

ENGENDERING SUPPORT: TRANSGENDER YOUTH'S INTERPRETATIONS

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

As
36
2015
HMSX
• L43

Masters

In

Sexuality Studies

by

Carolyn Christina Leach

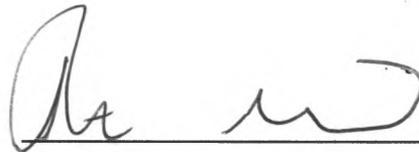
San Francisco, California

May, 2015

Copyright by
Carolyn Christina Leach
2015

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Engendering Support: Transgender Youth's Interpretations* by Carolyn Leach, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Masters of Arts in Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.



Rita Melendez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor



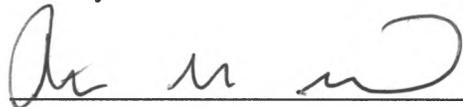
Clare Sears, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

ENGENDERING SUPPORT: TRANSGENDER YOUTH'S INTERPRETATIONS

Carolyn Christina Leach
San Francisco, California
2015

Increased visibility of transgender communities is generating a unique moment in history to create supportive environments for transgender individuals – especially for youth. Typical definitions of social support remain inadequate for transgender youth whom endure individual and structural discrimination, harassment, and violence within many different environments. How do transgender youth access, define, and interpret social support? What do transgender youth consider supportive behaviors, actions, words and environments? Semi structured qualitative interviews with nine self-identified transgender young adults are used to describe their experiences and interpretations of social support. Environments defined as typically supportive, including therapy and support groups, were interpreted by some participants as non-supportive. Transgender youth perceive both supportive and non-supportive responses within environments depending on whether the behavior, action, and words affirm or rejects their identity. Based on transgender youth's experiences, this study illustrates the complex interactions and interpretations social support that occur within homes, schools, and organizations.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis



Chair, Thesis Committee

5/14/15

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to formally thank my advisor, Rita Melendez, for pushing me to be more creative and confident. Also, many thanks to Clare Sears for getting me excited about gender and queer theory. I cannot thank my participants enough; I hope their words and experiences are justly represented. Lastly, thanks to my family for always supporting my academic and personal pursuits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Transgender Visibility, Youth (In)visibility	1
Cause for Concern	4
It Gets Worse.....	6
Adolescent Development	7
Normal Trials and Tribulations	7
Minority Stress Model or Heteronormative Stressors?	9
Importance of Support.....	11
LGBT Youth and Social Support.....	15
Where’s the T.....	18
Supportive vs Non-supportive- Drawing the Line.....	22
Supporting Transgender Youth.....	24
Study Design.....	25
Participants.....	26
Recruitment and Method.....	29
Interpreting Support in the Home.....	32
Interpreting Support within School.....	45
Interpreting Support in Organizations.....	56
Discussion.....	65
Identity Affirming Support.....	65
The Response Environment Interaction.....	67
Conclusion- Lost in Translation.....	69

“As all those who have the least to lose from changing this system get together and examine these social questions, we can separate the wheat of truths from the chaff of old lies. Historic tasks are revealed that beckon us to take a stand and to take action. That moment is now. And so this conversation with you takes place with the momentum of struggle behind it.” – Trans Liberation, 1998

Transgender¹ Visibility, Youth (In)visibility

In June 2014, the beautiful, talented, and popular actress Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time* magazine boldly titled “The Transgender Tipping Point”. The article highlights the recent accomplishments of the transgender movement suggesting true equality is on the horizon. In January of this year, President Obama for the first time in included transgender individuals in the State of the Union Address declaring the need to advocate for and "condemn persecution" of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT populations. Last month, approximately 20 million people watched Bruce Jenner publically declare, "for all intents and purposes, I am a woman". But who is this visibility benefiting? The transgender individuals and communities portrayed, or the people publically consuming their experiences from the comfort of their couches?

Although transgender media visibility is at an all time high, structural and individual violence continues to impact and decimate the transgender population, especially young transgender individuals (Spade, 2011). The increased visibility and

¹ Transgender identified individuals include anyone who feels their internal sense of gender, their gender identity, differs from the sex they were designated at birth

access to the Internet leads youth to recognize and come out as transgender at younger ages without access to appropriate social support (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen & Palmer, 2012). Understanding how transgender youth define, access, and interpret social support is critical to ensure adequate responses to gender non-conforming identities and presentations. Unfortunately, typical definitions of social support fail to account for the specific experiences of LGBT youth, especially those who identify as transgender.

Due to the recent proliferation of LGBT organizations and identities, the mistaken assumption has developed that transgender youth now easily access social support from family, peers, school, and community. The presumption that increased knowledge about transgender communities and visibility of transgender people benefits every transgender individual is deeply flawed and dangerous. Increased visibility and media portrayals of transgender issues, needs, and rights are not translating into increased social support for transgender youth. What is being lost in translation? Transgender youth are still being denied access to LGBT organizations and often feel marginalized within groups that do not offer services for their specific needs (Valentine, 2007). Figuring out how to gain access and social support for transgender youth is especially important when the difficulties of adolescence overlap when many come to terms with their gender identity and assigned sex incongruence. The necessity for raising awareness about nonheteronormativity and normalizing transgender youth's experiences remains

imperative because acceptance of gender diversity helps keep them alive and creates opportunities to thrive.

The existing research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth paints a daunting picture for those growing up as non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming, or nonheteronormative. The heteronormative paradigm dictates that only two genders exist; male and female, where men are masculine and female are feminine while prescribing heterosexuality as the norm. However, the differences and specific adolescence experiences for transgender youth remains unknown. Countless studies document the negative health consequences for LGBT youth from discrimination and harassment including increased mental distress and suicidal ideation. With this unique moment in transgender history, now is the time to actually begin the process of changing how we address gender difference in our culture. We need to create not only gender and identity inclusive, but also most importantly, *identity supportive* environments for transgender youth. The process begins by expanding the current conceptualizations and definitions of social support to incorporate the experiences of transgender youth. How do transgender youth access, define, and interpret social support? What do transgender youth consider supportive behaviors, actions, words and environments? This study attempts to answer these questions using the voices of nine self identified transgender young adults who explain their access, experiences, AND interpretations of social support.

Cause for Concern

Back in 2002, Emilia Lombardi and Riki Anne Wilchins' article on gendered violence demonstrates how non-conformity leads to structural and personal discrimination against transgender people. They argue that heteronormativity allows people to discriminate and punish transgender individuals for their gender nonconformity producing the high levels of gender violence. Lombardi and Wilchins surveyed 404 transgender individuals to assess the gender-based violence and discrimination experienced over their lifetimes (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing & Malouf, 2002). Asking participants if they had been victimized or discriminated for their transgender identity and/or expression, 59.5% reported some form of violence with the most common type being verbal abuse.

Most transgender participants had experienced more than one act of violence or discrimination. Almost 20% reported having experienced physical assaults and 19% had been raped, or survived an attempted rape. Transgender community members have long discussed these high levels of violence, but this study the first to statistically demonstrate the high levels endured throughout the lifespan. Most relevant to this project, the survey was also the first to establish that transgender youth were more at risk for violence and discrimination. Although only 3.5% of the sample was under twenty-five years old, the report showed, "transgendered youths who disclose their status are scorned, attacked, and locked into or thrown out of their homes." (Lombardi et..al, 98).

Almost ten years later in 2011, The National Center for Transgender Equality partnered with The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and collected surveys from 6,540 transgender people. Known as the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, this is the largest study to date focused on the individual and structural discrimination that transgender individuals' experience throughout their lives. Out of those who responded, 41% reported they had attempted suicide. Respondents who attended K-12 grades while expressing gender non-conformity reported high levels of discrimination and harassment demonstrating the risk of nonheteronormative presenting youth; 78% experienced harassment, 35% encountered physical assaults, and 12% were sexual violence survivors. The Task Force study on transgender discrimination outlines the dangers of not expanding the heteronormative ideology that continues to harms LGBT youth.

Unfortunately, this survey does not address whether the transgender individuals accessed of social support experienced during adolescence. The study reports that family acceptance was associated with better health outcomes for transgender individuals but fails to define what family acceptance versus rejection looks like. The report states that when a family accepted the transgender person, they were less likely to use drugs, alcohol and attempt suicide. The transgender people who felt accepted and supported by their families had less reason to cope with rejection through drugs or suicide. The special report found every institution from government, education, workplaces, and health care guilty of discriminating against transgender people. The reasons to attempt suicide are complex and subjective, but this report illustrates major stressors in transgender lives

including lack of support for ones' identity. 41% of 6,450 equal 2,580 individuals who have attempted to commit suicide. How many unknown transgender individuals carried out their attempts?

It Gets Worse

For the last fifteen years on November 20, Transgender Day of Remembrance, people around the world honor those lives taken as result of transphobic violence. Last year, the Transgender Violence Monitoring Project reported 226 murders substantiating the claim that every two days a transgender person is killed somewhere in the world (TvT research project, 2014). In the first two months of 2015, six transgender women of color lost their lives as a result of their nonheteronormative identities while seven young transgender people committed suicide. These deaths publicized as tragic and news worthy, however no effective change occurs to deconstruct the heteronormative paradigm that creates transphobic violence in the first place.

Certain researchers are skeptical of The National Transgender Discrimination Survey reported 41% attempted suicide rate, yet another study found around half of transgender youth sample seriously consider suicide while 25% attempt to take their lives (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). The factors associated with increase in suicidal ideation include past experiences with physical and verbal abuse from parents; and lower body esteem, particularly satisfaction with weight and how others evaluate their bodies. Caitlin Ryan's Family Acceptance Project (2010) demonstrates how rejection leads to negative

health outcomes for LGBT youth. Adolescents who experienced familial rejection were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide and 5.9 times more likely to be depressed. These studies and horrifying statistics demonstrate how transgender visibility is not necessarily translating into increased support for transgender individuals, particularly young people. So, why is transgender visibility failing to increase support for transgender youth? Because although transgender communities, issues, and rights are being publicized and discussed, how to encourage, support, and affirm transgender youth identities remains unknown.

Normal Adolescence Trials and Tribulations

Growing up is hard; adolescence is even harder. Usually described by psychology as starting around puberty, adolescence is the stage of development before adulthood where children become teenagers. Accompanied by physical, psychological, and emotional changes, adolescence can be a period of great uncertainty and anxiety for many individuals. The central tenet of adolescence is the development and integration of a positive identity. Transgender youth are no different; they face every challenge of adolescence including situating their gender identity into their personal sense of self. Unfortunately, society's heteronormative paradigm creates specific barriers to a cohesive, healthy, and positive transgender identity during adolescence. Transgender youth require additional support for their developing gender identity; not because their gender needs fixing, but rather to learn to combat the discrimination and victimization they encounter.

During adolescence, young individuals become more interested in their peers, significant others, and navigate life more independent from family structures. The main sources of social support begin to shift from parents or primary care givers to friends (Helsen, Vollebergh & Meeus, 2000). The level of perceived social support from both parents and peers influence positive development outcomes for adolescent individuals (DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, M & Evans, 1992). Good relationships with parents and peers can lead to higher levels of self-esteem, social competence, and overall well-being. Adolescents with a strong support system experience less stress that correlates with better school performance and lower levels of psychological distress (Rueger, Malecki & Demaray, 2010). Recently, more research conducted on the phase of adolescence focuses on the dramatic shift that takes place around puberty including sexuality and gender identity development (Russell, 2005).

Within sexuality research, adolescent psychologists analyze whether there are any developmental differences between lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth and their heterosexual counterparts (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar & Azrael, 2009). Although there are no developmental differences, LGB youth face the negative consequences associated with their sexual minority stigma including lower levels mental and physical health. Understanding that nonheteronormative youth encounter additional barriers during adolescence, research must examine how transgender youth specifically access the social support necessary to develop a positive identity. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are sexual identity minorities dealing with sexuality-based issues, while transgender youth

face different issues related to their gender identity. Transgender youth must navigate their sexuality development along with their gender identity status. Research must begin to understand and conceptualize the specific stressors transgender youth face as gender identity 'minorities' during adolescence.

Minority Stress Model or Heteronormative Stressors?

The minority stress model developed by Ilan Meyer (2007) demonstrates the various components that affect the health of lesbian and gay individuals. Stress can be used to describe any mental, physical, or emotional strain and every human experiences stress to some degree; minority stress differs in important ways. Sexual minority stress is a particular type of social stress that results from being LGBT or assumed to be part of this stigmatized group. Socially caused stress is unique to nonheterosexual, nonheteronormative individuals who experience and cope with it throughout their lifetimes. Minority stress model shows how stigmatized people manage their identities and try to combat mental distress caused by heterosexism, discrimination and prejudice. This framework allows us to see the stressors caused by structural level and on an individual level.

