

Trans youth

digging beneath the surface

Factors That Facilitate Or Impede Trans Youth Well-being in Quebec

Social Context

Quebec has one of the leading identity-affirming clinics for trans kids, the Gender Variance Clinic of the Montreal Children's Hospital. Advocates have also pushed for legal recognition, resulting in recent changes to legal regulations for gender marker and name change for minors in Quebec. Minors over the age of 14 no longer need parental consent to make those changes, but still need a letter of support from a professional (medical doctor, social worker, etc.). Those under 14 years old need parental consent and a letter of support from a professional, while youth and adults living in Quebec without Canadian citizenship remain unable to legally change their name or gender marker.

This fact sheet aims at presenting oppressive factors and structures that negatively influence the well-being of trans youth as well as aspects that contribute to it. It also proposes ways forward to facilitate trans youth well-being. It is part of a large qualitative study conducted in Quebec.

Recruitment and participants

Data presented in this fact sheet was obtained through semi-structured interviews with 24 self-identified trans youth living in the province of Quebec, aged between 15 and 25 years old. They were recruited through community partners via posters and social media. The research team paid particular attention in recruiting participants from a diverse background to gain insight into a multiplicity of lived experiences. Collected stories of trans youth experiences were diversified in terms of gender identities, age, race and ethno-cultural background, social class, education levels and citizenship status.

Results

Experiences and Dynamics in the Healthcare System

Healthcare system is a primary contributor to participants' well-being (gender specific or general care), yet, resources in this system are not trans affirmative. Indeed, because of their gender identity, even when the services they are seeking are not transition-related, barriers to access and fear of negative treatment from healthcare professionals are an issue.

"Going back to hospitals in terms of psychiatric stuff, [...] I've gone to the ER when I was suicidal and then had a psychiatrist ask me about the future of my genitals. [...] I had to just be like, "You shouldn't ask people that." (Josh, 23 years old, transmasculine)

"They respect my identity without trying to constrain me to [...]. To have my gender identity respected, that's what it means to be treated well [...] It helps me feel better because it takes the weight of gender off my shoulders." (Julie, 19 years old, non-binary trans woman)

Other Institutional Spaces: Schools, Child Protection Services, Justice System

Participants feel that those institutions are positive in their lives as long as they are affirming of their identity, whether they have changed their gender marker or not. Nonetheless, non-concordant ID create more difficulties for many – in school, child protection services and within the justice system, notably. Participants describe many institutional spaces as places in which they encounter difficulties, if not outright discrimination, rejection, and violence.

For example, describing an experience at school, Dan explains that their teacher threatened to use his former [still legal] name if he did not accept her grading: "She said, "Well, if you want me to keep calling you [name], because I know what your [legal] name is, because of the attendance sheet, if you want me to use "he", you have to accept my grade". I [...] didn't say anything, because I didn't want to be outed. [...] I had just come out in high school and lost all my friends, I didn't want to lose all my new friends." (Dan, 20 years old, transmasculine)

Family relations and Other Social circles

Family support, in the form of feeling loved, accepted, and supported by immediate and extended family, is a significant resource to help participants cope with difficulties in other spheres of their lives. However, family can also be a source of fear and anxiety (when being rejected, or kicked out). Explicit lack of parental support is detrimental to participants' well-being. Sometimes, they would also describe what a few participants coined as "negative neutrality", concept they defined as a lack of explicit, active parental support, which materializes as an ambivalent contributor to youth's well-being.

