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## The Importance of Community for Transgender People

### The Story of My Search

Since the dawn of the earth itself, community has played a key role in the survival of the existence of life. Essentially all creatures, plants and organisms depend on their community to survive and ensure the continuation of their species. Human communities have been around for thousands of years. Human beings are social beings, which is why a strong and positive sense of community is vital to our well-being. For transgender people, however, being surrounded by a positive community is absolutely everything.

Since a young age, I have been fascinated with psychology. Throughout the years, the fascination with what I consider my soul and the inner workings of my brain had always lead me to believe that I was different. At the age of four, I remember the first inklings that I was truly a girl. I was always around other girls and I did not enjoy playing with the boys. In my childish mind, I truly thought for many years that I was a girl, body and soul. It was not until I began to grow older that I finally realized that my body and soul did not match. This realization occurred around the age of seven. With that realization came a sense of deep isolation. I felt for so long that I did not have a place in the world to belong, and that I would never truly know what I was. I questioned myself day after day for several years until I found a label that fit me perfectly. This change occurred in 2012. I knew so strongly that I was transgender, and knowing that people like me have a place in the world gave me a small sense of relief. It took me about a year and a

half after that to fully come to terms with who I was before I finally felt comfortable enough to begin my transition into the young woman I always was inside.

Transitioning for anyone is hard, but for trans people it is a journey that is more difficult than most people would care to admit. It is hard enough to deal with the reality that your body doesn't match who you are, but on top of that the world is very uneducated and bigoted towards transgender people. Transgender people also live with gender dysphoria, which is an extreme level of anxiety about your body because it may not fully comply with your gender, which is your internal sense of who you are. I felt a deep sense of isolation for years in my search to find myself, but ultimately it was activism and getting involved in my community that changed my life for the better. I decided to focus on the importance of community for transgender people for my senior project, because of my personal experiences, but also because I feel strongly that there are not enough community organizations that are supportive of trans people. The focus of my research is to show why transgender people need community support and involvement in their lives, and how damaging the effects of isolation and discrimination can be. Activism and involvement within trans related communities are vital to the mental and physical well-being of trans persons, as well as in the struggle to lower suicide and hate-fueled murder rates of transgender people.

### The Results of My Search

In order to understand the issues within the transgender community one must understand what transgender means. Transgender people are people whose gender identities are different from the physical sex that someone assigned them at birth (Dargie). One of the first questions that came to my mind when I was doing my research was where did the word transgender come

from? The term 'transgender' is a relatively new term that was coined in 1971, however, transgender people are not new ("Intelligence Community Pride"). Trans people have been around for thousands of years and present in many cultures. However, throughout this history transgender people have been a small minority compared to the general population ("Intelligence Community Pride"). Native American communities saw gender variants as spiritually enlightened and were sometimes referred to as "two-spirited." Asian Indian culture reveres transgender women, called Hijra, as spiritual healers, so much so that they are necessary to attend weddings in order to bless the newly married couple. However, a common problem that persists throughout many cultures in the world is the lack of positive community for transgender people (Richards).

In my research, I wanted to really dig deep into why community and positive social interaction are key for mental and physical well being. I found a study through DISCUS on the effects of ostracism on self-esteem. The results concluded that ostracism negatively affects a person's perceptions of themselves and as a result negative behaviors become a person's way of finding out if those negative self-perceptions are accurate. Essentially, the study shows that ostracization negatively affects a person and can lead them to engage in negative behaviors in order to determine who they are (Ferris).

I felt a need to find information that was less vague and more specific to transgender people. This information seemed nearly impossible to find, as there are few studies done that pertain to transgender people, but when searching through DISCUS, I found a survey that was about the effects of societal isolation in the transgender population. The survey was focused on three-hundred and eighty respondents from Ontario, Canada who were sixteen years of age or older and transgender. The survey's aim was to show intervenable risk factors that related to gender dysphoria, gender transition, and social inclusion. The survey reported that within

Europe, Canada and the United States a range of 22-43% of transgender people had attempted suicide in the past because of the lack of social inclusion and understanding. The factors that proved to drastically lower suicidal tendencies in transgender individuals were social support, parental support, lesser experience with transphobia, medical procedures that would affirm one's gender identity (i.e. hormones, and or surgical procedures) and legal document changes that reflect the person's accurate gender identity were associated with "dramatic and nearly absolute decreases in suicidal ideations or tendencies." Essentially, social inclusion, access to medical transition, and decreased transphobia within the general population would nearly eliminate suicidal tendencies in the transgender population (Bauer). I found this study to be very informative and relevant to my research. It affirms that several factors are vital in the preservation of transgender lives, and most of these factors are social interactions. The results of this survey support the idea of the previous source; that the effects of ostracism are damaging and social interaction and community involvement is vital to trans people (Ferris).

