Trans and Non-Binary Students Navigating Relationships

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The Beginning

Like so many other ideas within research, there are pockets or subcultures within a larger scale culture of identities that do not have a precedent voice in popular culture (pop culture) or within a heteronormative foundation.

Within the last decade there has been a growing fascination surrounding identities, perseverance strategies, resilience, and experiences of queer youth of colour. Specifically, how Trans and Non-binary students of colour navigate their education and how they utilize structures that give them supporting / protective factors while navigating their intersecting identities alongside sharing their experiences within environments that do not constantly validate their existence.

Resilience can be defined as the capacity to accept, move forward, and overcome staggering bouts of stress that strengthens individuals and make them resourceful (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2015). In this paper, I will discuss how stress manifest different bodies of knowledge within each social environment for Trans and Non-binary students.

Much has been done by Brockenbrough and Boatwright (2015) in helping us to understand the unique, highly underrepresented, and overshadowed environments that Trans and Non-binary students of colour navigate through in order to survive. There are many testaments to be understood, thus, a problem at hand is treating Trans and Non-binary students of colour homogenously and expecting the same results. In short, this present paper will reflect on the complex and diverse identities and realities of Trans and Non-binary students navigating relationships.

In recent years, many universities and colleges across The States have begun to seek diverse students across many gender and sexual identities. Much research has been conducted by sociological scholars, concluding the wellness, gender and sexually diverse students bring to a university / college campus. However, with much research done, there seems to be a lack of asking an imperative question, "How are Trans and Non-binary students doing?"

Garvey and Rankind (2015), found discrepancies of comfortability on college and universities across fifty states between cisgender queer-identified women and men in contrast to Trans-spectrum and Non-binary students. Interestingly, this study found miraculous data that expressed insights that Trans-spectrum and cisgender queer-spectrum students do not necessarily share the same experiences of "coming out."

Moreover, on many college and university campuses there still remains a "comfortable" barrier that Trans-spectrum students have to navigate, "a heterosexist climate that inhibits the acknowledgement and expression of Gender and Sexually diverse perspectives…" (Garvey & Rankin, p.378, 2015).

Navigating heterosexists environments are a definite reality that many Trans-spectrum students have to navigate within the classroom as many Trans-spectrum students, "were afraid to disclose their identity in situations in which they felt the instructor might retaliate by grading them lower, might make them 'an object' in class or might patronize them by giving them special treatment" (Garvey & Rankin, p.378, 2015). One can imagine how these instances makes a Trans and / or Non-binary student feel cornered, silenced, or invisible which in turn will inhibit students to disclose and discuss their identities in class and other social spaces.

Z. Nicolazzo (2017) established that Trans and Non-binary students face so many perils of having to navigate social codes and social environments that were built for perceived cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual people. For example, Z. Nicolazzo expressed in their book that tiredness is an experience shared by many Trans and Non-binary students because of the reality of constantly having to "bring up gender." Moreover, many Trans and Non-binary students only "bring up gender" within certain environments and with certain people. Thus, practicing a sense of self-care and self-protection; also known as resilience (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 119).

Making the tough and often abstract decisions of not "bringing up gender" and sharing their own experience as a Trans and / or Non-binary identified person, often allowed Trans and Non-binary students to save their energies for people who were invested in them as people and save their energies for people, and environments that made them feel refreshed, rejuvenated, and able to cope with the cultural realities of gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 110).

To define, gender binary discourse is a term that represents a constellation of words, phrases, actions, rules (written and unwritten), and social realities that regulate what are considered to be appropriate gender identities, expressions, and embodiments. Continuing, compulsory heterogenderism is a neologism created by Z. Nicolazzo, 2015, 2016, in press, to describe how Trans and Non-binary people's genders are misunderstood as sexualities. To explain further, this social coding / conceptualization is believed to occur because of many people's reliance on sexuality-based stereotypes, thus, erasing and culturally rendering Trans and Non-binary identities unknowable or impossible. Lastly, this phenomenon also has the effect of

making Trans people feel not Trans enough, as their Trans ness is continually being questioned or not recognized (Nicolazzo, 2017, pp. 166-167).

In this next section, I will discuss how Trans and Non-binary students utilize code-switching to navigate hostile environments and (wanting to prevent) negative relationships. First, to define code-switching, modifying one's behaviours, appearances, et cetera to adapt to different sociocultural norms (Dictionary.com, 2017). For an example, Z Nicolazzo (2017) gives us a clear image when Megan does not reveal her identity as a (Trans) woman because she is read as a cisgender gay male. This is an example of stealth, not being open about one's identity in all or most social situations; a (social) code that many Trans and Non-binary people have to indulge within in order to survive and maintain resilience within many social environments.

Many Trans and Non-binary students have learned throughout their lifetime two (or more) different codes and behaviours. For example, if a woman with Trans experience is perceived as a cisgender gay male, she is expected, socially, to behave with more feminine grace, but, her aesthetic is supposed to maintain different masculine attributes (i.e. jeans, t-shirt, shorts) instead of revealing her true identity and wearing lipstick and a floral dress. Given, not every woman has to or wants to perform hyper-femininity in order to "be" a woman.