The minority stress model illustrates the distal and proximal factors that influence those who identify as nonheteronormative. Although Meyer's framework originally applied to gay and lesbian individuals, it allows us to see how transgender individuals face stressors on an individual and structural level. The environment (including

socioeconomic status, geographic location, education, and employment) influences the general amount of stressors LGBT individual experiences that is not directly related to their sexual minority status. Meyer overlaps the environment factor with the specifics of an individual's minority status- orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual), gender, and race. These three components then influence the minority stress processes experienced internally and explicitly. Distal minority events include incidences of prejudice and discrimination. Proximal minority stress incorporates internalizing, concealing, or expecting stigmatization.

Meyer hypothesizes these proximal events are influenced by how an individual feels about their minority status. If an individual is very confident and happy with their transgender identity, they are less likely to conceal or internalize their stigma allowing for better mental health outcomes. The last factor of the minority stress model is support and coping strategies. This component affects all of the others by mitigating the internalization of stigma, creating positive support for minority identity, and acts as a buffer against prejudice. Every sexual minority experiences these factors in some way, but every person's individual circumstance, stressors, and support varies.

Realizing the heteronormative stressors facing transgender youth, Michael Hendricks and Rylan Testa (2012) adapted Meyers model for transgender individuals. They found transgender individuals face proximal and distal stressors similar to sexual minority populations. Transgender youth face constant gender minority stress for their gender nonconforming identity, expression, and presentation. Most transgender people

face expectations of violence and discrimination while dealing with issues of internalized transphobia. An important part of the minority stress model focuses on coping and social support for one's sexual or gender identity. Although originally for sexual minority youth, Hendricks and Testa's adaptation illustrates how transgender youth also need extra social support to combat the specific stressors of being nonheteronormative.

Importance of Social Support during Adolescence

Transgender youth are managing heteronormativity and minority stress, as well as navigating the difficult terrain of adolescence. LGBT youth research started to identify how social support combats the negative health consequences of nonheteronormativity and sexual minority stress. These studies show that LGBT youth face different issues than their non-LGBT counterparts associated with their gender and/or sexuality minority identity status and stress (Herek, 2007). In the past decade, the vast increase in research with LGBT youth continues to demonstrate the incredibly high level of daily harassment and discrimination they face at home, in schools, and in the community. Social support is a critical aspect to understanding LGBT youth and health outcomes. Studies show that the more social support a LGBT-identified youth has, the less likely they will suffer negative health consequences. However, because many of these studies fail to include transgender youth, we lack a clear understanding of their experiences and interpretations of social support.

Social support systems can be found through family, friends, school, religion, and community. Research findings clearly show increased social support leads to lower levels of social and mental distress for LGBT youth (Budge, Adelson & Howard, 2013). Access to various types of social support including local organizations, parental, and school support becomes imperative for the health of LGBT youth. These types of support provide space for LGBT individuals to be surrounded by other LGBT people fostering a greater sense of inclusion in their community. The current data on LGBT youth highlights the negative mental, physical, and emotional health outcomes that occur without proper social support (Eliason & Schope, 2007). The research on social support and LGBT youth illustrates the lack of support increases the chances of negative health outcomes.

Unfortunately, research doesn't address the difference in experiences between lesbian, gay, bisexual as sexual minorities, and transgender youth as gender identity minority youth. Transgender youth find it more challenging to come out as transgender at home or school and experience increase rates of rejection or violence when they do (Grant, Jaime, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling). Transgender youth also experience less family and school support leading to more negative health outcomes (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2010). The victimization of LGBT youth directly impacts their mental health, self-acceptance, and suicidal ideation (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995). The negative consequences of LGBT victimization can be combatted through positive social support. However, the different ways that social

support can help transgender youth fight discrimination is not yet understood. How are transgender youth being supported? What behaviors, actions, words, and environments are being interpreted as supportive by transgender youth? What about unsupportive responses and environments?

Conceptualizing Support

Research illustrates that social support mitigates the negative effects of marginalization, harassment and gender discrimination on LGBT individuals' health. So far, no study has presented the different ways social support may buffer against prejudice specifically for transgender youth. For the most part, retrospective research asks transgender adults to recollect their childhood and describe whether they felt supported or not to be gender non-conforming as they grew up. Typically, social support measurements are separated into different categories including tangible/concrete, financial, emotional, appraisal and informational. Although greatly debated, social support is roughly defined as interaction between two individuals where there exists an exchange of resources (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988).

Tangible, or instrumental, types of support include housing, food, and social services. *Emotional* support can be there for someone in times of crisis or general interest in the persons' wellbeing. *Informational* support includes educating the youth on sexuality and gender related topics helping them navigate their LGBT identity status. Providing affirmation, feedback, and positive sense of self are examples of *appraisal*

support. Social support scales attempt to identify specific people and behaviors perceived as supportive. The subjectivity and individual interpretation of perceived support makes it difficult to pinpoint specific supportive versus non-supportive actions. What might be defined as supportive by one transgender youth may be considered unsupportive for another. A few research studies exploring how LGBT perceive and define social support in their own words illustrate the subjective problem with identifying support.

As previously established, access to social support is imperative for the mental, physical, and emotional health of LGBT youth. Regrettably, we still have little to no information on transgender youth. But defining and measuring social support as experienced by adolescence is a challenging process. The most commonly used measurement tool is the multidimensional scale of perceived social support developed by Gregory Zimet. But perceived social support scales and existing research fails to illustrate the complex intricacies that constitute experiencing and interpreting social support. For many studies, researchers determine and define support rather than allowing participants to determine what responses they interpreted as support. When LGBT youth solely answer items on surveys through checking whether they feel supported or not, we don't get to hear their own voices defining what specifically comprises support. Also, social support research with LGBT youth as one category fails to separate the different experiences of support by LGB, sexual minority members, versus the T, gender minority identities.

Another short coming of current LGBT research is the explicit focus on the the minority status of the youth, rather than all their experiences of social support during adolescence. If LGBT youth lack overall social support from family, friends, or community, no amount of support for their sexual or gender identity will make them feel better about going through adolescence. We have to remember the larger developmental picture; LGBT youth are going through all the hectic changes of becoming adults, in addition to being nonheteronormative. First, they need social support necessary to survive adolescence, and second they require the specific support to navigate their LGBT identity status.

LGBT Youth and Social Support

To explore how support is perceived, researchers ask lesbian, gay, and bisexual identified adolescents to explain, in their own words, how they perceive social support (Nesmith, Burton & Cosgrove, 1999). Although this study failed to include transgender youth, the focus shifts from the definitions of social support being dictated by researchers to the youths' first person perspective. Realizing LGB individuals experience ordinary adolescence along with the particular set of problems, this study explores the additional challenges nonheteronormative youth face by actually allowing them to speak on the issues they encounter everyday. More in depth than answering 'yes or no' on perceived support scales, these qualitative interviews allowed each participant to explain exactly what social support looks and feels like to them.

The youth described not only what type of support they perceived, but also who they received it from and how it was provided. The most commonly discussed theme was the parental reaction to the youth's sexual identity and how this framed their perception of future support. Most of the LGB youth depicted current supporters in terms of parental figures, whether they were biological family members or not. The participants whose parents' reactions were considered non-supportive, or even violent, tended to seek adults who supported their sexual identity in three distinct ways. By becoming role models for the LGB youth, supportive adults offer advice, nurture emotional needs, and provide overall positive encouragement. While highlighting the need for role models, the next study analyzes the types of social support offered to LGBT youth by different environments and people.

Cornne Mufioz-Plaza (2002) attempted to find out exactly how LGBT youth perceive social support from their family, friends, and community. The results of Mufioz-Plaza's study illustrate different environments provide the different types of support for LGBT youth. The study starts to explore how the perception and interpretation of support differ depending on the environment and the provider of the support. Overall, the results demonstrate LGBT youth perceived less support from parents and more support from non-family members, including peers and other non-parental adults. More specifically, heterosexual peers and non-family adults provided the youth with much needed emotional and instrumental types of support. LGBT non-family members offered appraisal and informational support while serving as role models to the LGBT youth.

The importance of role models is an undeveloped area of LGBT youth research. A crucial benefit to finding and knowing people similar to you is learning everything non-LGBT identified adults can't teach these adolescents. Unfortunately, this study demonstrates that LGBT youth feel limited amounts of support from parents and other family members. Interesting to note, these LGBT youth reported they didn't disclose their sexual identities to parents. Therefore, parents lacked knowledge of their children's nonheteronormative sexuality status, yet the LGBT youth still felt unsupported. The possibility of being rejected, kicked out, or abandoned ultimately proved too dangerous for LGBT youth to confide in an environment that *felt* unsupporting. Even though the parents remained unaware of their unsupportiveness, because they didn't know there was anything to be supporting (their child's sexuality), LGBT youth reported a lack of support within the home.

Rather than focusing on the support LGBT youth did have access to, the conclusion of Mufioz- Plaza's study highlights the severe isolation nonheteronormative adolescents face. The cognitive, social, and emotional isolation resulting from their LGBT identity status reaffirms the necessity of understanding how transgender youth interpret social support. However, once again this research doesn't differentiate between the experiences of LGB (sexual minority) youth and T (gender minority) youth. Currently, there are no studies that demonstrate how transgender youth interpret and perceive the social support they have access to. We cannot assume that LGB and

transgender youth experience social support in the same way; research must begin to expose the nuance, complexity and intricacy of transgender support systems.

Where's the T?

Mostly invisible within the LGBT youth research is how transgender youth define, interpret, and experience social support. Due to the lack of studies that include transgender youth, The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) analyzed responses from 295 transgender youth on their school experiences from a previous survey. The results illustrate the high level of harassment, violence, and victimization transgender youth endure at school from their peers, teachers, and administrators. However, despite its focus on transgender youth, open-ended questions were never asked of the participants. Open-ended questions would have allowed participants to use their own words to describe their individual experiences of not only the discrimination, but the support they access.

In the study, 87% reported verbal abuse while 53% faced physical harassment due to their gender identity or expression. Almost all the youth, 90%, heard peers use homophobic or transphobic language and one-third said teachers made negative comments about a student's gender expression. 26% of the sample stated they had been physically assaulted in the past year. Approximately one out of four transgender youth endure physical assaults at school because they do not conform to heteronormative gender expectations. Approximately half of these participants reported their assault to

the school administration; 70% of those who did believed the situation was handled ineffectively. When transgender youth hear teachers use transphobic language, they will be less inclined to report incidences to the administration because they know their complains won't be taken seriously.

The GLSEN study demonstrates how verbal and physical abuse negatively impacts transgender youths' academic progress due to their inability to feel safe within school environments. Transgender youth missed classes, dropped their grade point average, and were more likely to miss entire school days than non-transgender students. The study found the level of harassment experienced correlated with GPA, and after high school goals; higher levels of harassment led to lower GPAs and less desire to attend college. Around half of the schools attended by the transgender youth created nondiscrimination statements and policies that discussed harassment of students; only 24% of these included explicit mention of sexual and gender identity related abuse.

Along with the negative consequences of their nonheteronormativity, transgender youth lack sufficient resources and social support to combat their victimization. Similar to lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth, Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) allows transgender youth access to social support within their schools. 45% of the transgender youth's schools had a GSA where they received emotional encouragement and support from peers. GLSEN concludes that transgender youth need access to social support but still fails to define what constitutes supportive behaviors and environments or describe what the support process looks like.

The few remaining studies on transgender youth are much smaller in sample size usually with between 15 and 50 participants. Most of the transgender specific studies expand on the 'at-risk minority' model that focuses on how to manage sexual and/or gender identity stigma. Arnold Grossman and Anthony D'Augelli's 2006 study summarizes the existing transgender youth research and the themes that emphasize their vulnerability. They open their article noting the special 340 page *Adolescent Medicine* report on LGBT youth includes two pages dedicated to transgender youth. In an attempt to identify the specific needs to transgender individuals, Grossman and D'Augelli's study explore what transgender youth articulate as impacting their adolescent development.

Using three focus groups, they asked transgender youth ages 15-20 to describe experiences of discrimination, risk, marginalization, and support. Three themes arose from discussing their adolescent development including gender identity and presentation, sexual orientation, vulnerability and health. Many of the youth described negative reactions to their gender nonconforming presentation and some experienced physical violence from parents. The study concludes that transgender youth face four main health concerns due to their unique vulnerability reaffirming their 'at risk' status.

