



Abstract

Having affirmative and socially supportive groups of people in transgender individuals' lives are considerably important to supporting emotional wellbeing when identifying as transgender. This study explores if lack of social support for transgender identity is associated with increase substance use among the transgender community to help understand how gender minority stress can impact substance use across family, transgender friends, non-transgender friends, and total social support. The study did not find significance with lack of support in any social support category. Instead, supportive non-transgender friends were associated with any drug use other than marijuana (ever).



Introduction

Significance of Study:

- Growing need for cultural competence within substance abuse literature (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2001; Institute of Medicine, 2011).
- Fear of lack of support from family, friends, romantic relationships, employers, and religious communities for coming out as transgender (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Devor, 2004).
- It is estimated that 1.4 million people identify as transgender in United States (Flores et al., 2016).
- Preliminary studies suggest higher rate of substance abuse among transgender individuals (Connolly & Gilchrist, 2020; Hughes & Elinson, 2002, Lombardi & Servellen, 2000; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2001).
- Nuttbrock et al. (2014) found that transwomen were "4 to 10 times" more likely to have used substances than general population in major cities across U.S. (p. 2199).

Purpose of Study:

The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge related to substance use among transgender individuals.

Research Question:

What is the relationship between social support and substance use among transgender individuals?

Hypothesis:

The hypothesis for this study is that as social support increases substance use will decrease among transgender individuals.

Literature Review

Gender Minority Stress :

- Testa et al. (2015) developed gender minority stress theory to explain the effects of gender rejection, victimization, discrimination, & impact of society not confirming one's identity
- Transgender individuals must manage feelings of internalized and externalized transphobia. (Dyer et al., 2020).
- These experiences of psychological, physical, and social stressors could lead and contribute to maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance use.

Social Support in the Trans Community:

- Social support is an important component in people's lives, which can alleviate stressors when they are healthy (Pflum et al., 2015).
- For transgender individuals, social supports can be impactful within the course of their development regarding how they experience and evolve through gaining pride of their identity (Devor, 2004).
- Social supports like family, friends and peer support can be healthy mechanisms for coping when they are perceived to be gender-confirming (Greenblatt, 2018; Pflum et al., 2015).

Substance Use:

- Day et al. (2017) had also found that the earlier that someone had experienced victimization, it appeared to be associated with early onset of marijuana, nicotine, and alcohol use. Also, those who were victimized early in age were more likely to be lifetime users (Day et al., 2017).
- A study conducted in 2018 found that gender minority youth were less likely to drink alcohol if they were involved in a romantic relationship; however, they were more likely to use drugs when single (Whitton et al., 2018).

Table 2
Drinking Problem (Ever) and Social Support

	Have ever had a drinking problem		Have never had a drinking problem		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Family Support	2.70	1.13	2.68	1.18	.136	.892
Transgender Support	3.59	1.10	3.47	1.27	.722	.471
Non-Transgender Support	3.02	1.09	2.96	1.12	.411	.681
Total Support	3.25	.72	3.19	.76	.568	.570

Table 3
Marijuana Use (Ever) and Social Support

	Have ever used marijuana		Have never used marijuana		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Family Support	2.76	1.16	2.54	1.16	1.44	.152
Transgender Support	3.53	1.19	3.53	1.29	.354	.592
Non-Transgender Support	3.12	.97	2.81	1.25	2.30	.440
Total Support	3.22	.75	3.17	.76	.547	.585

Methods

Research Design:

The current study is a secondary data collected from the the Virginia Transgender Health Initiative Study (Bradford, 2015). Self-administered quantitative surveys completed on-site or by mail. This point in time survey is utilized for the current study to analyze associations between social support and substance use.

Data Collection:

The original data was gathered during 2005-2006, statewide in Virginia. Access to surveys were either by provide link or by physical questionnaire.

Sampling Method:

Used purposeful sampling methods – Promoted by transgender taskforce and HIV community planning committee members in Virginia : primary provides, community events, peer networks, support groups, even a new letter asking for participation.

N = 268 transgender individuals 18 years and older

Measures:

Independent variable: Social Support

- Likert Scales: 1 (not at all supportive) to 4 (very supportive)
- Scales included: family support (family related by birth & family by marriage), transgender support (, non-transgender support (non-transgender friends, church/temple/mosque, and coworkers), and a total support

Dependent Variable: Substance Use

- Drinking Problem (Ever)
- Marijuana Use Ever
- Any Drug Use Other Than Marijuana (ever)

Results

- Drinking Problem (Ever) held no significance between those who have support or lack support.
- Marijuana Use (Ever) held no significance between those who have support or lack support.
- "Have ever had any drug use other than marijuana (ever)" had no significance with lack of social support.
- Significance was found with "Have ever had any drug use other than marijuana (ever)" social support from non-transgender friends.

Table 4
Any Drug Use other than Marijuana (Ever) and Social Support

	Have ever had any drug use other than marijuana		Have never had any drug use other than marijuana		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Family Support	2.70	1.13	2.68	1.18	.136	.580
Transgender Support	3.59	1.10	3.47	1.27	.722	.723
Non-Transgender Support	3.02	1.09	2.96	1.12	.411	.022
Total Support	3.25	.72	3.19	.76	.568	.642

Conclusion

Implications:

Future implications for research should seek out community organizations and federal agencies to collaborate in data collections to observe transgender diversity within samples. In order to further educate and develop diverse transgender experiences in research literature, studies should gather demographic data to determine transgender identities in samples, as well as other gender minorities for the sake of producing research-informed care and developing/support best care models. Additionally, there is a need to develop trauma-informed care assessment tools for LGBTQ+ communities. Developing an assessment tool that can define and survey gender minority stress would be incredibly helpful. This could be partnered with research regarding ACEs to build diversity and cultural competency within trauma-informed research.

Culturally Individualized Treatments:

This study suggests client's experience of support for their identity throughout their development from all social groups and their communities be assessed to understand how substance use may be impacted individually.

Practitioners should allow clients to engage in their treatment by normalizing the extension of power of choice regarding disclosure. Specifically, this is a culturally sensitive practice for transgender clients, as it's allowing for safety and regard for those with trauma of choice over their disclosures.

Practitioners should continuously strive to cultivate unconditional positive regard for all clients they interact with so that those who are from vulnerable communities, such as those in the transgender community, are able to develop safety and build a therapeutic relationship with their provider.

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