

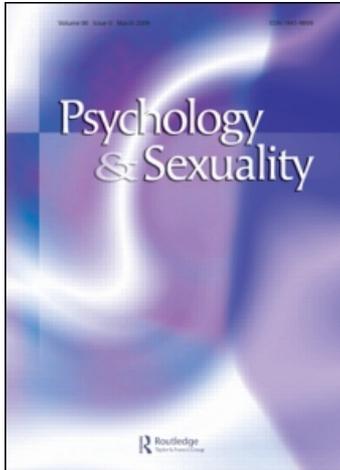
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The positive aspects of a transgender self-identification

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The positive aspects of a transgender self-identification

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Research to date has primarily focused on health risks, psychopathologies and negative life experiences with little attention to the positive aspects of identifying as transgender. An online survey collected data on self-reports of the positive aspects of a transgender identity ($n = 61$). Qualitative thematic analysis revealed eight positive identity themes: congruency of self; enhanced interpersonal relationships; personal growth and resiliency; increased empathy; a unique perspective on both sexes; living beyond the sex binary; increased activism; and connection to the GLBTQ communities. These findings are compared to previous research on the positive aspects of gay, lesbian and bisexual identities. The implications of these findings for providing strength-based therapeutic approaches and training counsellors to be culturally competent with transgender-identified clients are discussed.

Keywords: affirmative therapy; bisexual; gay; lesbian; positive identify; transsexual

There are many transgender-identified persons with a positive self-identity who experience well-being and flourish. There are also transgender-identified persons who face challenges in developing a positive self-identity. Psychological research on transgender-identified individuals has mostly emphasised topics focused on negative outcomes or deficits, such as the role of the diagnosis of gender dysphoria in treatment (e.g. Carroll, 2007), discrimination and victimisation (e.g. Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006), trauma (e.g. Mizock & Lewis, 2006), psychological distress (e.g. Sánchez & Vilain, 2009) and suicidality and other risk behaviours (e.g. Maguen & Shipherd, 2010; Sevelius, Reznick, Hart, & Schwarcz, 2009). However, transgender identity may present unique opportunities for positive identity development and finding meaning (e.g. Lev, 2004; Maguen, Shipherd, Harris, & Welch, 2007). In this article, we go beyond 'coming out' or emergence models to explore how aspects of a transgender identity, as reported by transgender-identified individuals, can promote individual well-being and flourishing.

Although research has documented differences, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) communities are often combined in research as if they were a monolithic group. As a result, transgender-identified individuals and their specific identity development processes, psychological needs and sociopolitical concerns have been overshadowed by the focus on gay men and lesbian women or neglected entirely. However,

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research has pointed to differences between the constituencies (e.g. Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). Differences between the communities are based on sex/gender rather than or in addition to sexual orientation/attraction (see Hines, 2007, 2010; Sanger, 2008, for critical discussion of transgender identity vis-à-vis sex, gender and sexual orientation).

The term ‘transgender’ is an umbrella label that includes many different self-identifications. These self-identifications may be linked to biological sex, experienced sex, gender, gender roles, gender performance or transition process. The lack of a single definition may have affected the collective identity of the transgender community and its subsequent influence on social and political issues of concern. The diversity within the identification may also account for exclusion of the transgender community from research focused on sexual orientation or same-sex attraction (see Sanger, 2010, for a sociological discussion of this exclusion).

In recent years, a small literature has focused on the formation of a transgender identity, emphasising how individuals recognise, accept, integrate and disclose their transgender identity or transitioning status (e.g. Finnegan & McNally, 2002; Lev, 2007). Assorted (auto)biographies share stories of the strengths and growth of transgender-identified individuals (e.g. Boylan, 2003; Green, 2004). Studies of transgender individuals have found that greater support from family and friends is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Erich, Tittsworth, Dykes, & Cabuses, 2008; Erich, Tittsworth, & Kerstein, 2010). Overall, however, very little attention has been given to the perceived positive aspects of transgender identity beyond self-acceptance.

Previous studies investigating the positive aspects of lesbian and gay male (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008) and bisexual (Rostosky, Riggle, Pascal-Hague, & McCants, 2010) identities revealed a number of important themes. The current study extended this research to transgender-identified individuals. Such studies are important if practitioners are to have the knowledge base necessary to facilitate the positive identity development of transgender clients.