First, transgender youth face unsafe environments within school, home, and community. Secondly, transgender youth lack access to health care services. Third, the mental health care services available to transgender youth remain extremely inadequate. And last, Grossman and D'Augelli find transgender youth lack the emotional support in the form of caregiving role of families and communities. This study points to all the

support that transgender youth lack and the resulting negative consequences rather than focusing on the support they encounter. However, once again, we are left without a clear picture of how to provide social support for transgender youth. The authors failed to include specific instances that were perceived as supportive versus non-supportive by transgender youth.

Because most LGBT youth research illustrates the results of sexual/gender minority status, suicidal ideation, and ‘at risk’ markers, transgender youth research highlights their assumed vulnerability. Recently, we have seen a push back to the ‘at risk’ ideology and shifted to the other side of the spectrum focusing on the resiliency of transgender youth. But there must be a way to study transgender youth as ordinary adolescents with unique obstacles that require specific types of social support. We need to treat transgender youth just like every other adolescent in need of support trying to develop a positive sense of self. Every adolescent faces particular obstacles and needs access to social support, regardless of their gender or sexual identity. So back to the original question, what does social support actually look and feel like for transgender youth?

Differing Definitions of Social Support

The typical classifications of social support including tangible, emotional, and informational need to be expanded to incorporate transgender youth. However, identifying the specific type of support found in each environment doesn’t necessarily

address exactly which behaviors, actions, or words that the youth interpreted as supportive. And because previous research address LGBT youth as one group, we have yet to identify the ways that transgender youth specifically interpret behaviors as supportive or non-supportive. By only labeling the various types of support transgender youth access and whether they receive it or not, researchers neglect to address the process of interpreting support. Who is providing transgender youth with support? And when are these responses being perceived as support versus unsupportive to the youth? My transgender participants discuss actions, behaviors, and words they consider supportive and the different environments. Similar to other studies, the youth found certain types of support within the home and different types from school or formal organizations. By examining individual transgender youths' perception and interpretation of support, I begin to identify positive responses that provide gender and identity supportive environments.

Supportive versus Unsupportive- Drawing the line

As previously established, transgender youth experience normal adolescence with specific needs and access to different types of social support that have yet to be defined. Research must illuminate how transgender youth interpret and define social support in their words. Although research fails to inform the reader what support for transgender youth looks like, there are studies defining nonsupportive actions, behaviors, or words for LGBT youth. Unfortunately, feeling supportive is subjective; what may be perceived as support for one transgender youth may feel unsupportive for another. Also, the person

supporting the youth may feel like they are being supportive, while the transgender youth interprets something as non-supportive. Currently, LGBT youth and social support has begun to identify certain behaviors and actions that are considered unsupportive.

Outright rejection of an adolescents' sexual or gender identity remains the ultimate form of unsupportive behavior and action. But many family members do not view their behaviors, actions, and words as rejecting or unsupportive. However, The Family Acceptance Project (FAP) demonstrates the negative effects of rejection on the health of LGBT youth. Caitlin Ryan and her team established that family acceptance acts as a buffer against the negative health consequences for LGBT youth. The LGBT youth who experienced family acceptance developed higher levels self-esteem, social support, and overall health. Ryan found that youth who reported high levels of family acceptance received higher positive adjustment measures of self-esteem, social support, and general health. Ryan determined family acceptance acts as a protective factor associated with these positive physical and mental health outcomes. However, once again, the researchers describe what social support is rather than allowing LGBT youth to define it for themselves.

To calculate the degree of family acceptance, FAP determined the level of acceptance for each LGBT youth based on in depth interviews that described family experiences and interactions regarding sexual/gender identity. Fifty-five positive and fifty negative events were identified and the youth participants specified how often each comment, action, or behavior occurred. Most important to my project, this study actually

includes transgender youth and found that family acceptance didn't vary depending on gender, sexual, or transgender identity. The key findings all link higher levels of family rejection to devastating health consequences. The most concerning outcomes indicate adolescents who experienced familial rejection were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide, 5.9 times more likely to be depressed, 3.4 times more likely to use drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to have unprotected sex. FAP concludes that family acceptance during adolescence is related to positive health benefits for LGBT youth and protects against negative health consequences.

Although seemingly obvious that rejection negatively impacts LGBT youth, the Family Acceptance Project empirically demonstrated that rejection of an adolescents' identity damages their mental and physical wellbeing. On closer examination, the families who were unsupportive or rejecting stated they did so to protect the adolescent from further harm from others. Unfortunately, Ryan doesn't elaborate on how the families understood their own behaviors, actions, and speech. The FAP fails to explore how the families believed their behavior was being interpreted by the LGBT youth. Once more, the Family Acceptance Project illuminates the need for social support and acceptance for LGBT without differentiating lesbian, gay, and bisexual from transgender youth experiences.

Supporting Transgender Youth

The current research on LGBT youth details the specific types of social support necessary to combat the negative health outcomes associated with sexual and gender minority identities. However, the experiences of social support for LGBT youth are frequently conflated. We can no longer assume that transgender youth experience social support in the same way as lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Transgender youth face different issues related to their gender identity rather than the sexual identity concerns of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Research has yet to demonstrate how transgender youth interpret and receive social support from parents, peers, and communities. How do transgender youth define social support? Where do transgender youth access social support? And finally, what behaviors, actions, and words do transgender youth interpret as supportive? My research project analyzes the experiences of nine transgender young adults with social support. Using qualitative interviews, I explore how transgender youth interpret social support within the home, school, and organizations. My project aims to address how transgender youth access, define, interpret, and experience social support.

Study

Online qualitative interviews using the online instant messaging program found on Skype with transgender young adults located within the United States provided a personal life history of gender identity and access to support. Originally designed to compare location of childhood to where the participants currently lived to see what the

differences in access to social support. Unfortunately, I did not achieve a broad enough sample to compare location and access to social support. The majority of participants currently live in California, although some have recently moved here from other states. Instead, the major themes that arose were the differing definitions of support and how transgender youth interpret social support they receive in the home, school, and organizations. Using grounded theory methodology, I open coded my interview transcripts line by line. The most important theme revolved around how transgender youth interpreted social support determined whether the environments- home, school, organization- were perceived as supportive.

Participants

My participants all self identified as transgender ages 18-25, spoke English, and lived in the United States. I interviewed nine transgender young adults through the online instant messaging program Skype, with no voice or face-to-face interaction. The qualitative interviews lasted approximately one to one and half hours. Participants chose a pseudonym used for the duration of the interview and research process. The first criterion for participation is that individuals self identified as transgender. This can be in anyway they chose to define transgender and I accepted any transgender identity. The second criterion is that the participant is between the age of 18 and 25. The last criterion is that every participant lives within the United States and speaks English fluently.

I interviewed nine participants and cannot make generalizations to the entire transgender population. The benefit of a small sample is that it allows me describe each individual transgender youth's background and experience of social support. Also, every single participant's gender identity was described differently and needs to be validated by more than transgender female or male categories. For the following participant overview, I use the exact words and descriptions they provided for race, sexuality, and gender identity. Participants chose their pseudonyms before the interview started and I use the names or initials they provided.

Alice is 24 years old and lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan where she attends graduate school. She grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan with her mother, father and one younger brother. Alice is white and currently works in her school's LGBT center. She identifies as female first, transgender second. Alice's stated her sexual identity as queer.

Roxy is 18 and Hispanic living in her hometown of Covina, California. She described her gender identity as MtF transgender woman. Roxy identifies as a lesbian. She lives with her father now, but grew up with her mother and two sisters. She has a very limited relationship with both her parents since coming out as transgender and speaks to them only on absolute necessary situations.

Josephine grew up in Centerville, California, an unaffiliated township near Fresno. She is my oldest participant at 25 and current attending graduate school at East Bay Political Science department. When asked what her race or ethnicity was, Josephine

responded that she was a WASP. Her family was “very conservative, very Republican, and very Christian”. She identifies as a lesbian, transwoman and presents female while at school. However, currently Josephine is unable present her authentic gender identity at home.

Lily is a 19-year-old sophomore in college and a transgender woman of color attending a South Bay private university. Born in New York and raised in Belmont, California, she currently identifies as East Asian. Lily’s gender identity is “transfeminine” and her sexuality is “somewhere on the asexual spectrum, panromantic, polyamorous”. She is a research assistant for a project that focuses on transgender discrimination within the workplace.

Kourtnie is 20 years old and grew up in Santa Rosa, California. When asked how she describes her gender identity, she responded “ male to female trans, but I identify as female”. Kourtnie is Caucasian and straight. She will begin a certified nursing assistant program this month but currently works as webcam performer.

Jake grew up in Long Island, New York and is 22 years old. He is a Caucasian transgender man in graduate school in the San Francisco Bay Area. Jake identifies as queer. Starting in his Long Island high school, continuing into undergraduate college and currently, Jake works and advocates within the LGBT youth community.

LnL grew up in a small rural Californian town and currently lives in Concord. LnL identifies as “nonbinary, transgender, masculine(ish)”. Their sexual identity is queer. LnL is a white, first year graduate student in the Bay Area.

Mark is an 18-year-old senior in high school. When asked his gender identity, Mark described himself as “100% male.” Mark grew up in Dallas with his mother, father, and two sisters. He identifies as heterosexual.

Isaac is a 20-year-old “transman” attending a South Bay private university. He is Mexican and grew up in San Diego with his mother, father, brother, and sister. Isaac identifies as heterosexual.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through free social media websites including Facebook, Tumblr, Craigslist, and Instagram. A recruitment flyer (Appendix A) posted online briefly explained the project and ask interested participants to reply by email to a special account set up specifically only for this research. When participants emailed after seeing the flyer, I responded to further discuss the goal of this research and interview process. Skype has a free online messaging platform that encrypts all text and doesn't record message sessions. Skype features include being able to set up a private key that is not available to the public and automatically encrypted. Skype is supported on every type of computer system, Mac or PC. When a participant replies to the follow up email with a confirmation to participate, we solidified a time and date for interview.

Method

The location of the interview depended on where participants could safely access the Internet for at least an hour. At the time of the interview, my first message provided a complete informed consent statement to the participant. I directly copied and pasted the consent form onto the Skype messenger. I asked if the participant had any questions and we discussed any possible questions that arose. After going over the implied consent together, the participants decided to partake in the interview process. They retyped section I, the informed consent agreement, before electronically signing using their pseudonym.

Following the informed consent, the interview began with a brief series of demographic questions before moving onto the life history questions (Appendix B). Demographic questions discussed previously included age, gender, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Life history questions began with place of birth, family structure, early childhood memories, school and social support experiences leading up to their current age. I also asked the participants to outline personal movement or location history. This started from where they were born and a time line summary of movements throughout their life. Because my original goal was to examine how location affects access to social support, many of my questions revolved around location history. The next line of questioning pertains to access to social support currently and in the past. General questions of social support were broken up by childhood, adolescence, and current age periods. I also asked by location; how did where they grew up versus where

they live now make a difference for social support? Following my participants' lead, I often asked follow up questions depending on what they wanted to discuss.

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked the participant if they had any questions for me or wanted to add anything else. After the interview process, I thanked the participant for their time and contribution. Each participant was entered into a raffle drawing for a \$50 electronic gift card. The winner of the raffle received an Amazon gift card delivered electronically to the recipient through email. The participant claims the gift card by clicking on the provided link within the email. The participant will open the link and print the electronic gift card in order to use it. After coding and analysis, I will delete all the participants email addresses.

The unit of analysis was the interview transcripts. Because the interviews were conducted on Skype, transcripts were completed at the same time as the initial interview. After all nine interviews were conducted, I went through the transcripts and coded line by line. Using an open coding strategy, I analyzed the data for themes of location, social support, family, schools, and organization cites. Because most of my participants currently live in California, the location theme did not illicit many connections to social support. Coding lead to the themes of how and what transgender youth interpreted as supportive versus non supportive. Exploring the different environments that transgender youth encounter- home, school, organizations- illustrates the individual experiences and interpretations of social support. The interpretation of support depends on whether a response is considered identity affirming or rejecting which creates supportive versus

non-supportive environments for transgender youth (Appendix D). This framework privileges the interpretation and voices of transgender youth who are beginning to determine what social support looks and feels like to them.

