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**An Exploratory Study of the Impact of Participating in Social Support Groups on  
the Psychosocial Functioning of Transgender Adolescents**

Submitted for consideration for the NJPA Scholarship for Research on Diversity Issues

Psychologists are tasked with implementing evidence-based interventions to address the psychosocial needs of transgender youth. One such response to meeting the needs of this underserved population is establishing gender-affirming spaces in the context of social support groups (SSGs). For transgender youth, subjected to hostile school climates and invalidating family environments, SSGs provide a surrogate community and serve as a protective factor to ameliorate the impact of marginalization and discrimination. Using an intersectionality framework, (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991) this study will explore the relationship between identity constructs and macro- and micro-level stressors; the psychosocial benefits derived from group participation; and the role of SSGs in helping transgender youth manage stress processes. This project promotes diversity in psychology by addressing the dearth of research regarding the experiences of transgender adolescents in groups and creating a framework to guide the implementation of culturally sensitive interventions.

Social support and peer connections play an integral role in adolescent development. Schools often create a context to foster these interpersonal relations (Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009). However, transgender youth encountering negative school climates may not have an opportunity to develop supportive relationships. According to the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network's 2013 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014) three quarters of transgender youth reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression, 60% reported being verbally harassed; 29% reported being physically harassed; and 15% reported being physically assaulted. Transgender youth often experience significantly higher rates of bullying, harassment, and substance use (Reisner,

Greytak, Parsons, & Ybarra, 2015). In addition to peer victimization, transgender adolescents are likely to encounter additional life stressors such as chronic unemployment, police harassment, homelessness, and incarceration (Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006).

According to Meyer's Minority Stress Model (2003) increased exposure to external and internalized stressors (e.g. discrimination and internalized trans/homophobia) increases risk for psychological and behavioral health problems. LGBT racial/ ethnic minorities are likely to experience greater psychological distress (Meyer, Dietrich, & Schwartz, 2008), as they are more susceptible to encountering racism from the dominant group; discrimination within their respective cultural communities; classism rooted in economic inequalities; and sexism as their gender identity and expression defies traditional binaries (Reck, 2009). No studies have explored the role of groups in helping transgender racial/ ethnic minority youth cope with stress processes that result from discrimination burden.

Transgender adolescents' marginalized identity and limited access to resources are inextricably linked to mental health disparities. Transgender youth may be three times more likely to experience anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harming behaviors (Reisner, Veters, et al., 2015). Depressive symptoms have been found to be correlated with higher needs for and dissatisfaction with social support, and lower levels of receiving social support (Nemoto, Iwamoto, & Bödeker, 2011).

LGBT youth groups, such as Gay Straight Alliances, were established to create supportive environments and have been found to improve psychosocial well being (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011) as well as reduce suicide risk (Goodenow,

Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Unfortunately, in many LGBT groups transgender youth are underrepresented and may not have a space to discuss their unique concerns (e.g. transitioning) (McKinney, 2005). The marginalization of transgender youth within LGBT groups and the disproportionate rates of peer victimization and psychological problems have created a niche for psychologists to develop interventions specifically for this population (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). SSGs exclusively for transgender youth have been implemented in many mental health programs but no research has been done to examine the effectiveness of such interventions or explore group constructs that yield optimal outcomes for members.

Overall, peer support groups have been shown to be effective interventions for addressing a myriad of conditions (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Leung, Orrell, & Orgeta, 2015). For transgender adolescents, SSGs provide gender-affirming spaces where members coalesce around shared experiences. Group membership and peer affiliations create opportunities for youth to form instrumental relationships that increase their capacity to cope with negative school climates and other life stressors (McLaren, Schurmann, & Jenkins, 2015) while fulfilling their intrinsic desire for social connection (Leary & Cox, 2008).

Research has suggested that collective self-esteem, which can be derived from group participation, is positively correlated with individual self-esteem and negatively correlated with depression (Sharma & Agarwala, 2015). Given that group membership may enhance personal self-esteem, it is likely that SSGs create a space for transgender adolescents to develop coping skills to mediate stressors. The social connections derived from group participation provide individuals, particularly minorities, with a collective

process that members can use to explore and reconcile their identities (DiFulvio, 2011). The social and emotional connections formed among peers within SSGs can be conceptualized as attachment bonds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Individuals seek and maintain proximity to the group and use this network for support, comfort, and safety during times of distress and as a secure base for exploration (Boccatto & Capozza, 2011). These group-related constructs have yet to be studied in the context of support groups specifically for transgender adolescents.

This qualitative, exploratory study will use focus group methodology to facilitate in-depth, open-ended discussions with youth, ages 16-19, who have participated in SSGs for transgender adolescents. I will collaborate with three organizations that offer such groups, in Highland Park, NJ, Newark, NJ, and Staten Island, NY, to recruit a sample of racially/ ethnically diverse youth. Three focus groups will be held onsite at the community organizations.

Thematic analysis will be used to analyze data and extract themes from participant's responses. Using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), a top down approach will be employed to code participants' responses for the research questions and map themes onto specific research questions. Responses will be analyzed to extract themes around the social and relational aspects of group participation. By examining social supports, peer connections, and group attachment, my hope is that this data will enhance clinicians' understanding of the role of SSGs in improving the psychosocial functioning of transgender adolescents.

**Word count- 985**

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