Methods

Participant description

The participants in this study self-identified as transgender persons who were at least 18 years of age. Sixty-one transgender-identified persons participated in the online survey described below. The average age of the participants was 40 years (SD = 15.6, range 18–74 years). The sample self-identified as 80% Caucasian/white, 5% bi- or multi-racial, 5% Latina, 3% African American, 3% Native American and 3% other racial identities. Participants were from 16 US states (83.5%), Canada (11.5%) and the United Kingdom (5%). Forty-one percent had a high school diploma or some college education, 20% had a bachelor’s degree and 36% had an advanced college degree. Thirty-one percent reported being single or dating; 15% reported being in a committed relationship with a ‘same-sex partner’ and 15% reported being in a committed relationship with an ‘opposite-sex partner’; 18% were married to an ‘opposite-sex partner’ and 7% were in a legal relationship with a ‘same-sex partner’; 6.6% were separated, widowed or divorced. Thirty-nine percent reported having children.

When asked to choose a label for their primary gender identity, 26% chose ‘FTM’, 16% ‘female/woman’, 15% ‘transgender’, 13% ‘MTF’, 12% ‘male/man’, 8% ‘transsexual’ and 8% ‘other’. When asked to choose a label that came closest to describing their sexual orientation or identity, 23% chose ‘bisexual’, 21% ‘queer’, 16% ‘no label or other’, 15% ‘straight/heterosexual’, 10% ‘gay’, 10% ‘lesbian’ and 5% ‘questioning’.

Participants were asked 'What words or phrases do you typically use to describe your gender identity?' Many variations of transgender were offered, for example 'transman', 'trans-woman', 'MTF', 'FTM', 'transsexual' and 'tranny'. Several participants simply identified as 'man', 'male', 'woman' or 'female'. A few participants identified as 'queer' or 'cross-dresser' and other assorted labels included 't-girl', 'lesbiman', 'genderqueer' and 'heterosexual woman with a transsexual history'. These self-labels are consistent with the wide variation of transgender self-experience and self-expression.

Finally, participants were asked, 'Overall, how positive do you feel about your current self-identification as a transgender individual?' Seventy-two percent of participants reported feeling extremely or very positive, 25% reported feeling 'somewhat' positive and 3% reported feeling 'not very' positive (no participant endorsed the 'not at all' option).

Procedures and survey items

Participants were recruited through email announcements sent to listservs that targeted the transgender community. Those who received the announcements were asked to forward the email as appropriate. The email announcement included a link to the website where the survey was posted for online access. The online survey began with a description of the research and procedures for the purpose of informed consent. After indicating their consent, participants were asked a series of demographic questions described above. Finally they were asked: 'Please tell us below what you think the positive things are about being a transgender identified person. Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important to your life and in as much detail and with examples if you wish.' An expandable text box was provided for answers.

Data analysis

The data for the analyses were the answers submitted by participants to the open-ended question. These were analysed using a thematic analysis based on a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This inductive approach allowed the 'lived experiences or lifeworlds of people being studied' to be analysed for recurring themes (Hatch, 2002, p. 29). Data from 40 transgender participants were analysed for thematic occurrence. Three of the authors separately analysed the data for the themes. The themes were compared and reconciled by reference to the data. The fourth author checked the themes against the data. A final consensus list of themes that emerged was created and data were recoded consistent with that list. The data from the remaining 21 transgender participants were then coded to check the reliability and stability of the themes. No new themes emerged; therefore the themes were considered reliable for this sample. A total of 146 meaning units were coded for the 61 participants.

Findings

The participants provided answers reflecting positive aspects of a transgender identity. Although 10% of the sample stated that they did not believe there was anything positive about transgender identity or that there were 'only difficulties', all but one of these participants went on to list at least one positive aspect of a transgender identity. Many of the participants listed challenges and difficulties that resulted in positive lessons or were overcome with positive values. For some, the positive aspects came from 'having been born transgendered' and for others 'from the act of transition' from one sex to another.

The eight positive themes that emerged from the data were congruency of self; enhanced interpersonal relationships; personal growth and resiliency; increased empathy; a unique perspective on both sexes; being beyond the sex binary; increased activism; and connection to the GLBTQ communities. Although there were many interconnections between the themes, we distinguish, present and illustrate each of them separately below.

Congruency

Almost half of the participants in the survey cited the congruency between their inner feelings and outer appearances as a positive aspect of claiming a transgender identity. For some, this congruency resulted from self-identification as transgender, thus giving a label to and starting to normalise their feelings. For others, the congruency came from transitioning from one sex to the other. The congruency sometimes included being able to express their inner feelings through their choice of clothing or manner of style.