Interpreting Support within the Home

*“ My family kinda just laughed it off, and would just tell me I had a great imagination.” –
Alice*

As seen from the quote above and in Appendix E, families deal with their transgender children and their gender issues in different ways. The quote by Alice demonstrates how her feminine behavior was considered something silly, cute, and creative by her family, rather than an underlying gender identity issue. Her family allowed her to dress up and act feminine because they could laugh this off as being young and adorable. Although they didn't explicitly repress her gender expression until she was older, failing to recognize and support her authentic gender identity from a young age led Alice to feel unsupported. Alice's home environment represents how behaviors can be both supportive and nonsupportive depending on the perspective.

As she got older and continued to exude femininity, Alice's family was forced to confront her gender issues. Around age four, Alice remembers wearing t-shirts on her head and pretending to brush it like long hair. One of her childhood friends liked to make movies in which Alice always dressed up and played the female characters. She

describes her female cousin dressing up as a boy while Alice would wear her cousin's dresses stating:

Even though everyone knew I was technically a boy, I would love to dress up and play female characters. I would get really into it. Everyone thought it was so funny. But it wasn't a joke to me. It was really the only time I felt like I got to be my real self.

Alice described these as unpleasant memories because of her father's negative responses to her cross gender dressing and activities stating, "at a very early age, I got the sense that behaving in that way was not acceptable."

Alice's father is a wonderful example of a parental journey from unsupportive to supportive responses. As earlier described, Alice's cross gender play began from age three and her mother accepted her behavior without necessarily encouraging or rejecting her femininity. Growing up, she describes being obsessed with Alice in Wonderland and telling everyone her name was Alice. Choosing her pseudonym appropriately, Alice explains how this childhood behavior angered her father. She recounts her father's unsupportive emotional reactions to playing with dolls and saying her name was Alice. The words used to describe her father's reactions to her femininity included annoyed, mad, and embarrassed. These emotions made it clear to Alice that her behavior was unsupported and unacceptable in her father's eyes. Highlighting the differing reactions from parents, Alice states:

He and my mom had kinda different approaches to handling my situation. My mom kinda just went along with what I said and she would let me play with dolls and just go along with whatever I said. She told me when I was

four I looked at her and said "Mom, I'm a girl." Her response was a simple 'okay honey'.

Her father believed that Alice's mother was encouraging femininity and disagreed with this parenting approach. Alice's father attempted to encourage more masculine behavior by teaching Alice how to swim and bike. Although this only left Alice repressing her true self, pressured and frustrated with 'boyish things', her father believed this was the support Alice needed to become more masculine.

When Alice disclosed her transgender feelings to her parents after puberty began, they told her they loved her no matter what and would figure it out together. However, her father initially refused to believe his 'first born son' identified as female until the therapist said this was the most straightforward case of transgender identity he'd ever seen. Although Alice's father confirmed his unconditional love, the denial he felt towards her transgender identity was perceived as unsupportive. After seeing how happy Alice was presenting as female, her father has since actively supported her and their relationship remains extremely close. Alice's father did not change his definition of support but went to therapy and became educated on transgender identities allowing him to accept his transgender daughter. After years of parental acceptance, Alice understands her father's initial reluctance and stressed his current supportive responses stating:

I don't wanna make my dad out to sound like a bad guy. I get it now. I was his first born son and he didn't know what was going on. He felt like something was wrong, and there kinda was. But he ended up being a great supporter later. It just took time.

During childhood, participants grew aware their internal feelings of gender differed from what they were assigned at birth. However, because most youth don't realize or officially 'come out' as transgender until adolescence, they grow up in a home treated as their gender assigned at birth. Transgender woman are treated and socialized as little boys while transgender male individuals are seen as girls. Understandably, many transgender youth feel repressed within a home that doesn't allow them to explore their authentic gender identity. My participants experienced examples of supportive and non-supportive responses within the home environment constantly navigating, perceiving, and interpreting social support.

Four out of five transgender female participants described cross gender childhood play while growing up accompanied by repressive responses. Because assigned female children are allowed more leeway and can safely identify as tomboys, none of my trans masculine youth discussed cross gender play associated with rejecting responses during childhood. I use the term cross gender to refer to male assigned children who preferred female typical friends and activities. Recognizing that there are more than two genders and my participants were actually identifying with their preferred gender, using terms cross gender and gender non-conforming play addresses how it appears to family, friends, and their community. Growing up, many male assigned children experienced parental disapproval for dressing up in girl typical attire while those assigned female were allowed more masculine expression. At younger ages, male assigned children were allowed to

play with girls, dress up as female, and generally allowed to express a certain type of child femininity.

As the participants aged, their gender expression become more policed and gender 'appropriate' for their assigned roles. The data from the Family Acceptance Project suggests that parents believe that by policing atypical gender expression they are protecting their children from further hostility out in the world. However, parental reactions differed by gender with fathers reacting more negatively than mothers to cross gender play and expressions. When Alice's femininity was repressed within the home, these identity-rejecting responses created non-supportive home environment. Alice's home environment and parental instances of support and non-support demonstrate the challenges in interpretation of social support. Parents can believe they are affirming and supporting their child's identity, while the youth feels like their identity is being repressed or rejected. Another example of how support and nonsupportive responses can be interpreted within the home environment is Kournie.

Kournie never knew anything different than femininity or identifying as female saying:

From the time I could remember/talk, everything I did was female. I always played with girls toys and had female friends in school, I never really had boys that were friends in school. My mom told me that when I was 4 I asked her why I wasn't a girl, and at around age 6 I remember making a wish on a snow globe, that I would turn into a girl.

These memories illustrate how Kourtnie's declaration of her authentic gender to her mother began at a very early age. Unfortunately, Kourtnie declares, "my father is an abusive angry person, so all my memories with him from early childhood until the time I was 18 were negative." While her father demonstrated unsupportive behavior by becoming angry because of her childhood femininity, her mother reacted supportively by allowing her to wear makeup and wax her eyebrows. Kourtnie said that although her father disapproved of her femininity, her mother, brother, and aunt all encouraged and supported her. Kourtnie states:

They were all supportive. I mean even my father was supportive of it. (probably because my mother forced him to be and he would listen to every word she said).

Seemingly contradictory, Kourtnie knew her father didn't approve of her female gender identity but her mother demanded her father be supportive and stop repressing her femininity. Her mother demanded a supportive environment and supportive behavior for Kourtnie's authentic gender expression. Transgender youth navigate the constant change in response type, from nonsupportive to supporting, within the same environment. This is an example where one parent demanded another parent stop identity rejecting responses to ensure a supportive home environment for their child. Kourtnie remembers a telling early childhood memory with her father:

The first time I remember hearing/seeing a trans person was at a flea market with my father and he pointed her out as a he/she. It didn't really click with me, I was about 8, and I remember thinking that the ladies nails were cool.

Thankfully, her mother has always supported and affirmed her authentic gender within their home. Kourtnie reiterates how grateful she is for the supportive members of her family:

My mother has always been there for me and my brother, and her sister, my aunt. My mom always made sure we had love and guidance, and she really is a great mother. Over my teenage years, we had a lot of problems; 1 because I was a teenager; 2, It was around the start of my transition; and 3, I had a lot of mental health issues starting around that time. I was very rebellious and awful to my mom, but over the years since that has stopped, and she has never stopped being there for me. I go to her with everything, and she is always there.

Kourtnie's father negative response and rejecting actions towards her femininity were mediated by her mother, brother, and aunt's steadfast support.

"My mother attributes it to mental defect, and my father tells me I'm stupid for wanting to change my world so drastically." – Roxy

Two trans feminine identified participants, Roxy and Josephine, are not welcome to present their authentic gender to their families within the home. Specifically, the parents choose to ignore rather than affirm their children authentic sense of self. As the quote above illustrates, Roxy's mother and father deny her female identity through pathologization., mental illness, and choice. Roxy at 18 is my youngest participant, remembers an important childhood memory:

My first exposure to anything loosely relating to cross gender identities, was RuPaul's drag race, of which I know there is a huge difference between RuPaul and I. It was an eye opener at age 10. (I felt excited

knowing there were other people who could "transform" from men into women so effortlessly, even I wished I could compete one day).

Growing up with her mother and two sisters, Roxy's feminine behavior and female typical play causing difficult tensions to arise early. Referencing her mother, Roxy states:

her personality always seemed to evolve into something that clashed with mine, we never had much of a close bond.

During her sophomore year of high school, the arguments intensified and unsupportive environment in her mother's house led Roxy to move in with her father.

Last year, the first people Roxy told about her transgender awareness were her parents "thinking [she] could hide behind them if things got hairy". Unfortunately, Roxy's parents reacted unsupportively and believe she is mentally ill as the quote beginning this section illustrates. Currently, communication between her parents is strictly only when necessary. Out of 11 siblings, two sisters accept and embrace Roxy as her authentic self.

She says the following about the rest:

My siblings to put it short do not agree with my "decision" and that I'm taking away their brother, and now they have to treat me differently because of my 'situation'.

The two sisters responded with support by immediately changing names and pronouns affirming Roxy's authentic identity. Roxy says her supportive sisters have helped work through many issues declaring:

Right off the bat they called me by my "true" name and they've embraced the idea of having a new sister to talk to quite remarkably well, in turn I

like to call them my best friends. They have supported me since I came out.

Demonstrating the variant levels of support within one home, Roxy's siblings provided refuge from her parents pathologizing non-supportive response. Similar to parents, siblings' reactions to a 'coming out' fluctuate initially and over time between supportive and unsupportive. Roxy's experience highlights what happens when parents repress and reject an identity while other family members support and affirm authenticity.

As discussed above, for participants who displayed gender non-conforming tendencies from a young age began to notice family disapproval about gender presentation early in life. Many youth described fathers as being especially reactive to the idea their child might be feminine, gay, or transgender. For those designated male at birth, their fathers openly commented on signs of femininity and tried to establish more masculine behaviors. The degree of imposing masculine activities varied and included teaching how to swim, bike, or play catch. Mothers more typically allowed those assigned boys to play with dolls, dress up and bond with many female individuals. For the assigned female trans youth, fathers seemed less concerned with gender atypical playing as allowed by tomboy acceptability.

Similar to most literature on transgender men, those raised as girls did not comment as much on parents trying to curb their masculine behavior or presentation. Isaac explains tomboy/ boy passing:

When I was younger I dressed very masculine and had short hair so strangers often perceived me as male.

The reactions of parents to their gender nonconforming children depend on multiple factors. Overall, participants' fathers initially reacted more unsupportively of cross gender play and transgender identity while mothers presented more supportive behaviors, actions, and words. Many parents' whose initial reactions were unsupportive and angry eventually become more supportive of a child's preferred gender identity. The parents who made a conscious effort to educate themselves on gender identity and transgender issues chose to support their children.

"My parents are very traditional, very conservative, very Republican and very Christian. Growing up involved a lot of church activities. They're both trained schoolteachers, but my mom stayed at home to take care of the kids. They're also both incredibly wonderful people who are very friendly and nice, but a little close minded on certain topics." –Josephine

Unfortunately, many families responded negatively to the disclosure of nonheteronormative sexuality and/or gender identity. Out of nine participants, five of the families initially reacted with non-supportive responses. As of the interviews, every participant had found at least one ally within their families to support their transgender identity. Because many identified as gay for some point in their lives, many disclosed at two separate times; once their non-heteronormative sexuality and then again their

authentic gender identity. The responses for both sexual and gender identities ranged from accepting to hostile.

The contradiction in Josephine's quote above illustrates the ambiguity and complexity of interpreting social support. By listing off the adjectives associated with right wing pundits and intolerance, Josephine draws attention to her assumption of their dislike and rejection of her transgender identity. However, she reminds us that her parents are also "incredibly wonderful" to ensure we know they are good people, no matter how close-minded. This quote highlights the tension between parents who may not understand, agree with, or even believe in transgender identities and the support their children crave. Unfortunately, Josephine's assumptions of her parent's repression of her authentic identity proved correct. She explains:

My family's perspective is that it's ok to be different, as long as you keep it to yourself and don't rock the boat. They view trans as a form of sin, and so it's inevitable but not something we should show either.

Demonstrating unsupportive repressive reactions, her parents refuse to discuss transgender issues and Josephine is not welcome to present her authentic female identity within the home. Coming from a very small township and conservative family, Josephine expected these unsupportive responses within the home and community. Her brother's journey from supportive to unsupportive negatively impacts Josephine who still struggles to understand his change of heart. After coming out to her unsupportive parents, Josephine presented herself as female during time spent with her brother last summer. Quite unexpectedly, her brother became unsupportive demonstrated through

transphobic speech and demanded Josephine present as male while spending time together. The incident was never directly resolved because shortly afterwards, Josephine traveled to Africa.