A question that arose next in my mind was, what types of social inclusion would be beneficial to the transgender community? I had a lot of trouble finding sources on this, simply because there is so little social inclusion in the world for transgender people. The source that I did find was called "Somewhere under the rainbow: Exploring the identities and experiences of trans persons." This study pointed out that literature on transgender people is rare, and that studies that are done about people of the transgender spectrum conform to rigid ideas of sexuality and of gender (Ferris). The purpose of the study was to delve into participant's personal identities beyond the label of trans. The results concluded that the participants all identified differently as individuals and reported unique physical and mental health attributes; although some of their adversities were similar. The study concluded that social support and positive

relationships reinforced mental health. This conclusion is highly similar to my other sources, which report that strong community involvement and social interaction improve the quality of life.

After reading this source I thought more about the diversity within the transgender population, which so often makes it difficult to develop a strong sense of community. I found a study that highlights the lives of thirteen transgender youths of color that live in the southeastern region of the United States. This study's aim was to highlight the resilience strategies of young transgender people and how they navigate racial prejudice and transphobia. The study showed a few key strategies in dealing with racial and trans-related prejudice of the thirteen participants: being a self-advocate in the educational system, the importance of social media in affirming one's gender identity, and involvement in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community (Singh).

I continued to try to look for things that would promote social inclusion for the transgender community, and in doing so, the topic that popped up in my head was education. Education programs would be the start of social inclusion for transgender people. By teaching others what it means to be transgender, more people could understand and sympathize with the transgender experience. With that education, transphobia would diminish drastically.

I found an article through DISCUS that discusses a national survey on the knowledge of the health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender minorities in baccalaureate nursing programs. The aim of the survey was to assess faculty knowledge in baccalaureate nursing programs and their ability to teach about the health of LGBTQ people. The results of the survey proved that knowledge of LGBTQ issues are limited and that there were only 2.12 hours of time dedicated to teaching LGBTQ health. The findings of the survey state that education about LGBTQ people

and more specifically transgender people will need to be a major focus in order to promote social inclusion. The survey partly concludes, “Education is likely to be foundational in teaching cultural competence and dispelling sexual stigma, but a dearth of information exists on the extent to which LGBT health topics are integrated into the nursing curriculum” (Lim, Johnson, Eliason).

### Reflection

My search for resources on my topic seemed to be limited. At first I had a difficult time finding more than just a few sources that were relevant to my project. I had to delete some of the sources that turned out to not be as vital as I had originally thought. The information that I did find as I searched harder seemed to be relevant and contained highly applicable information that supported my thesis. The search for information was difficult for me and slightly discouraging. I knew that there was little information about transgender people and their lives, but the serious lack of information about the lives of transgender people proved to be disheartening and disappointing. I think that this lack of information further proves that there is little representation of transgender people in literature, medical research, psychological studies, and this is something that needs to change.

However, compared to searches for trans-relevant information that I have done in the past, I observed that more research and information about transgender people and their lives is being done. This is encouraging, and ultimately this may help educate the general public about transgender lives.

Although things are changing slowly for the better in regards to the transgender community, there is still much work to be done in order to achieve equality. Transgender people

face discrimination in most aspects of their daily lives, therefore, it is imperative that transgender people are surrounded by supportive and endearing people who can understand or empathize with the transgender experience. Transgender people who are involved in support groups, or who surround themselves with supportive individuals are ultimately more likely to lead healthier lives. Involvement with transgender communities could allow transgender people to learn how to cope with the difficulties that come with being transgender, and learn how to self-advocate and educate others about how they should be treated in their daily lives. By learning how to positively deal with adversities and staying involved in positive community environments, one could learn how to cope with the damaging affects of discrimination and ostracization. By learning these survival skills, transgender people may learn to lead happy and healthy lives.

This research has reinforced my belief that transgender people are the epitome of human strength. Many trans people endure adversity on a daily basis, but many still stand firmly in their identities and refuse to take oppression without a fight. It is these men, women, people who are changing the world. It is that amazing resilience that reminds me of something that Maya Angelou once said; “Surviving is important, but thriving is elegant.”

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