A transgender identity allowed several participants to express ‘honesty’, ‘truth’ and ‘unity within yourself’, which they had not previously been able to experience. Some participants expressed that they had been living with a ‘sense of denial towards a true part of their personhood’ before transitioning. Congruency brought feelings of ‘true peace’, ‘relief’ and ‘being whole’. As a ‘woman who must live with a male shell’ stated, embracing a transgender identity had a ‘calming effect [that] has allowed me to begin growing as a complete person for the first time in my life’ [age 61, father of two, married to a woman].

For a ‘straight man’, 37, transitioning to a male body meant having ‘an exterior that you can more readily identify with. You can live the life that you know should be yours, [not] being stuck in a foreign body . . . being whole, happy, and peaceful.’ For a participant who had transitioned to a female body, ‘transition taught me courage, truthfulness, authenticity, love, honour – all the things the pop psychology books try to sell’ [‘bisexual, female’, age 36].

For another group of participants, expressing their gender through clothing was an important part of living congruently. A participant who self-described as a ‘normal woman’ stated, ‘It was horrible wearing a costume every day. [I feel] joy at being able to dress and interact as a woman . . . picking the clothes I will wear each day, brushing and drying my hair just right’ [age 57, ‘straight, female’]. An ‘asexual, transgender’ (age 18) participant indicated, ‘I can wear any clothes I like since neither men’s nor women’s really applies (or fits properly).’

The importance of congruency for some participants is illustrated by their statements about prior depression, substance abuse and suicidality. One ‘straight, transgender FTM’ (age 40) individual commented, ‘Since allowing myself to be the person I am, my suicidal depression has completely vanished. I am more self-confident.’ Another participant stated, ‘It was horrible wearing a costume every day. [I feel] the burden of hiding and guilt lifted. [T’vm] not hiding in bottles of alcohol anymore’ [age 57, ‘normal woman,’ straight].

Personal growth and resiliency

Over a third of the sample reported that a positive aspect of transgender identification was the personal growth and resilience they experienced. Many linked being ‘more self-confident’, ‘stronger’ and ‘more self-aware’ with their transgender identity. For one participant, a transgender identity was linked to ‘gaining good introspective abilities, getting to know oneself well, learning how to stand up for oneself’.

Meeting and overcoming challenges from a variety of sources, internal and external, contributed to this sense of personal growth and resilience. A 57-year-old ‘trans, gender

evolving' participant reported, 'I wouldn't wish my life on anyone, but if I had the choice to be transgender, I would do it all over again. All the problems have made me a much stronger and better person.' Another participant simply stated, 'I am stronger and wiser because of my struggles as a transgender individual' [age 22, 'gay genderqueer'].

One in 10 participants specifically indicated that their transgender identity was linked to their spiritual growth and referenced a variety of religious and spiritual traditions. A 40-year-old 'straight, transgender, FTM' participant stated, 'I am experiencing true spiritual growth now because I have come closer to understanding God is the one that created me in His image.' Another participant wrote, 'I've become stronger in my faith because I have had to decide to follow the spirit rather than heterosexist rules' [age 25, 'genderqueer, mandyke, lesbian, queer']. A couple of participants referenced identification with the Native American 'two-spirit' people and the strength that implied. A 57-year-old 'bisexual, trans-woman' described her transition as, 'a sacred and spiritual experience [that] gave me an understanding of what Buddhists call "attachment to desires" and when I lost those attachments I felt as though I had entered a new world'.

Empathy

More than one in four respondents indicated that a transgender identity allowed them to experience increased empathy for others. Empathy emerged as a general sensitivity to the feelings of others as well as to injustices suffered by members of other minority groups. For some, the empathy was general. For example, participants stated that 'it gives me empathy with others in a way I didn't have before' or 'being more accepting of others'. For some, it was empathy with both sexes. A 36-year-old 'straight, female' participant wrote about understanding the 'cultural pressures males and females operate under and use against each other'.

A 33-year-old 'genderqueer' participant wrote that, 'experiencing discrimination definitely lends more empathy to others' causes'. For a 36-year-old 'straight woman', 'transition taught me empathy and taught me to take a stand for others'. For another participant, 'Being trans has helped me understand and empathize with other people's struggles in a way I could not otherwise. It makes me think about my world in a way that not being trans could never do' [age 29, 'trans, queer']. A 37-year-old 'transsexual, transman' participant reflected, 'It has forced me to think about stereotyping, about being and feeling marginalized, and has increased my empathy with others in minority groups or on the margins. I think I have become a more sensitive, thoughtful, and compassionate person.'