Upon returning, her brother asked Josephine to be the “best man” at his wedding. Josephine agreed and will be presenting as male at her brother’s wedding as his best man. Josephine said “it was a nice olive branch” and her brother is attempting to repair their relationship. Josephine believes that her graduation this spring will be ultimately:

the point where they will get to choose if they want to come to support me or if their concept of me as a man is more important.

Josephine’s parents demonstrated unsupportive responses by ignoring her need to present her authentic gender expression within the home. At first, her brother recognized this need until he also became nonsupportive about Josephine’s presentation and used transphobic, hateful speech. Although the majority of her family disapproves of Josephine’s identity, her gay-identified sister responded supportively. Thankfully, Josephine found supportive words of encouragements from this sister. Her story exemplifies the definition of non-supportive response; ignoring and rejecting a family member’s authentic gender identity will always be interpreted as unsupportive behavior by the transgender youth. When asked how the relationship with her family is currently, Josephine responded, “great, except I don’t talk about the trans things and they don’t ask.”

Not all family members reacted negatively towards a participant coming out as transgender. Interestingly to note, three mothers actually approached their children to ask if they felt transgender. Alice, Isaac, and Kourtnie's mothers all asked their children whether they truly felt like another a gender than what they were assigned. I am unaware of any other study that found parents coming to children and asking if they felt like they might be transgender. Alice recalls how this moment of disclosure occurred:

An Oprah episode was on and my parents asked me, remember when you acted like this? Do you ever feel like you're a girl still? And I said, yeah I do. I think they kinda gave me a look of, oh shit. Well. We kinda knew this was coming. But we are kinda scared about it.

As described earlier, after reassuring their unconditional love, they found a therapist together to figure out a way to offer support and create a supportive environment for Alice within the home.

Isaac recalls how his mother approached the situation and came to him with information about transgender identities:

Around 7th grade I told my mom I liked a girl in my class because I was tired of her asking me about boys. That's when my "transition" started I would say. My mom started going to meetings and doing research online and she started explaining a lot of concepts to me including the distinctions between gender and sex. When she asked me if I had the choice to be born a girl or a boy what would I pick, I told her it didn't matter because I couldn't pick. She then explained what being trans was in more detail and I started getting really excited.

Isaac explains that he didn't realize the difference between sex and gender until his mother did her own research. This allowed his mother to recognize that Isaac was not just a tomboy growing up, but his authentic gender identity was male.

Kourtnie describes how the situation arose for her:

My mom, I had actually came out as gay around like the age of 12 because that's what I thought I was, and she was probably the first person I told. She had told me that she already knew as did everyone else in my family, and then a little before I started my transition, I was slowly getting into makeup, then I got my eye brows waxed one time and that concerned her, and she had actually asked me if I wanted to be a girl.

These mothers knew their children had always been gender nonconforming growing up and recognized that something deeper was occurring that just childhood fantasy and play. These three parents took the initiative and provided the possibility for participants to disclose their authentic gender identities.

Interpreting Support Within Schools

"I didn't realize I was different from the other kids (boys) until 7 years old, at school when people would tease me for associating myself with girls any chance I got to. Friends, crushes, activities were all feminine, but I didn't notice until being made fun of"
– Roxy

Similar to Alice and at a young age, Roxy recognized her female presentation was unwelcome by her peers. The range of responses within school environments are available in Appendix F. Roxy remained unaware of her 'difference' until the other little

boys pointed out her femininity at age 7. Stating her “experience was associated more with what you would hear from a genetic female”, Roxy pointed out she experienced childhood as a girl. Roxy remembers being confronted with her feelings at school and not being able to label what they meant:

I know now that the feeling I felt years ago in elementary school, were in fact because of gender identity disorder, if I knew the term back then, I would classify myself as being transgender. It just took me longer to put a name to my feelings that had existed indefinitely.

Focusing on the peer pressure to conform to gender expectations, Alice and Roxy describe the bullying they experienced for the femininity within school. Pronouncing, “my name was Alice, and that I was a girl”, Alice vocalized her female identity starting from a very young age. When she told strangers this, Alice describes the reactions including laughing and being told she was silly. Not only did Alice enjoy female company and activities, she embodied femininity. Even with short hair, people told her mother how pretty Alice was growing up. Alice began to associate her femininity and true identity as something she had to hide from others explaining:

Eventually I kinda learned to pull back my identity. I tried to be more like what everyone was telling me to be. Especially in school. When I first got to school kids were really mean to me.

But because her mother’s words and behaviors supported Alice’s cross gender play within the home, she wasn’t faced with her ‘difference’ until attending school. The children at her Michigan school bullied and mocked Alice’s feminine tendencies. Alice

quickly learned that her female preferences separated herself from and was disapproved of by her peers.

As described in the childhood play section, many trans feminine participant experienced gender policing from a young age. Due to their overt femininity and cross gender play, the harsh lessons of gender normativity are learned early for many trans women. In my study, four feminine presenting youth discussed the unsupportive responses they encountered at school for associated with females more than males. The trans youth found that starting around puberty they realized it was no longer okay for them to play, associate, and identify with girls. The transgender women young adults highlighted the recognition that their preference for female social spaces and adults made them a target for peer gender policing. As children become more same sex peer oriented with age, transgender youth realize their behavior, and gender preferences are societally unaccepted.

Growing up in a tiny township without a post office, Josephine remembers cross-dressing being associated with intense stigma in her community. Aware of something different that was hard to explain:

I used to identify as 'half girl' from about kindergarten to the 4th or 5th grade because I felt like, having two older sisters, I'd been 'raised by the wolves'. Explained the difference in my behavior and preferences that way. Yes, I had no vocabulary/conceptualization to express the way I felt, so I couldn't really identify with anything.

After peer pressure to conform to gender typical behaviors, Josephine stopped referring to herself as half girl. Josephine identified as 'half girl' until fifth grade because she

identified with women and shared little in common with men. All of these participants described the change in how peers and adults treated them starting around a certain age.

Josephine recalls:

Around 5th grade I started to receive enough peer pressure to where you're not just being a cute little kid anymore, but you might have some actual problem.

Although she didn't have the vocabulary for her behavior, feelings, or identity, Josephine knew that it was no longer okay for her to associate with females.

Because gender non-conformity is associated with difference, usually non-heterosexuality, many transgender youth experienced verbal and physical harassment. Many of my participants experienced bullying within school by peers and pressures to conform to gender typical behavior with age. Heteronormativity is a powerful mechanism that keeps gender variant youth feelings shameful within the larger culture but schools particularly. Because adolescence creates the desire to identify with peers, pressure for transgender youth exacerbates the normal experience of feeling like they don't fit in. Josephine summarizes eloquently:

Yes, I feel I was bullied in school. Never physically, but emotionally and psychologically for not fitting in. Had I not been 'passing' as male it would have been infinitely worse, as it was I was simply 'different' but not particularly dangerous.

During this time being different is always almost seen bad, children don't want to stand out in school. The support that transgender youth interpret and perceive within the school environment has been documented extensively. Unfortunately, research seems to

reveal everything that support does not look like, rather than what it looks like for transgender youth. The negative outcomes including bullying, harassment, and violence that transgender youth experience in school are well documented; but what do supportive responses actually look and feel like to the youth in school?

“My mom, against my wishes, went to go talk to my advisor because she wanted to be sure that at least one adult in the school knew what I was going through and could keep an eye on bullying. She explained it very well too me and said, “I know you can protect yourself, but this is more for me than for you. I just want to be sure that if there is some emergency, which is not likely but can always happen, someone can be there for you and can have some context of what you're experiencing.” – Isaac

The earliest transition occurs for two transgender male youths, Isaac and Mark, who transitioned in middle school experiencing supportive administration and teachers. Both commented on how they were perceived as tomboys from early age and the transition wasn't difficult for the school administration and their peers. Isaac explains that,

I was the same person I've always been and it didn't matter if I was a girl or a boy when I was around the people that love me. I think that helped a lot because it helped me realize that being trans is just one small part of who I am.

Tomboy acceptability may allow transgender males to illicit less concern within schools than transgender young females. Isaac and Mark's families suggested transferring schools to provide anonymity after socially transitioning to male but ended up staying in

the same district they grew up in. Each had at least one administrator aware of their transgender identity and supportive person within the school they attended. Isaac's mother discussed her concerns with the school advisor and principal. Isaac remembers that:

The school advisor definitely was very supportive and she encouraged us to talk to the principal.

As the quote that started this section illustrates, Isaac's mother demanded administrative support for her transgender son and allowed herself to emotionally relax assuming someone would protect her child in school if necessary. Isaac stated the principal was extremely supportive of his transition "encouraging [him] to use the boys bathroom instead of the nurses". Isaac later found out the principal identified as gay and wondered if this was the reason he was so supportive. Either way, having access to the bathroom of his authentic identity made his school environment feel more supportive. When asked if he felt supported within school, Isaac replied:

Yes it is wonderful, and I truly believe it makes all the difference! And yes, my school was completely supportive.

Not as hard, as one would think living in Texas. All my friends were extremely accepting and weren't really shocked by any of it. I mean I'd always looked and acted like a boy my whole life, so really alls they were changing was my name and pronouns that matched my appearance" – Mark

Similar to Isaac, Mark illustrates how his tomboy presentation allowed an easier transition period. Although given the option to transfer school to transition, both chose to continue within the same school district where their peers knew they were assigned female. Both commented on how they were perceived as masculine children and currently pass as cisgender males. Transitioning in middle school without any non-supportive responses from administration or peers, Mark remarked:

Well when I was four years old, I started to realize that I didn't really feel like a girl, or how I was "supposed" to feel. I started wearing male clothes and did the normal guy stuff. My mom just thought I was a tomboy, like she had been, and didn't think much of it. But, as I grew older, I realized that looking like a boy and acting like a boy wasn't enough. I needed to actually BE a boy, so I did some research, found the word transgender, and came out in the seventh grade.

Because tomboys and masculine presenting females are more socially acceptable, Mark and Isaacs' school transitions did not draw attention as a transgender or gender non-conformity issue. Mark grew up in Dallas and frequently commented on how amazing his hometown is during the interview explaining:

I mean I don't think people are all that against [transgender individuals] in most areas. I just think that people are afraid that they're going to be against it and then choose not to disclose the information to the people around them.

Although Mark's experience in Dallas was extremely supportive, this could be due to his highly educated family who demanded the school's support. Both of his parents are in the medical professions and able to afford multiple psychiatrists when Mark first came

out. However, this quote reveals the ambiguity of Mark passing as cisgender and not disclosing his transgender identity to the high school. He loves his city, but still has fears people do not understand transgender identities. When asked about how the high school responded to his transgender status, Mark stated:

The teachers are awesome, but I honestly don't even know if they know I'm trans. I kind of went stealth in high school, so I don't talk about it much. But my principal knows and he's awesome.

Possibly because of his cisgender male passing privilege, Mark was unaware if even his teachers knew his transgender identity status. Simply saying,

School is awesome, I had my name legally changed in the system, as well as my sex no problem.

Schools prefer that students conform and the perception of how well a transgender youth presents as stereotypically male or female can modify the level of support offered.

Lily discusses how her gender presentation altered the level of support she received both within school and the home. Lily explains the beginning of changing her gender expression change:

As a gender-nonconforming trans woman just coming out, things were really rough. I didn't pass, and received discrimination from my peers, my high school, my family, etc.

Lily socially transitioned from gay male to transfeminine presenting during her junior year of high school. Explaining “people tend to transition into a high femme or hyper feminine presentation/identity at first”, Lily presented very feminine when she first came

out as transgender. She believes that when presented as a stereotypical feminine female, her school was more supportive. Lily explains this by saying:

In my sophomore year of high school, came out as gay (I was doing some pretty heavy association of any femininity with being gay and thought that if I felt femme I must have been gay).

Lily recalls that the administration was supportive initially after she came out, but eventually refused to allow her access to the appropriate bathroom. Just signed in 2013, AB1266 now requires California schools to allow transgender youth to use their authentic gender restrooms and locker rooms. However, for transgender youth who don't live in California, school administrative refusal to allow correct bathroom use creates non-supportive environments. And even with this law in place, Josephine perfectly summarizes a big problem within her Northern California postgraduate institution with a 'progressive' reputation;

Gender neutral bathrooms are hard to come by on campus, and it's every difficult to change the way people perceive and treat a whole class of people when transphobia has been so socialized from birth.