Within this example, the idea of "passing" comes into play. Passing is defined as the ability to be socially (mis) read as having a particular gender identity. Moreover, for some Trans people passing is positive, whereas most Trans and Non-binary people find passing to be a burden or feel must be done in order to stave off or prevent the reality of violence (Z Nicolazzo, p.168, 2017). Within a thought, the idea of passing is socially

constructed because one could not (and would not have to) "pass" without the environment making assumptions.

Within The States, there is a gender ideology that explains gender is static. Of course, as we see across cultures we are alluded to the fact that not every culture believes that gender (or sexuality) is static. In addition, the ideal cultural standard within The States for Trans and Non-binary people is to pass and "look normal" in order to be considered as a woman or man. Of course, this is a superfluous and narcissistic ideology that stems from many malevolent rhetoric's. This rhetoric does not encompass the gender identity or expression of those who do not identity as a woman or man.

There are culturally, some examples of women with Trans experience who pass well into the ideals of the normalcy of femininity and womanhood. Laverne Cox is a dynamic and stunningly beautiful Trans woman of colour, yet, we are now using Laverne Cox as a means of fabricating Trans beauty standard. This is a belief that even Laverne Cox herself has negated in many of her shows and talks she gives around The States.

Laverne Cox is so beautiful and passes so well that we use her as a token and put her on a diamond pedestal as the epitome of what it means and what it is like to "be" Trans. This lacks accordance with personal experiences of many Non-binary persons who are perceived as Trans simply because they do not fit within the gender binary. Most Non-binary people are not Trans simply because they do not personally identify as Trans and do not fit within the traditional social context of experiencing a dramatic negation towards their own body. Explicitly, many Trans people do not fit the idea that

one must be Trans because they "hate their body." This systemic ideology is not realistic to the diverse and complex experiences of Trans and Non-binary people.

In a broader cultural context, the word and / or idea of Trans does not exist. Many cultures across the globe understand gender and sex to be two distinct facets of a human being but within their own language and cultural framework. For example, within the Navajo tribe there are people called, Nádleehé, which (loosely) translates into English as "The Changing One" or "One Who Constantly Changes." Within the translation one can claim that this person's gender is not seen as static, rather as a fluid experience not a stagnant experience. Many may lay claim that this person is a "woman" one day, a "man" the next day, and then a "two-spirit" the day after (Singh & dickey, p.21, 2017).

This may be an easy way to conceptualize a person who is called, Nádleehé, but, this idea fails to understand the cultural framework of understanding gender as a fluid experience not within the idea that "from birth this is what you are and then you want to change" instead the idea within many Native American tribes is a sense of unity within their existence that is abstract, complex, and diverse. Lastly, a good claim to make is that "Two Spirit" is a concept that the "white people" (colonial settlers) constructed to understand the native people of this land and their ways, thus, Two Spirit tries and remains to be understood within the cultural framework within the Native American culture (Singh & dickey, p.21, 2017).

All in all, this argument is within the understandings of ethnocentrism, the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one's own culture and

cultural relativism, the belief or principle that concepts and values of a culture cannot be fully understood or translated in other languages.

A Modern Understanding

As noted before, within the year 2017 there has been a lot of push for research and evidence amongst Trans and Non-binary persons' health and wellbeing. Singh & dickey, 2017) are accredited authors who guide many healthcare practitioners to understand their clients' who identify as a Trans and / or Non-binary person with compassion and trust that the client knows themselves better than the healthcare practitioner (Singh & dickey, p.4, 2017).

When talking about Non-binary gender identities, Singh & dickey, are explicit in assisting the reader in understanding that the reduction of gender within two dichotomous categories is an act of colonization that is a historical fact firmly rooted in racial oppression and the erasure of indigenous people and/or people of colour (Singh & dickey, p.21, 2017). Thus, one can understand that it is imperative to note within knowledge and schools of thought that the existence of Non-binary people are not a new, modern, or solely a western phenomenon (Singh & dickey, p.21, 2017).

The Keys of Resilience

There are many schools of thought about resilience. Many of the perspectives of resilience tends to focus on resilience being a noun, thus, the understanding resilience is something that one possesses. There is a different idea about resilience posed by Z Nicolazzo (2017) that paints resilience as a verb; an action that one can practice.

This is an interesting concept because seeing resilience as a set of actions one can practice over one's lifetime and within certain social contexts and environments is

more congruent to how many Trans and Non-binary people understand resilience. For example, instead of seeing resilience as a set of skills or an ability one can possess, we can begin to understand how Trans and Non-binary people have to develop and use a variety of resilience strategies in order to navigate different social oppressions and social codes, gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism.