Interpersonal relationships

One in six participants noted the positive interpersonal relationships that they experienced when family and friends accepted their sex or gender expression. One respondent eloquently stated, 'The act of self-disclosure, when done with sensitivity toward the person you are sharing with, is a liberating experience, and while potentially scary because you risk rejection, it is probably the single most important thing you can do towards mental, emotional, [and] physical health' [age 39, 'transsexual, questioning'].

Respondents indicated that their relationships strengthened as they informed their spouses or children about their transgender identity. A participant who has been living 'fully identified as a woman' wrote, 'My wife has totally accepted me, [she] sees me as I really am without the need to withhold any feelings I have' [age 61, 'lesbian female']. A 61-year-old participant poignantly noted,

I don't think I feel any positives, however my daughter says I wouldn't be the same person to her if I wasn't transie so she says it's a good thing. Come to think of it the closeness with my daughter is a positive thing ['transgender, bisexual, feminine woman'].

Unique perspective/insight

The most common theme, mentioned by half of the participants in the sample, was having a 'unique perspective' or insight into both sexes/genders. For some, this unique perspective was the result of their experiences of being perceived as both male and female. For others, this unique perspective came about from transitioning and experiencing hormonal changes such that they felt they had experienced living as each sex. For several participants, having experience as each sex allowed them to identify male privilege and also understand the oppression of women. An 'FTM, butch dyke, lesbian' participant [age 57] stated that,

Being not 'one or the other' but being 'both and' is a place of privilege that allows me insights into the complexities of gender identities and gender relationships that many people do not experience. Being transgender presents a challenge to accepted thinking and stereotypes and encourages us all to examine our own prejudices and blinkered views.

For another participant, the transition process allowed the valued insight,

I have had the experience of going through puberty two times, once as a female and once as a male. . . . PMS is terrible for women. I am one of the few men in the world who really understands what they go through. Also, I understand menopause because I've technically gone through that as well.

Living beyond the binary

Over one-third of the sample's participants reported that living beyond the gender/sex binary was a positive aspect of transgender identity. These participants appreciated the opportunity to challenge gender norms and the stereotypes of a male or female identity. Some participants described gender as 'fluid'; others found the female/male binary to limit their self-expression. One participant wrote, 'To be bound as a "woman" or "man" is stifling' [age 18, 'free, bisexual, female']. Another participant responded, 'I don't need to worry about whether my behavior suits my gender because there are no set rules for "transgender" the way there are for "man" and "woman" ' [age 22, 'no label, transgender'].

For some participants, experiencing both gender roles led them to see themselves as gender 'ambassadors' who could 'translate' between the sexes. For others, their gender experiences allowed them to express themselves more fully. As one 27-year-old 'feminine male, gay transman' participant wrote, 'I think it is positive to not be at a complete end of either the male or female sides of the gender spectrum, but exactly smack dab in the middle. A perfect balance.'

Activism

Just under one-fourth of participants saw their activism as a positive aspect of transgender identity. Activism took the form of being a role model and educating others, as well as general social justice work. Activism provided a way to make the transgender community 'visible'. Some participants educated others about transgender identity in the classroom or at their church to dispel stereotypes. One participant stated,

It is important to me to be an advocate and educate audiences about misconceptions and stereotypes. It is even better when I am able to educate them through my own experience as a transgendered individual and my identity as a gay man [age 27, 'transman, FTM'].

For one participant, 'living openly as transgender' was seen as being, 'an inspiration to others, from trans-identified people to non-trans identified people. In fact, more non-trans people thank me for having the courage to express and say who I am . . . for teaching and sharing with them' [age 27, 'transgender, genderqueer, FTM, gay'].

Many participants expressed the desire to 'fight for civil rights'. One participant, a 43-year-old 'polysexual, polyamorous, transman', stated, 'I do not allow discrimination for any reason . . . either grandma raised me right or by being an intelligent Transsexual, I learned to fight for right instead of just being a victim.' Engaging in social activism also created a path to community. A 57-year-old 'bisexual, trans-woman' wrote, 'Another way I have found positive things is by being active in the [fight for] civil rights for GLBT persons. To be able to work for those protections is very rewarding.'