"Between creating a conference for the queer and trans community, being president of my college's gender and sexuality alliance, working at the gender and sexuality resource center and the center for multicultural experiences, I thought it was time to stop telling people it's okay to be themselves when I wasn't telling myself that." – Jake

Three participants, Lnl, Josephine, and Jake transitioned in college. Currently, four participants are attending undergraduate or two are in postgraduate programs. Most

of the transgender youth found specific programs of their college accepting and supportive of their gender identity. Four participants attending Northern California State schools finding the women and gender studies program welcoming of their transgender identities. However, Lnl who found supportive people within the Women and Gender Studies department faced horrible harassment when they ran for student body president. Lnl and another transgender friend ran for office during their senior year. The other candidates refused to identify Lnl and their friend with correct pronouns or names. After complaining to the election committee, Lnl said:

We tried to seek help from the school for, but the school ultimately ruled that we had been treated exactly like all the other candidates, so we hadn't been discriminated against.

Continuously being misgendered and referred to by an incorrect name demonstrates how their gender identity was unsupported within the larger school community. Also involved with student government, Jake found support within his up state New York undergraduate college.

The quote that started this section reveals the internal tension Jake encountered running so many sexuality and gender alliances. After years of helping others with their transgender and queer identities, Jake finally affirmed his authentic gender identity while at college. During his senior year, Jake socially transitioned with the full support of the administration and he remembers:

I couldn't change my name on my school id or the equivalent to ilearn [online school system] without legally changing my name. However, I was able to have my name on my diploma.

Technical problems prevented changing Jake's name within the online system but his diploma had the correct name displayed. However, Jake felt supported by the queer campus community and the larger college for his authentic gender identity.

Administrative responses towards transgender youth help set the overall school climate as supportive or non-supportive. The reactions of administrations depend on the transgender youth's gender presentation; for Mark and Isaac, their tomboy aesthetic and young transitioning age allowed them to gain passing privilege as cisgender males. Isaac was encouraged to use the male restroom while Mark remains stealth in high school. Because the administration reacted in an identity affirming way towards Mark and Isaac, both perceived school as an overall supportive environment. However, Lily points out that her gender presentation drew attention to her transgender identity and therefore disrupted the school administration. Lily was discriminated against and not allowed to use the female restroom. This identity rejecting response created an unsupportive environment within school.

Similar to the home environment, the level of support and interpretations of responses within school differed across participants. The differing degree of social support changed within districts as well, from middle to high school. A variety of responses occurred within the same college environments by different participants. For example, a college Women's and Gender studies program was extremely supportive

while the political administration on the same campus refused to defend transgender students. The interactions and responses with school administration, teachers, and principals depended on the time the youth socially transitioned and how gender conforming their presentation was.

Interpreting Support from Formal Institutions

“I half expected to be sort of ostracized for my choice to transition but instead I was mostly met with support and appreciation.” – Alice

“Social services are limited so much that the only place there are such services are in downtown L.A., about a 45 minute drive from where I live. I don't have a means of social support at this time.”- Roxy

“It was only after I met a trans man in the LGBT center in San Diego that I embraced the trans identity. He fit perfectly into what I thought was "normal" and yea, I've been really lucky to have so much support!” - Isaac

In the home and school environment, transgender youth navigate certain both supportive and non-supportive responses. Further highlighting the ambiguity of social support, this section will discuss people, places, and organizations typically assumed to offer support services. My project demonstrates that when someone offers some form of support, if it is not interpreted as supportive by the transgender youth, the environment and response will feel unsupportive. Some participants discuss how therapists, support

groups, and LGBT organizations can actually be sources of stress, hostility, and resentment. For example, most people would congratulate the supportive response of a parent taking their transgender child to therapy and support groups. However, if an individual doesn't want to attend these sessions or does not identify with the LGBT community, these responses fail to feel supportive to transgender youth. With the subjective complexity of social support, what do transgender youth interpret and perceive as supportive responses? How can we support every transgender youth? We can start by asking questions and listening to transgender youth's voices, experiences, and interpretations. Many transgender youth recognize people and organizations are unable to offer the right type of support demonstrated by Lily:

I think what I've learned is that institutions and systems and even everyday people are equipped to provide a certain kind of support for a certain kind of trans people; and as I've moved in and out of being that kind of trans person, I've experienced differing levels of support.

No matter what the intention of a response, if it is being interpreted as unsupportive by the youth, it creates a non-supportive environment for that individual. This includes formal institutions such as medicine, mental health care, LGBT organizations and services.

When Good Support Goes Bad

Out of nine participants, three had extremely negative experiences within a support group environment (Appendix G). As discussed previously, Mark passes as a cisgender young man with most peers and high school administration unaware of his transgender identity. He identifies as “100% male” and heterosexual. He attended a local center in Dallas explaining:

I tried once, but it wasn't really helpful. The people were mostly gay or lesbian, so me being straight, I didn't really fit in.

As a straight, young 18 year old male, it makes perfect sense that Mark would interpret this environment as unsupportive. What is the one thing that straight, young men absolutely do not want to be associated with in high school? Arguably, anything LGBT related. I realize that straight men exist as allies in the LGBT community, however we all remember the rampant homophobic slurs rattled off in high school halls. During senior year of high school, Mark doesn't want attention from his peers drawn to his transgender identity because he'd:

prefer it if they didn't know, because they might end up treating me differently than they would a normal guy.

This telling quote illustrates how important passing as a cisgender young man is to Mark. Masculinity is a driving force and integral part of Mark's identity that was probably not explicitly supported within a LGBT support group. Although he didn't discuss whether the other support group participants were visibly queer, his masculinity and cisgender presentation as a straight male made him stand out as non-LGBT identified. The support group was not by definition unsupportive of Mark's identity, but was not a supportive

environment because he is straight. When a transgender youth doesn't want to associate or publically identify as trans, support groups can create negative feelings because they are feel out of place and conspicuous. Instead of publically identifying as LGBT, Mark goes to the transgender camp, Aranutiq, where he keeps in touch online with other transgender kids he meets there.

Similar to Mark, Kourtnie interpreted support groups as non-supportive because she chooses not to publicly identify with the transgender community. She states, "at 13 my mother would literally force me to go"; in an attempt to be a supportive parent, Kourtnie's mother believed her daughter would benefit from a support group experience. However, Kourtnie expresses negative feelings about the interacting with transgender community stating, "I don't really want anything to do with the trans community." Kourtnie explains her mixed feelings and negative experience in the support group with this revealing quote:

To be honest another big reason why I don't really associate with the trans community, is because a lot of trans people I come across, I feel like make me look bad, and a lot of them just get offended at anything, and have huge attitudes, and I just don't really like being around that.

Kourtnie identifies as "a woman plain and simple", without associating herself with transgender identity because she "really prefer[s] and tr[ies] to blend in." Kourtnie's mistrust and dislike of the trans community arose from "learning that there is a lot of hate within the trans community".

Her experience in a support group was negative and perceived as an unsupportive environment because she did not desire to be in that space identifying as transgender. Forcing Kourtnie to attend a support group that discussed transgender youth identities and issues was interpreted as an unsupportive response. Despite the negative support group experience, Kourtnie has been attending therapy for years addressing issues separate from her gender identity for the most part. She started seeing a therapist before she expressed her transgender identity and continues with regular sessions. On one hand, Kourtnie said she feels so supported by her family that she doesn't necessarily need to discuss her transgender identity in therapy. On the other hand, her employment as a webcam performer and trans misogyny experienced creates a lot of mental distress. When asked if she benefited from therapy she responded:

I'm 50/50 on therapy. I go because of my mental issues. I work as a webcam performer for almost 2 years and the men issue is really pretty awful. Between that and the everyday life of mine, its just horrible.

These issues are perfect to discuss with other young transgender women within a support group setting but given Kourtnie's negative experience with the transgender community and support groups, she refuses to go back. Thankfully, she has found a therapist that she enjoys and provides a supportive environment.

Another transman, Jake, is extremely politically active within his postgraduate college campus and community. Living and attending school in the San Francisco Bay Area, there are many assumptions about youth having access to quality transgender related care. Although there are a various LGBT organizations, services, and support

groups, it would be naïve to believe that everyone has a positive experiences or even access. Jake attempted multiple times to go to a very popular transgender support group in San Francisco describing it as ‘horrific’. He illustrates how important it is to educate professionals about transgender youth specific issues because uneducated people create unsupportive environments:

The person who was running it had very high anxiety and that did not benefit the group. I left often with high levels of dysphoria.

Due to the anxiety of the support group leader, Jake interpreted the experience as non-supportive and identity rejecting. After trying four times, Jake stopped attending this support group because of the high levels of dysphoria he left with. He currently attends the support group on campus which has been a much more supportive environment. Jake really enjoys the campus support group, but he also helps facilitate the space stating, “it would be nice to not always be that point person to make it happen though”. After an anxiety producing, non-supportive environment at a popular San Francisco transgender support group, Jake had to create his own safe space on campus. Transgender youth should not be responsible for educating professionals about transgender youth issues.

On the other hand, Alice benefited from a support group setting and environment. Through a local teen LGBT center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, she attended their support group during high school when she began her transition. Although most of the other participants were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, Alice states:

I made a lot of friends there and it really helped me feel like I had a community. . . I could talk about what I was going through and really feel heard. And admired.

This powerful community building space allowed Alice to be explicitly supported for her transgender identity in ways she wasn't within the school environment. Alice also attended a LGBT summer camp that had other trans youth in attendance where she benefited from this community bonding experience. Another form of support that benefited her and her entire family was therapy. Immediately after coming out, Alice conveys about her parents,

They got me a therapist. And they saw my therapist as well as their own sessions. And we all kinda worked through it as a family.

Surprising for Midwest located therapists in 2004, Alice's already had experience working with transgender adults; she explains "resources were very limited at the time but in Ann Arbor I think it was way better than other places". As discussed previously, this therapist was really the only person that her father would listen to about Alice's transgender identity. Alice's parents made great efforts to support Alice and provide her supportive environments to explore her transgender identity. Because she interpreted these as supportive responses and environment, Alice benefited from traditional types of social support including support groups, therapy, and summer camp.

However, as I have demonstrated, not everyone benefits from these typical types of social support. Isaac, another heterosexual young trans man, experienced identity-repressing responses from a therapist. Isaac experienced a very supportive home

environment with his entire immediate family expressing identity-affirming responses. In order to obtain any sort of medical transition including hormones, transgender youth must get a mental health professional to diagnose them with gender dysphoria. Previously known as Gender Identity Disorder, or GID, gender dysphoria is the formal diagnosis defined as expressing discomfort or discontentment with ones' designated sex or gender at birth. The only way for Isaac to receive hormone blockers and begin medical transitioning was to meet with a therapist.

Isaac explains that within the San Diego area, there were no therapists working with transgender youth at the time. His mother and Isaac decided to try the therapist from the local LGBT organization who worked with youth questioning their sexuality. Unfortunately, Isaac explains how lack of options for therapists impacted him:

He wasn't very good therapist for trans kids, after a month or two he still said he couldn't give me a letter for gender identity disorder because I clearly didn't have a disorder. I was doing well in school and I was for the most part happy. He said he definitely believed I was trans but we would have to continue going to therapy to prepare me for bullying not just because I'm trans but also because I'm Mexican.

Because Isaac was a perfectly healthy adolescent, he was refused a necessary diagnosis clearly illustrating the problem with needing a mental health diagnosis to access care. This therapist was uneducated about transgender youth and he refused to write a letter stating Isaac should receive hormone therapy.

The therapist demonstrated irresponsibility and identity repressing behavior for not educating himself about transgender youth during the months of Isaac's care. And thus, his narrow view of transgender youth determined they should be 'disordered', which Isaac was not. Further illustrating his incompetence, Isaac states the therapists twisted reasoning, "for bullying not just because I'm trans but also because I'm Mexican." This final identity-rejecting and racist response occurred in front of his mother who confronted the therapist and immediately someone new for Isaac. Isaac sums up the identity affirming response by the new therapist:

He saw me once and gave me the letter, and very soon after that I started hormone blockers . . . I was incredibly happy with that and I got to experience male puberty at the same time as my peers.

Isaac's experience of unsupportive responses by a racist therapist exposes how uneducated mental health professional create non-supportive environments for transgender youth.

Support groups and LGBT organizations appear to safe, supportive spaces for transgender youth. But what if the transgender participant doesn't identify as LGBT or doesn't need support for any issues pertaining to their gender or sexual identity? The differing degree of support found within LGBT centers and therapy illustrates how certain transgender youth perceive these spaces as unsupportive. For the negative experiences within formal institutions, the level of transgender education within the organization was critical. The transgender youth who experience unsupportive environments faced misguided therapists who were anxious discussing gender issues.

Also, youth that were forced to go to therapy or support groups did not perceive those experiences as supportive or helpful.