"It's still my family that helps me, and they are still important to me. You know, I am a person who has some trouble keeping in touch with people, but my family remains very important. So for sure, if they would not accept me, I would not be doing well."
(Noah, 22 years old, trans man)

"I would say that, perhaps I am wrong, but it is not 'that bad' [in speech marks] since I did not receive death threats, I was not threatened to be kicked out of the house if I continue with this [expressing gender identity] ... but in itself, it was not positive either. So I maintain this idea that it's a kind of a negative neutrality. If they are not openly opposed to my identity, if they they don't absolutely deny it, ... there is no factual or perceived support from me" (Valérie, 19 years old, woman)

Community spaces

Trans youth identified trans and LGBTQ+ non-governmental organizations (NGOs), support agencies, and other community spaces as an important source of support and information (student unions for example). Online spaces (social medias and web) were also identified as important to affirm their identity. Nevertheless, community spaces can also be important sources of adversity. Interpersonal conflicts in community spaces, sometimes described as “community infighting”, are detrimental to many participants’ well-being.

“It’s good for my well-being [...] these communities because, it gives me just, like, a place [...]. The way I am is—I’m not the only one.” (Josh, 23 years old, transmasculine)

“I have several friends who- who sometimes want to do things, and then, because of a detail they get rejected and it’s very demoralizing, it’s very hard when we are rejected by our own people, with whom we identify” (Andy, 22 years old, non-binary).

Discussion

Trans youth well-being, and ultimately, their life outcome, can be affected positively or negatively by multiple factors, and therefore a global understanding of youth’s experience is necessary in order to better support them and meet their needs.

This research confirms that recognition and affirmation can enhance subjective appraisals of well-being and that non-recognition is a barrier to self-realization for many youth.

Examples of this are particularly salient in the healthcare system and other institutional spaces.

- The family and other social circles are additional primary sites of affirmative recognition or of disaffirmation, yet also the source of anxiety and fear for youth who contemplated coming out. Participants identified experiences of explicit rejections from family and other social circles, although some youth also described their kin and other loved ones’ rejection to be closer to what one participant called “negative neutrality”, meaning an ambivalent or ambiguous combination of relative acceptance (e.g. passive acceptance, financial support) with certain forms of disaffirming and at times abusive practices (e.g. indifference, aggressive behaviors). Familial and other intimate relationships’ contribution to youth’s well-being may therefore not be as clear-cut as some of the existing literature suggests. Il semblerait que seule l’affirmation forte de l’identité mène au bien-être. It seems that only a strong affirmation of their identity leads to well-being.
- Likewise, participants identified conflictual and exclusionary practices in community spaces, sometimes called “infighting”, and also described the existence of norms (e.g. of gender presentation, of behavior, in activist spaces) that may be implicit rather than formalized. Together, these results reinforce that, as per existing literature, explicit non-recognition impedes youth’s well-being.
- Acceptance and inclusion in on and offline community spaces are important to participants’ well-being, and if youth did not explicitly describe an anticipation or fear of rejection by community members, certain participants highlighted engaging in a process of selective involvement with groups and agencies they believe cater to their needs and realities, while avoiding others.

Courses of action for a better support for trans youth, based on the results of this research:

For parents and close relatives

- Finding support and resources in order to better understand and support trans youth
- Even if the acceptance process can sometimes be long and difficult for the parent or the family, making sure that the young person is feeling supported and affirmed in their gender identity. Only strong and explicit parental and family support seems to contribute to the well-being of the participants in this study
- When the child expresses the need for it, adopting an advocacy role to defend their rights in order to facilitate access to institutional resources

For the organizations and institutions in contact with trans youth or working with them

- Remembering that only the person can define and affirm their own identity
- Putting in place structures in which it is possible to honor and affirm a person's identity, even in situations where identity cards are non-concordant in terms of name and gender mentions
- Attending trainings on realities of trans people

For communities

- Continuing to offer spaces for solidarity and sharing both online and offline
- Allowing that a trained resource is available in certain spaces in order to facilitate sharing and discussions around topics that could bring the emergence of conflicts within the different communities
- Organize activities that allow various trans youth communities to share their needs and concerns with each other

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Community Partners: Gender Creative Kids Canada, Head and Hands, Jeunesse Lambda, ASTT(e)Q, Centre for Gender Advocacy, ATQ, GATUM, Coalition Montréalaise des Groupes Jeunesse LGBT.

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