Links to the GLBTQ community

Being a part of a transgender community or the larger GLBTQ community was a positive aspect noted by 13% of participants. Supportive relationships within the transgender and GLBTQ communities were perceived to lead to increases in self-acceptance and understanding. A participant stated, 'It's nice to have a supportive community of those who know what it is you are going through' [age 23, 'trans, queer, male']. A 33-year-old 'genderqueer' participant stated,

One positive aspect is my relationship to the trans and queer community. I feel like my gender and sexuality have a home in a unique culture. Having trans and queer space means I always have a place where I can get and lend support, and can have access to activities and events geared toward the community. Whereas in the mainstream culture my identity would be marginalized, in trans and queer spaces, it is celebrated and normalized.

Another participant stated, 'I feel fortunate to have people in my life who are wonderful friends and who I can trust that they accept me because they know and have accepted my "difference"' [age 40, 'queer transman'].

Discussion

The findings from this study illustrate a number of interconnected positive aspects associated with a transgender identity. The themes that emerged from the data are suggestive of possible positive aspects to be explored further using a variety of research methodologies. For instance, the extent to which each of the positive aspects described by our participants contributes to optimal well-being and psychological functioning in transgender-identified individuals is an empirical question that needs to be examined through complementary methodologies.

Social inclusion and support and a sense of meaning or purpose in life are two important factors for health and well-being (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Seligman, 2002). In previous studies, social support from family and friends has been positively related to a greater sense of well-being for a sample of transsexual-identified individuals (Erich et al., 2008, 2010). The participants in this study noted several aspects of their identity that contributed positively to their interpersonal relationships (with family and friends) and their sense of

self. Consistent with findings from a gay- and lesbian-identified (Riggle et al., 2008) and a bisexual-identified (Rostosky et al., 2010) sample, these transgender-identified participants reported that their experiences led to an increased empathy for others that strengthened their interpersonal relationships.

Other similarities with gay male, lesbian and bisexual samples in interpersonal positive identity aspects included belonging or being linked to a community and engaging in activism on behalf of social justice ideals. Participants across all of these samples also reported a sense of satisfaction in challenging stereotypes by living beyond the gender binary, educating others and being a positive role model for others. Although transgender-identified individuals have often reported a sense of exclusion from the gay and lesbian community (e.g. Hines, 2005) and some participants in this study did as well, many in this sample discussed their connection with the broader gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer communities as a positive feature of their identity. Working towards a broad GLBTQ inclusive community is an important goal due to the similarities in concerns and issues facing all of these communities, as well as general concerns for social justice.

Participants in this study appreciated the intrapersonal insights and awareness that their identity and experiences provided them. They perceived that their unique perspective brought with it an insight into the experiences of both sexes/genders. This insight, in turn, positively affected their interpersonal relationships by allowing them to relate to and empathise with the experiences of both sexes and even sometimes explain one sex to the other.

Participants in a gay male and lesbian identity sample wrote about challenging gender stereotypes and being free of gender roles (Riggle et al., 2008), and participants in a bisexual identity sample wrote about loving without regard to sex/gender (Rostosky et al., 2010). Many of the transgender-identified individuals in this sample saw fluidity not only in sexuality but also in both gender and sex. As a result, they were able to live 'beyond the binary'. Living beyond the binary confronts the typical dichotomous classifications (i.e. female/male, heterosexual/homosexual) and allows for a more authentic presentation of the self as an individual or within an intimate relationship (e.g. Rubin, 2006; Sanger, 2008).

For many participants in this sample, creating a congruency between the socially expressed and 'inner' experienced gender or sex was important to the achievement of 'peace', 'authenticity' and 'honesty' with themselves and in relationships with others. In models of transgender identity, these feelings are listed as steps towards acceptance of self and positive self-identification (e.g. Finnegan & McNally, 2002; Kaufman, 2008). Practitioners and others can help to create a therapeutic environment that supports clients' development towards authenticity and congruency. Congruency was similar to the authenticity and honesty themes that were reported in the gay male, lesbian and bisexual identity samples (Riggle et al., 2008; Rostosky et al., 2010), but for transgender-identified respondents congruency also included the reconciliation between internal feelings and external presentation.