Discussion

Identity Affirming Support

By solely defining the type of social support experienced and accessed, most research neglects to state how they determine whether something is considered supportive or not. Using the gender affirmative framework as foundation, I defined identity supportive responses as any behavior, action, and words that allowed transgender youth to fully express their authentic selves. Non-supportive responses towards transgender participants include anything that creates feelings of shame, fear, or abnormality. Previous research demonstrates how attempting to change or alter a child's gender identity produces negative health consequences including anxiety and depression. Therefore, any behavior or words that actively attempt to change or alter the transgender youth's gender expression are considered unsupportive. Emphasizing how the 'one size fits all' social support model fails transgender youth, social support needs to incorporate individual experiences of location, culture, family dynamic, school, organizations, and community.

I demonstrated how certain responses that are typically defined as supportive, such as therapy and support groups, can be interpreted as non-supportive creating unsupportive environments for transgender youth. In these cases, the participants did not

feel like they needed extra support for their transgender identity because it wasn't a cause of concern or distress. Also, certain participant's didn't wish to identify as transgender and were uncomfortable within formal LGBT organization setting. Forcing them to address issues they didn't have in therapy and support group sessions actually created distress and was interpreted as unsupportive. Due to individual circumstances and sense of self, supportive responses must be something the transgender youth desires rather than what is assumed to help. This is not to say that therapy and support groups are not supportive responses for some transgender youth. However, we must always take into consideration the individual conditions and subjectivity of perceived support by listening to each transgender youth in order to figure out what support looks like for them. We need to ask, "how are you?" less and "how can I help?" more.

In this way, negative or unsupportive responses appear easier to define because they generate shame, anxiety, fear, while repressing an individual's identity. Allowing for the individual variation of gender identities and personalities, gender affirming support means respecting every aspect of transgender youth- race, culture, religion, sexuality, and class. We must listen to the needs of every transgender youth to provide the type of support they desire, which may or may not be the typical assumptions of social support. Most importantly, gender-affirming responses are mindful of the complete individual without explicitly focusing on gender identity issues. The previous sections were divided into the different environments participants' discussed- the home, school, and formal organizations. Within each environment, I explored experiences

participants perceived as supportive and non-supportive behaviors, actions, or words. To demonstrate the complexity of social support, I explain how transgender youth perceive both supportive and non-supportive responses within each environment. Although the youth experienced both kinds of support, I argue that identity rejecting responses create unsupportive environments for transgender youth while identity affirming responses were interpreted as support.

The Response Environment Interaction

Transgender youth are constantly navigating responses and interpreting each as supportive and non-supportive. When a response is interpreted as identity affirming, this creates a supportive environment for the transgender youth. When transgender youth interpret a social support response as identity rejecting, this creates a non-supportive environment. Transgender youth experiences of social support in the home, school, and organization environments illustrate how sometimes support gets lost in translation. Examples of failed support social occurs when someone or some place offers support towards transgender youth and the youth perceives this behavior, action, or words as identity rejecting. The differing interpretation of support occurs between the person or place attempting to offer the support and the youth receiving it as unsupportive.

Certain behaviors can safely be assumed to be unsupportive responses towards transgender youth including familial identity rejection, transphobic language, and administrative hostility. However, not every action deemed supportive will be perceived

and interpreted as such by transgender youth. Many times parents, peers, and organizations respond to transgender youth in ways that have been defined as supportive for LGBT youth in general. Transgender youth face different circumstances due to their nonheteronormative gender identities that we have yet figured out how to best support their healthy development. Also, we tend to forget that transgender youth are going through normal adolescence and need support for a variety of concerns, not just their gender identity. Particularly for those youth who are not distressed by their transgender identity, forcing them into therapy and support groups can be interpreted as non-supportive environments.

People feel like they are giving support, and that it will be perceived as such. But if the trans youth don't perceive the support, what happens? When you don't support a person's identity, you reinforce the idea that their identity is not acceptable. For transgender youth, every time someone represses or rejects their authentic identity, they feel unsupported. The universal picture of transgender youth leans towards unsupportive and is perceived as such. Every relationship has instances of support or non-support, but the identity rejecting responses are more detrimental to a transgender youth's health. But each transgender youth experiences instances that are supportive and unsupportive, so the question cannot remain whether transgender youth are supported or not.

Conclusion

Lost in Translation

Currently, we do not know how to best support and create supportive environments for transgender youth. But by asking transgender youth what they interpret as supportive and non-supportive, research can begin to illuminate when and where transgender youth are actually feeling supported. Differing degrees of support within the home, school, and community makes up the overall feelings of being supported. But the question is not whether transgender youth are supported or not, but what responses are being interpreted as support within each different environments, of the response environment interaction shown in Appendix H. The same type of support that may make one trans youth does not necessarily make another feel supported. Transgender perceive different level of supportive and unsupportive responses, which can change depending on the factor, the situation, and the time. People are not always supportive or always unsupportive, but every identity rejecting responses reminds transgender youth that they are not generally accepted within society.

My participants are highly educated, middle class socioeconomic status, all with access to at least one type of social support. Every transgender youth found someone within their immediate family that supported and affirmed their transgender identity. But when asked the last question during the interview, “do you feel supported?”, many answered ambiguously, “yes and no”. They each have access individual instances of

support but recognize that the universal attitude towards transgender people is extremely hostile, violent, and unaccepting.

Many of the participants said that the world did not support them regardless of how much individual support they receive. They hear the stories of transgender violence, see the murder tally rise and hear of the kids killing themselves. They know that their lives and overall chance at happiness are negatively impacted by their transgender identity. Many worry about employment, and whether they will be hired or not because of their gender status. Overall, they all discussed how transgender people are perceived within the world. The universal climate for transgender individuals is still very negative, violent, and unaccepting. This sort of understanding and realization that no matter what, people hate you is devastating for young people. Transgender communities as a group face structural and cultural obstacles but individually face very different set of circumstances depending on their socioeconomic status, education, race, age, sexuality and geographic location.

As I have found in my analysis when a transgender youth interprets a response as unsupportive, this creates a non-supportive environment and leaves the youth feelings unsupported. Regardless of how a response was intended, if transgender youth interpret something as unsupportive, this becomes an example of failed social support. The interpretation of support depends on whether a response is considered identity affirming or rejecting which creates supportive versus non-supportive environments for transgender youth. This framework privileges the interpretation and voices of transgender youth who

are beginning to determine what social support looks and feels like to them.

Unfortunately, the following questions still need to be further explored. How is social support perceived and interpreted by transgender youth? How does current social support responses fail transgender youth? What is being interpreted as successful and supportive responses?

Transgender youth are ordinary adolescents with specific circumstances. Every adolescent is trying to consolidate aspects of their identity into a positive, cohesive sense of self. Culture, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, AND gender. Every youth figures out their gender identity and how they like to present. Where trans youth experiences differ, is if they want to identify as transgender publically announcing their difference and otherness. Current definitions and understanding of social support remain inadequate for transgender youth. I finished every interview with the question, “do you feel supported?” But I should have asked when and where do you feel *supported*? How about unsupported? Because there will always be instances of both. We are not always going to feel supported. And when we offer support, its not always translated as such. By examining transgender youth’s interpretation of support, I discovered a spectrum of identity affirming responses that create supportive environments and identity-repressing responses that create unsupportive environments. By analyzing individual transgender youth’s interpretation of supportive and non-supportive responses, I strive to make sure every transgender youth truly *feels* supported.

References:

Almeida, J., Johnson, R. M., Corliss, H. L., Molnar, B. E., & Azrael, D. (2009). Emotional distress among LGBT youth: The influence of perceived discrimination based on sexual orientation. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 38(7), 1001-1014.

DuBois, D. L., Felner, R. D., Brand, S., Adan, A. M., & Evans, E. G. (1992). A prospective study of life stress, social support, and adaptation in early adolescence. *Child development*, 63(3), 542-557.

Ehrensaft, D. (2012). From gender identity disorder to gender identity creativity: True gender self child therapy. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(3), 337-356.

Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011.

Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., and Diaz, E. M. (2009). *Harsh Realities: The Experiences of Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*. New York: GLSEN.

Grossman, A. H., & D'augelli, A. R. (2006). Transgender youth: Invisible and vulnerable. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51(1), 111-128.

Grossman, A. H., D'Augelli, A. R., Howell, T. J., & Hubbard, S. (2006). Parent reactions to transgender youth gender nonconforming expression and identity. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 18*(1), 3-16.

Grossman, A. H., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2007). Transgender Youth and Life-Threatening Behaviors. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 37*(5), 527-537.

Helsen, M., Vollebergh, W., & Meeus, W. (2000). Social support from parents and friends and emotional problems in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 29*(3), 319-335.

Hendricks, M. L., & Testa, R. J. (2012). A conceptual framework for clinical work with transgender and gender nonconforming clients: An adaptation of the Minority Stress Model. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 43*(5), 460.

Herek, G. M. (2007). Confronting sexual stigma and prejudice: Theory and practice. *Journal of Social Issues, 63*(4), 905-925.

Hershberger, S. L., & D'Augelli, A. R. (1995). The impact of victimization on the mental health and suicidality of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. *Developmental psychology, 31*(1), 65.

Hidalgo, M. A., Ehrensaft, D., Tishelman, A. C., Clark, L. F., Garofalo, R., Rosenthal, S. M., Spack, N.P., Olsen, J & Lurie, R. H. (2013). Editor's Corner The Gender Affirmative Model: What We Know and What We Aim to Learn.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). 121 West 27th Street Suite 804, New York, NY 10001.

Lombardi, E. L., Wilchins, R. A., Priesing, D., & Malouf, D. (2002). Gender violence: Transgender experiences with violence and discrimination. *Journal of homosexuality*, 42(1), 89-101/.

Mottet L, & Tanis J. Opening the door to inclusion of transgender people: The nine keys to making lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations fully transgender- inclusive. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Center for Transgender Equality, 2008.

Nesmith, A. A., Burton, D. L., & Cosgrove, T. J. (1999). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and young adults: Social support in their own words. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 37(1), 95-108.

Rueger, S. Y., Malecki, C. K., & Demaray, M. K. (2010). Relationship between multiple sources of perceived social support and psychological and academic adjustment in early adolescence: Comparisons across gender. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(1), 47-61.

Russell, S. T. (2005). Conceptualizing positive adolescent sexuality development. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 2(3), 4-12.

Spade, D. (2011). *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press.

Stotzer, R. L. (2009). Violence against transgender people: A review of United States data. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 14*(3), 170-179.

Trans Murder Monitoring, "Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide" (TvT) project website: www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en/tvt-project/tmm-results.htm

Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of personality assessment, 52*(1), 30-41.

Appendix A-



WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE?

ARE YOU TRANSGENDER? AGE 18-25?

I am a Sexuality Studies graduate student at San Francisco State University. I am looking for participants who would like to be interviewed through an online messaging system, non face to face format. I am interested in how location effects access to social support for transgender youth. My research aims to identify ways to support transgender youth in every location, particularly rural areas. Participants will be entered into a raffle for a \$50 gift card.

Would you be interesting in participating in research? If so, please contact Carolyn at cclproject2015@gmail.com. Thanks and have a wonderful day!

Appendix B

Demographic section

- 1.) How old are you?
- 2.) What is your race? Ethnicity?
- 3.) What is the last level of school you completed?
- 4.) What is your current occupation?
- 5.) How much do you make approximately each month?
- 6.) What is your gender identity?
- 7.) What is your sexual orientation?

Life history section

- 1.) Where were you born?
- 2.) Where did you experience your childhood?
- 3.) Describe what a typical day growing up was like.
- 4.) What is your immediate family like? (Parents, siblings)
- 5.) Did you ever relocate during childhood? To where?
- 6.) How did you and your parents get along?
- 7.) How is your relationship with your family currently?
- 8.) Where did you go to school?

Gender identity section

- 1.) How has your gender identity evolved throughout your life?
- 2.) When did you first realize your gender identity was not what you were assigned at birth?
- 3.) When did you first hear the term transgender? Did you apply it to yourself?
- 4.) When did you first identify as transgender?
- 5.) Who was the first person you told about your gender identity?

Social support section

- 1.) Do you feel supported to be transgender? By parents, friends, school, or any other services?
- 2.) Who do you go to with any problems you have emotionally, mentally, or physically?
- 3.) How did your family react to you telling them you were transgender?
- 4.) Did you ever inform any of your schools of being transgender or gender variant?

- 5.) How many social service organizations exist for LGBT youth where you currently live?
- 6.) Do you remember any from your hometown?
- 7.) Did you have access to LGBT community or services available in any place you have lived?