Moreover, understanding resilience as a sense of practice tools also allows for recognizing varying degrees of success. Meaning that just because there is a set of resilience for a Trans and / or Non-binary person within one social environment does not mean that the same resilience method can be practiced within another. To give an example, coming out within a classroom setting during a lesson takes a different set of resilience than coming out to one's coworkers at an internship (Z Nicolazzo, 2017, p.92).

Trans and Non-binary students have to develop and practice resilience on-campus to negate and / or maneuver through cultural ideas that everyone must have a gender, in addition, to navigating the different social ideas that one must look and perform their gender a particular way. For example, in Z Nicolazzo's research (2017) they found that navigating and developing resilience can be more complex for Trans and / or Non-binary persons' who "pass." What this means is that many Trans students who work very hard to pass as a cisgender woman or man are now subjected to the ideas of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, meaning that the students Trans identity was erased from social contexts and made irrelevant. For some Trans students, this is a privilege that many Trans students strive towards, for others, this is a burden because

of the unrealistic ideologies of cultural notions of beauty and attractiveness (Z

Nicolazzo, 2017, pp.92-93).

For many Trans and / or Non-binary students practicing resilience could be an

example of walking with headphones around campus listening to music so that they can

ignore or tune out their peers' remarks towards their gender expression/presentation.

Another practice is finding and / or creating a safe space on campus that their space.

What this can mean for a Trans and / or Non-binary student is a carved out space on

campus where they are aware they can go for safety especially after having to navigate

and be within hostile collegiate environments (Z Nicolazzo, 2017, p.91).

Another means of resilience for many Trans and Non-binary students is to create

a space that validates one's gender identity and / or expression. Consequentially,

creating and / or finding a space where gender is not the primary focus of identity is

another source of resilience for many Trans and Non-binary students to escape and

decompress from constantly facing the gender binary discourse and compulsory

heterogendersim in addition to constantly being misgendered (Z Nicolazzo, 2017,

pp.92-93).

Adding one more layer to the development and practice of resilience, many

Trans and Non-binary students have to navigate being a person of colour (POC) but

also have to navigate being a person with a disability and / or being neurodiverse. This

new claim of identity, neurodiverse, is a current approach to understanding the

complexity of one's neurological condition. As discovered with research done by Z

Nicolazzo (2017) there is a student by the name of Silvia who is a Black, agender

(without a gender) student who experiences post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

temporomandibular joint dysfunction (TMJ), in addition to being diagnosed throughout

an academic semester with fibromyalgia. Thus, these experiences began to shake

Silvia in her own belief and understanding of practicing resilience. Despite these

experiences and conditions placed upon Silvia, Silvia is able to practice resilience by

leaving her university campus and going back to her comfortable home. To her, Silvia

expressed this gives her time to decompress and gives her the feeling that she is back

to who she was before her diagnoses. This is a positive implication of practice of

resilience as this then allows us to understand the limitless options and opportunities of

resilience and what that could look like for a Trans and / or Non-binary student (Z

Nicolazzo, 2017, p.95).

Staying with the multi-facet of experience for many Trans and / or Non-binary

student's whose identities manifest intersecting oppressions within different systems,

Silvia was able to create and practice resilience by challenging pathologizing definitions

and ideas of health and ableism. Silvia was able to reconstruct a new idea of health by

reevaluating the idea(s) of "health" and "healthy" altogether (Z Nicolazzo, 2017, p.97).

Mirrors of Resilience

When speaking about Trans and Non-binary experiences with practicing

resilience, it is easy to make assumptions that all Trans and Non-binary person

experience the gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism the same

way. Fortunately, we need to possess an understanding that every Trans and Non-

binary persons experience with oppression is different.

Singh and dickey (2017) make a great case on understanding the practices of

resilience and understanding the role of posttraumatic growth for Trans and Non-binary

people of colour. For example, many Trans and Non-binary POC develop resilience in the following areas, (a) developing pride in one's own gender and racial/ethnic identity, (b) recognizing and negotiating gender and racial oppression, (c) accessing financial and healthcare resources, (d) connecting with a community of colour (e) and cultivating spirituality and hope for the future (Singh & dickey, 2017, p.54).

Another important shard to understand is the high importance Trans and Non-binary place upon community building. That being said, it is known that many Trans and Non-binary persons of colour create and practice different resilience strategies for different environments and social contexts through experience and community building. There are two types of community building to note, *thick trust* and *thin trust*. Thick trust is formed through friendship and social network interaction while thin trust is formed through interactions across disparate groups, including racial and class groups (Singh & dickey, 2017, p.54).

As expected, thick trust appears to be more concrete and useful in creation for many Trans and Non-binary persons as this type of trust allows for collection of information, insights, and other resources for Trans and Non-binary people to navigate legal, health care, employment, housing, and other systems of oppression. For example, a study on Latina and African American women revealed that these women established support and information to access hormones and medical feminizing procedures they identified as critical to reinforcing their gender identities through their thick trust networks and connections (Singh & dickey, 2017, p. 55). In sum, it is apparent that Trans and Non-binary persons have to navigate and negotiate within more than one path at a time.

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