Unlike the reported results (Riggle et al., 2008; Rostosky et al., 2010) from samples of gay male, lesbian and bisexual respondents, creating 'families of choice', having egalitarian relationships, and exploring their sexuality did not emerge as themes for positive transgender identity (although a few participants did mention each in their answers). The former (creating families of choice) could be in part because of differences in how civil marriage laws apply to gay men, lesbians and transgender individuals. Several of the transgender-identified individuals remained in marriages entered into before their transition, or their 'same-sex' relationship was socially and/or legally recognised as a

male–female relationship. Further, participants in this sample were less likely to have disclosed their transgender identity to their family of origin than participants in the gay male and lesbian samples (as reported in Riggle et al., 2008). One-third of participants in this sample had not disclosed their identity to members of their immediate family of origin, and over two-third had not disclosed their identity to members of their extended family of origin. It is possible that the transgender participants in this study were not estranged from their families of origin and therefore felt less need to create a family of choice. Further research is needed to explore the concept of chosen families for transgender individuals. Further research may also reveal commonalities and differences on the relationship and sexuality themes cited above.

Limitations

Although qualitative methodologies are appropriate for exploring phenomena and generating theory, the findings from this sample may not generalise to the population of transgender-identified individuals. The sample for this study was self-selected, non-random and limited to those with access to the Web. The sample also relied upon transgender-identified individuals who were involved with online resources targeting broadly the GLBTQ communities as well as more specific transgender groups; thus, the voices of more socially isolated individuals need to be further explored.

Although there are no existing parameters to establish demographics for this population, the current sample was largely white/Caucasian and residing in the United States. A more diverse sample, with a larger subset of racial and ethnical minority identified individuals and respondents from a variety of countries, might reveal different positive aspects of transgender identity. As the focus of this study was transgender identity, we did not query participants about the specifics of their physical status (and, in fact, this could easily have been perceived as invasive or insulting). However, we acknowledge that for transgender-identified individuals who have undergone physical changes, their experiences may have led to different positive aspects of their identity compared with those who have not undergone physical changes. Future studies may explore differences in positive self-identity based on different expressions of gender identity or sex.

Implications for psychological practice

Transgender-identified persons face challenges in developing a positive self-identity and may have difficulty flourishing in the current macroenvironment (e.g. Monro, 2006). Affirmative psychological services may help transgender-identified individuals to face personal and interpersonal (including societal level) challenges and increase their psychosocial well-being (e.g. Kaufman, 2008; Korell & Lorah, 2007). Few helping professionals, however, have been trained to provide affirmative services to sexual minorities, especially to transgender-identified individuals (e.g. Carroll & Gilroy, 2002; c.f., Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002).

Although techniques in LGB affirmative therapy have been developed and applied to transgender-identified clients, therapists need to be aware of the unique experiences and perceptions of transgender-identified clients (Korell & Lorah, 2007). These unique experiences may be related to gender identity, transition status, family and work status and/or sexual orientation. The development of a holistic wellness approach to assessment and treatment planning is recommended. Attention to the strengths of transgender-identified clients can help to counteract the emphasis on pathology, deficits and medicalisation that are common (e.g. Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Strocchia-Rivera, 2010).

Before working with transgender clients, helping professionals need to address their own biases and assumptions that may keep them from effectively hearing and responding empathically and effectively. Knowledge of transgender identity development, using appropriate terminology consistent with the individual's identity, being aware of state and local laws affecting transgender-identified persons and the impact of different transitional stages is necessary to more fully understanding a client's needs.

The findings from this study contribute to the current knowledge base by systematically reporting on the positive perceptions and experiences of one sample of transgender-identified individuals, thus offering a new, more hopeful and helpful narrative to the dominant discourse of psychosocial distress. Some research has suggested that simply asking about positive experiences related to one's minority identity facilitates identity development and integration (Cheng & Lee, 2009). We therefore suggest that practitioners use these findings to help their transgender-identified clients generate their own new narratives of positive health and well-being.

The findings from this study highlight the importance of interpersonal connections in positive identity integration and development. A sense of agency and empowerment develops from belonging to a group. Therefore, in addition to facilitating intrapersonal identity work, helping professionals can assist transgender clients in forging connections to a supportive community. To do this, helping professionals working with transgender-identified clients need to have a working knowledge of the local community as well as Internet-based resources. The Internet provides an ever-expanding source of social support that may not be available in a transgender-identified person's local community.

Helping professionals can assist transgender clients' identity work towards congruency and authenticity by assisting them with the integration of their sex or gender expression into their family and community life (Fraser, 2009). Positive narratives of identity may be key to the development of a meaningful and satisfying life beyond 'coming out' and identity integration. Helping professionals may also be instrumental in the social changes that need to be promoted to eliminate the stigmatisation of transgender identity and promote a more just society.

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