



Measuring Resilience Among Trans and Non-Binary Survivors of Sexual Violence

A Research-to Practice Fellowship Project

FORGE
Michigan State University

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Center for Victim Research

The [Center for Victim Research](#) (CVR) is a one-stop resource center for victim service providers and researchers to connect and share knowledge. Its goals are to increase 1) access to victim research and data and 2) the utility of research and data collection to crime victim services nationwide. CVR's vision is to foster a community of victim service providers and researchers who routinely collaborate to improve practice through effective use of research and data.

Accordingly, CVR engages in a number of training and technical assistance activities to support victim research-and-practice collaborations. Specifically, CVR:

- Hosts a library of open-access and subscription-based victim research;
- Provides light-touch research-focused technical assistance to victim service providers;
- Translates research findings for the field in fact sheets, reports, and webinars; and
- Highlights useful research-and-practice tools and training resources for the field.

CVR also supports two types of [researcher-practitioner collaborations](#): interagency VOCA-SAC partnerships and local-level Research-and-Practice (R/P) Fellowships. In 2018, CVR's R/P Fellowship program supported nine teams of researchers and practitioners engaging in a variety of victim-focused research projects. Fellows were engaged in emerging, ongoing, or advanced research-and-practice partnerships. This report describes activities by one of CVR's 2018 R/P Fellowship teams.

R2P Fellows: Organizational Descriptions

FORGE: FORGE is a national transgender anti-violence organization, founded in 1994. Since 2009, FORGE has been federally funded to provide direct services to transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary survivors of sexual assault. Since 2011, FORGE has served as the only transgender-focused organization federally funded to provide training and technical assistance to providers around the country who work with transgender survivors of sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and stalking. FORGE's Executive Director and Policy and Program Director, **Michael Munson** and **Loree Cook-Daniels**, collectively bring 50 years of experience working with and providing services to the transgender community. **Tristen Taggart**, FORGE's Trans Youth and Trauma Specialist, is an undergraduate at Virginia Commonwealth University who is deeply interested in delving into several emerging issues related to transgender sexual violence survivors, including how sexual assaults may impact an individual's gender identity and/or decisions to de-transition.



Michigan State University: Dr. Heather L. McCauley is a public health-trained Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. Dr. McCauley's research focuses on sexual violence prevention and intervention, centering underrepresented and marginalized populations in her work to reduce health disparities. She has authored or co-authored 75 journal articles and book chapters on these topics in outlets spanning a variety of health and social science disciplines.

Finneran K. Muzzey is a queer, non-binary PhD student at Michigan State University. Finn has been trained as a statistician and quantitative researcher, with extensive experience developing, managing, and analyzing cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys and datasets. Finn's research includes the impacts of sexual and dating violence on adolescent sexual development, with an emphasis on the experiences of trans and non-binary youth.

Description of the Problem

Sexual violence is a significant public health problem that disproportionately impacts transgender people. The U.S. Transgender Survey found that almost half (47%) of the more than 27,000 trans respondents had experienced sexual assault in their lifetime, with one in ten respondents sexually assaulted in the past year (James, et al., 2016). However, research on the prevalence and, in particular, the impacts of sexual violence among transgender populations is relatively scarce. The literature has been stymied by methodological challenges with recruitment and sexual violence measurement, as much of the research comprises small self-report surveys, hotline calls and social service reports, or police reports (Stotzer, 2009). Moreover, research on sexual violence victimization experienced by the transgender community has focused almost entirely on risk, without attention to the protective factors that could inform intervention and clinical practice to help individuals thrive.

Addressing the Problem

In 2003-2004, FORGE self-funded a national survey of the transgender community, which has shaped much of FORGE's work ever since, including service to transgender and non-binary survivors and training and technical assistance to victim services professionals. However, the experiences of transgender and non-binary people have shifted over time and new research is needed to fill both research and practice gaps. Moreover, existing research has focused almost exclusively on sexual violence and the many adverse health impacts. Strengths-based research is needed to understand how transgender and non-binary people thrive despite histories of trauma. Thus, the purpose of this early-stage, Researcher-Practitioner Fellowship project was to develop a survey tool for transgender and non-binary individuals to explore **how experiences with trauma and (trans) identity impact resilience, community, and world-making**. We were interested in moving beyond existing measures from previous sexual violence research studies and taking a strengths-based approach.

This early-stage partnership was initiated by FORGE, who approached sexual violence researcher Dr. Heather McCauley about collaborating. FORGE had previously worked with Dr. McCauley on a Futures Without Violence advisory board developing LGBTQ and transgender/gender non-conforming-specific intimate partner violence materials. Dr. McCauley was also recommended to FORGE as a potential partner by Dr. Rebecca Campbell, a colleague involved with the Office for Victims of Crime's Vision 21 project.

We began our work together virtually and then came together in-person to execute the project deliverables. We used a participatory, generative process of survey development that is ideal for researcher-practitioner partnerships and for areas of research that are underdeveloped in the literature. The first step was to create shared ground rules for our work together, solidify the focus of the survey instrument, and clarify who we wanted to benefit from this survey tool. We unanimously decided to focus on survivors and reflected on the need to use a strengths-based lens in this work. Next, we engaged in an in-person, creative process that involved individual and group brainstorming and item development. We asked each team member to generate research questions that they felt addressed our study purpose. Using a consensus-building process, we narrowed down our research questions. Then, each team member created a visual tool to identify and organize the constructs that addressed our research questions. Again, using a consensus-building process, we identified the important constructs we would include in our survey. Generally, these constructs were not present in existing literature, necessitating item development. Dr. McCauley provided an instructional overview of item development before the team worked together to develop key items for the survey.

