to their gender identity (which is usually different from their birth sex). Unfortunately, they cannot always use their preferred name due to various constraints imposed by the environment. The current study explores how social acceptance of the preferred name of transgender youth is related to their mental health. Based on a community-based sample that includes 53 transgender and gender non-conforming youth who reported having a different chosen name from their given name, we found that the higher frequency transgender youth can use their preferred name in various contexts, the better psychological well-being. We discussed social and political implications of our findings.

Background

Transgender youth are more likely than lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and heterosexual youth to experience depression, stigma and discrimination in school settings, and abuse from family and peers (Grossman et al., 2005). Additionally, when compared to their LGB counterparts, transgender youth have significantly higher risk for suicidality (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). External transphobia may lead to an increased risk for negative mental health outcomes. The ability of transgender youth to use their preferred or chosen name(s) are important indicators of social gender identity acceptance. No literature to date has examined the impact of the ability of transgender youth to use their preferred name on suicide and mental health risks.

We hypothesize that the more contexts in which transgender youth are able to use their preferred name, the higher self-perceived school safety and lower suicide risks, which can be indicated by lower depression, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness (Joiner, 2005).

Methods

Participants

We drew sample from 727 self-identified sexual minority youth recruited from community-based organizations in three metropolitan areas across the United States during 2011–2012. We used two inclusion criteria to select eligible participants: (1) youth whose self-reported gender identity was trans-woman or trans-man, or whose gender identity was inconsistent with their biological sex, and (2) youth whose preferred name was different from the name given at birth. Of the 64 transgender youth, 53 (82.8%) had a preferred name that was different from their birth name; they were entered into our subsequent analyses (age ranged 15 to 21, $M = 19.21$, $SD = 1.75$).

Measures

Perceived accepting contexts. Participants were asked whether or not they were able to go by their preferred name in 4 contexts: at home, at school, at work, or with friends. A composite score was created to measure the number of contexts where their preferred name was accepted (ranges 0–4).

Depression. The 20-item *Beck Depression Inventory for Youth* scale was used ($\alpha = .94$; Beck et al., 2001). Sample items include "I have myself." "I think my life will be bad." Higher score represents higher depression level.

Thwarted belongingness. Seven items were selected from the *Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire* ($\alpha = .88$; Van Orden et al., 2008). Sample items include "These days, the people in my life would be happier without me." "These days, the people in my life would be better off if I were gone." Higher score represents higher thwarted belongingness.

Perceived burdensomeness. Five items were selected from the *Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire*. Sample items include "These days, I am close to other people" (reverse-coded) "These days, I feel disconnected from other people." Higher score represents higher perceived burdensomeness.

Self-perceived school safety. One item that stated "My school is (was) safe for students who are LGBTQ." Responses range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Results

The majority of the transgender youth reported that they could use their preferred name in all of the contexts inquired (i.e., at home, at school, at work, and with friends; see figure on right).

The greater number of contexts in which transgender youth can use their preferred name, the less depression and thwarted belongingness, and the safer they feel at school (Table 1).

Percentage of Perceived Accepting Contexts

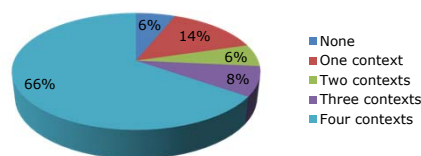


Table 1: Multiple Regressions

	Depression		Thwarted belongingness		Perceived burdensomeness		Self-perceived school safety	
	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Gender identity	0.05	0.09	-0.12	0.18	0.21	0.20	0.21	0.11
No. perceived accept contexts	-0.15*	0.06	-0.31*	0.13	-0.27	0.15	0.21*	0.08

Note. Gender identity (-1 = Trans-woman, 1 = Trans-man), No. perceived accept contexts = Number of perceived accepting contexts. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.



Conclusions and Implications

Transgender people may experience discrimination, prejudice, victimization and mental health problems due to their social minority status. This study demonstrates that inclusive environments can buffer transgender youth's adverse personal experiences and enhance mental health. Specifically, social acceptance of transgender individual's preferred name and other preferred language (e.g., pronouns) can bring profound benefits to this marginalized population.

Key References

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