Appendix C

New or Continuation

**STUDENT
PROTOCOL APPROVAL FORM
RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN VOLUNTEERS**
San Francisco State University

All research involving human subjects proposed by faculty, staff, or students must be reviewed and approved by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs - Human and Animal Protections (HAP) or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for SFSU. The Protocol Approval Form (PAF) is required for all research protocols.

In all cases, research must not proceed until approved by HAP. The total review process for non-exempt protocols which require full committee review can take up to 12 weeks. Exempt protocols, which are reviewed in the Office, can take from 2 to 8 weeks. Please leave adequate time for the revision cycle.

All communication from HAP will be conducted by email from the protocol@sfsu.edu address. Please list an email address that you check regularly. Notice of requested revisions and final approval will be sent to that address.

The PAF must be filed with a complete protocol statement, informed consent(s), and any related documents, at the Grad Stop counter, ADM 250, SFSU or by email to protocol@sfsu.edu. Phone: (415) 338-1093. Fax: (415) 338-2493.

Document templates and samples may be found at the ORSP-HAP website at <http://research.sfsu.edu/protocol>.
Date: _____

Title of Research: Subjective Locations, Subjective Experiences

Name of Researcher: Leach Carolyn Phone Number (609) 769 3313
Last Name First Name

Department: Sexuality Studies E-mail Address: leachc@gmail.com

There is a Co-Principal Investigator on this project, who is: _____
Name, Academic Rank, Affiliation, E-mail Address

Signature _____

Is the project funded? _____ If yes, by whom? _____

Type of research: Culminating Exp. Course (e.g., 895,898) ___ Class Project (e.g., 571) ___ Other Student Research (e.g., 699, 899) ___

Caus Peeler graduate 912025938
(Student's Signature, if Student Research) Graduate or Undergraduate Student ID #

APPROVALS: The signatures below must be from two separate faculty members. The Co-Principal cannot sign as the Department Chair/Designated Colleague.

As the Faculty Advisor/Sponsor, I certify that I have reviewed this protocol and determined that it is ready for submission. I affirm the merit of the research and the competency of the investigator to conduct the research project.

[Signature]
(Signature of Student's Supervisor)

Rita Melendez Assoc Prof
Name and Academic Rank

E-mail Address: rmelende@sfsu.edu

[Signature]
(Signature of Department Chair, Graduate Coordinator, or Designated Colleague)

EJ McLaughan, Professor
Name and Academic Rank

E-mail Address: ejmcc@sfsu.edu

Review Categories: For Office Use Only

- Approved as Exempt
- Approved as Expedited
- Approved as Minimal Risk
- Approved as More than Minimal Risk
- Not Approved

(Chair, IRB)

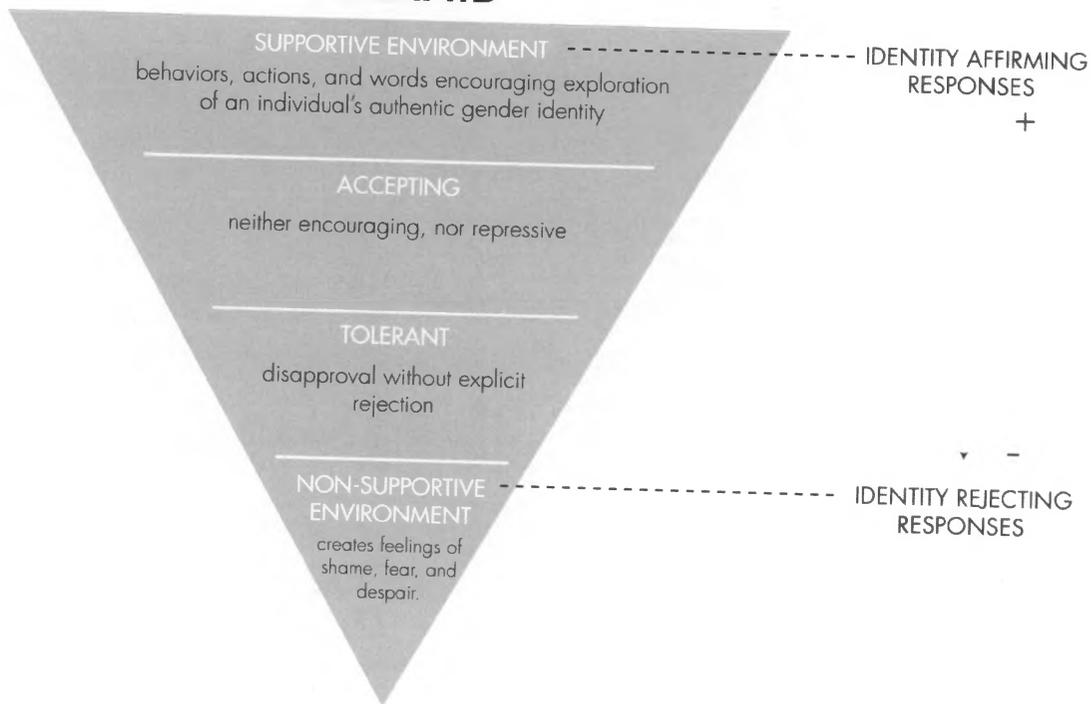
(Date)

Modification ___ Approved (date)

Modification ___ Approved (date)

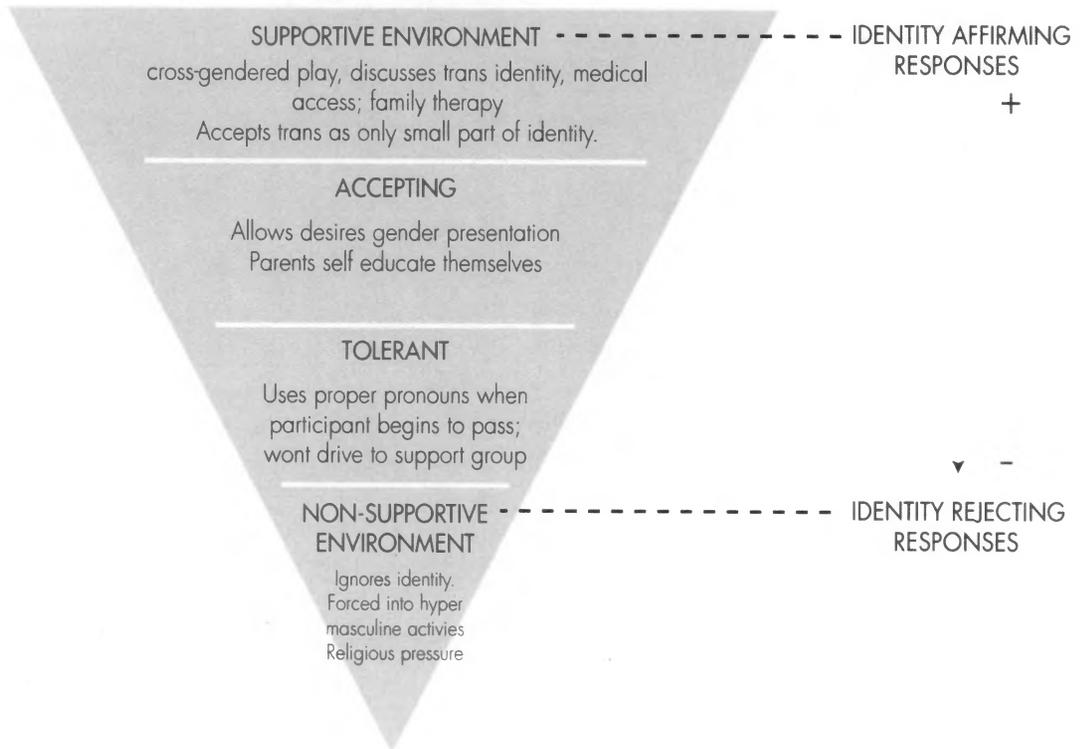
Appendix D-

THE SUPPORT INTERACTION PYRAMID



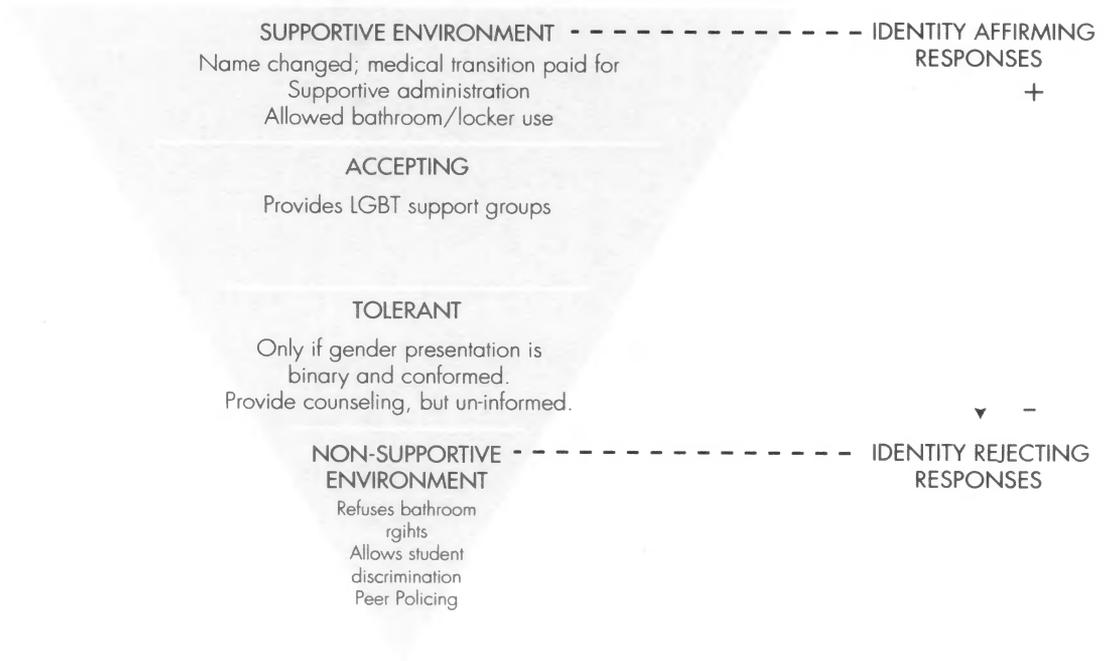
Appendix E

HOME ENVIRONMENT



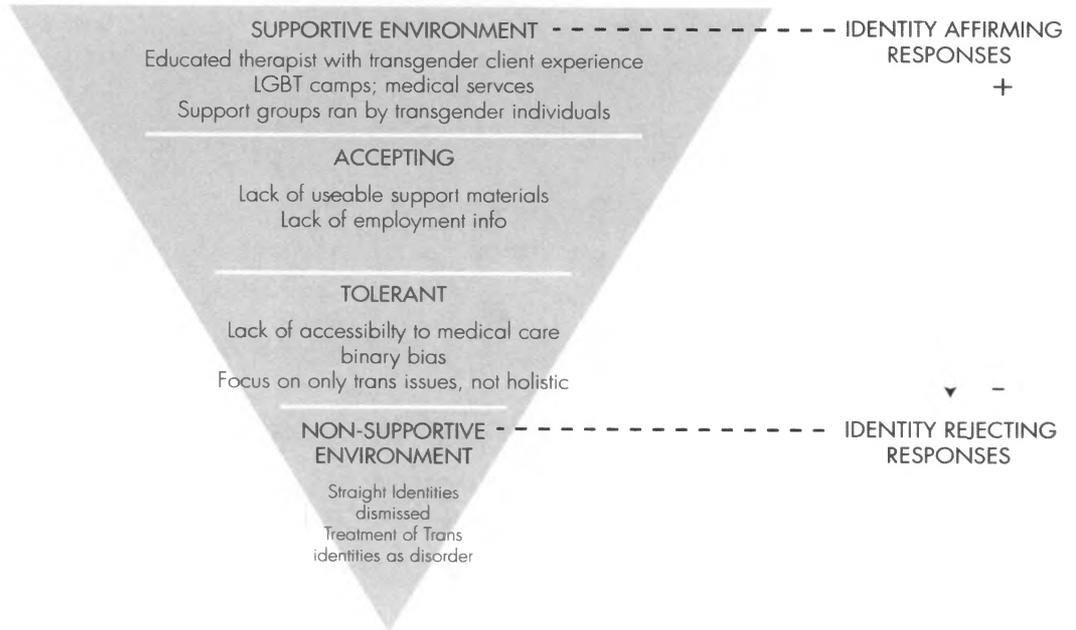
Appendix F

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT



Appendix G-

INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT



Appendix H-