The next step comprised completing cognitive interviews with 6 transgender or non-binary individuals to hone the survey items (described below). A key step in our collaboration was discussing recruitment strategies and messaging for our cognitive interviewing process, but also the eventual study for which the survey was designed. As a limitation of previous research in this area has included challenges with recruitment, we spent time mapping our professional networks to identify potential agencies with which to partner for recruitment and to make sure that we were reaching communities that have been underrepresented in previous research. While we invited a small number of participants to complete cognitive interviews, they were recruited via our professional networks. This strategy fostered a level of trust necessary for participants to share their opinions about violence victimization and related topics. We anticipate we will continue to leverage our professional networks for recruitment when we launch the survey nationally.

Data Sources

The main project deliverable was a survey to assess how experiences with trauma and (trans) identity impact resilience, community, and world-making. The first data source

was a compilation of existing literature that included relevant constructs for this work. These studies provided a springboard for the team to have conversations about who would benefit from this work and to narrow the focus of the instrument we would create. In general, the team felt that existing measures were inadequate on their own and decided that the team would need to develop new measures to fulfill the goal of this work being strengths-based and focus on resilience after trauma. The team generated data during the process of item development, with their individual and group exercises for narrowing the research questions, constructs, and items for the survey. Finally, data included feedback from 6 transgender and non-binary individuals about the survey items, which influenced the final version submitted to Center for Victim Research.

Results

A review of existing literature highlighted that previous work focused primarily on risk and adverse outcomes associated with violence victimization. Very few measures existed to inform the measurement of resilience and how transgender and non-binary people navigated relationships, among other things, after trauma.

The team generated items assessing key facets of **resilience and wellness**, including (survivor-defined) healing after trauma, sense of community, and social support. Strengths-based measures of **sexuality** were included to understand the unique experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals in their sexual relationships after trauma, including desire and desirability, intimacy, sexual confidence, and embodiment. Measures of **trauma** included sexual harassment and sexual violence, with adaptations needed of existing measures to capture trans-specific experiences. The team also developed a section to identify how a partner's sexual violence history impacted the relationship and experiences of vicarious trauma.

Feedback from cognitive interviewing participants included conceptual changes, language refinement, and changing the order of the constructs. Participants universally recommended we not use the term "queer," given many LGBTQ people do not prefer that term. They also recommended we have items that are salient for people who identify as non-binary as well as for people who are binary. In general, participants suggested adding context to questions to emphasize that our experiences (e.g. perceptions of safety, comfort presenting as our authentic selves) shift depending on whether we are at home, at work, in school, etc. We had extensive conversations about the word "community." For example, referring to the "LGBTQ community" was too vague for participants. With one participant, we discussed how survivors can feel community with other survivors. For some, being a survivor is part of their identity. Participants recommended creating space for non-monogamous relationships, emphasizing that some of our constructs (e.g. emotional intimacy) could vary depending on whether they are with their primary or secondary partner. We discussed resilience and healing in the context of revictimization. Participants wondered whether

we could assess resilience before and after each experience of sexual violence. At the very least, they wanted to acknowledge that resilience can be protective for those who experience violence again. Finally, participants highlighted specific forms of violence victimization we had not included in the survey. For example, abusive partners threatening to hinder legal adoption of children, having their partner (the victim) arrested for domestic violence, feeling pressured to transition in ways the survivor is not comfortable with, and pressure to freeze sperm or eggs. These findings have and will shape our survey as we finalize the tool.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Existing literature to inform work with transgender and non-binary survivors of sexual violence is limited and focused primarily on risk and adverse outcomes. Data that will be generated by this survey will provide critical information for researchers and practitioners to understand, from a strengths-based perspective, how transgender and non-binary survivors may thrive after sexual violence. Moreover, because this survey was developed via a researcher-practitioner partnership, the survey captures the experiences that matter for the communities we aim to serve.

Because the largest prior source of information on the transgender and non-binary community is over 15 years old (FORGE, 2004), data generated by the survey developed by this fellowship team will provide a rich source of current information to guide organizations' efforts to support and promote resilience among transgender and nonbinary survivors of sexual violence.

Sustaining the Partnership

This project was an early-stage partnership, with the goal of building infrastructure to conduct a subsequent survey of transgender and non-binary survivors of sexual violence. The team plans to submit grant applications to funding agencies to conduct a national survey. The CVR fellowship was an incredible opportunity to bring together experts with different areas of expertise to make a difference for an underserved community. Specifically, FORGE brought decades of expertise working with transgender and non-binary communities and a pulse on how data may benefit practitioners. Dr. McCauley's team brought expertise in research design and sexual violence measurement. The fellowship, which promoted cross-learning, created community and reduced barriers that can happen when researchers and practitioners come together. The project approach intentionally used engaged, consensus-building processes to flatten any potential hierarchy and create space for everyone at the table. This process resulted in a product we are proud of and we know this is only the beginning for the FORGE-MSU team.