

Impact of Social Support on Coping Capacity of Transgender Youth and Young Adults in Education Institutions in Southern Thailand

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ABSTRACT This mixed-method study analysed the impact of social support on coping actions adopted by transgender youth and young adult students at education institutions in Southern Thailand (Provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat). Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aid of open-ended questions focussed on the value and nature of friendships, the different types of support received by their education institutions, and facilitative and avoidant coping actions adopted by the respondents. Content analysis was performed to identify the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis. The research concluded that the nature of social support offered to respondents by their education institutions seemed to have a significant effect on the coping actions taken by the respondents. Further, that their coping actions were both adaptive and maladaptive in dealing with the different ways in which those in their formal learning environment had related to them.

INTRODUCTION

A copious literature and creditable studies validate the general view that ‘transgender person’ is a wide-ranging term that includes feminine men, cross-dressers, drag queens, transsexuals, and intersex. In this paper, transgender youth and young adults refer to those who feel that they have been wrongly considered in respect of their sexual characteristics at birth (Stewart et al. 2018; Schwartz 2017; Moolchaem et al. 2015; Nordmarken 2014; Zimmerman 2013).

Recent studies have shown that transgender learners at secondary and higher education institutions were increasingly dismissing the sexual orientation assigned to them at birth and seeking other forms of sexual identity with which they felt more comfortable. This drive for sexual transition would lead to the assumption of new sexual identities that might not be to the satisfaction of others in the learning milieu (Davies and Kessel 2017; Greenspan et al. 2019; UNESCO 2016).

Places of formal learning and education are primary settings wherein opportunity for the

expression of such transition may be attained without the presence of family and other community associates (James et al. 2016; McCann and Brown 2019). While homophobia has in recent times steadily diminished and sexual minority groups are experiencing an increase in open acceptance, delay in the social acknowledgment of transgender people and transphobia remains a questionable issue in schools (Barbir et al. 2017). Expression of otherness in sexual orientation and identity would therefore not be without challenge and difficulty in those education institutions.

An American study by Davies and Kessel (2017) found that, due to feelings of insecurity at high school, transgender students experienced unremitting stress, anxiety and depression due to the continuing transphobia of their co-learners. This left little opportunity for transgender youth to establish good, satisfying relationships with non-transgender learners. Similar findings were obtained in a nation-wide study by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (Kosciw et al. 2018). Both these studies highlighted the need of the transgender youth for support by their education institution; that without support, victims of this sort of transphobia might well indulge in maladaptive

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strategies in order to cope with the practical ways in which the phobia would be expressed.

Other research and literature confirm that in places of learning where homophobia and transphobia is openly practised, the feelings of transgender youth, of not belonging, fear, insecurity, hurt, unworthiness, humiliation, depression, misery, sadness, and unwantedness are only intensified when practical, homophobic/transphobic actions are meted out to them. These include harassment, physical violence, bullying, badgering, verbal abuse, and sexual ambush (Baltag and Sawyer 2017; James et al. 2016; UNESCO 2016; Grant et al. 2011; Hillier et al. 2010). Behaviour and actions of this nature would leave cause for the victims to find the inclination or motivation to cope and adapt in a positive way to their situation in the learning milieu.

Transgender learner youth and young adults have the inherent, human need for and capacity to forge reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with others in their respective places of formal learning (Barbir et al. 2017). Such relationships would be platforms for acceptance and long-lasting friendships that would be satisfying to all involved. If expressions of non-acceptance, rejection, and exclusion of these transgender learners are shown through aggression, violence, and poor treatment then the need for redress of the stance of those guilty of negative actions is paramount for the mental health and psychological equilibrium of those learners.

The places of learning as well as non-transgender co-learners concerned could be involved in offering support through understanding, emotional and psychological help, education assistance, financial help, and networking with other institutions that could offer support of a non-scholastic kind, like spiritual and moral guidance, sexual education and advice, and healthcare (Brougham et al. 2009). This wide range of support could spur transgender learners on to behave appropriately as individuals in sexual transition, better solve problems, take part in physical activity, mix freely with instructors and co-learners, resist the temptation to self-harm in times of depression, and generally have positive thoughts about their existence (Bry et al. 2018). By adapting to their learning environment in these facilitative and avoidant ways, trans-

gender youth and young adults would advance their chance of gaining the acceptance of those who are phobic about them or have difficulty in having honest and open relationships with them (Birnkrant and Przeworski 2017; Blair and Hoskin 2019).

Whereas the above mirrors the wider, global scenario as regards the topic of this study, it cannot be transposed to, nor can it be used to extrapolate features that might apply to, Thailand. This study has not found any literature, research studies, or documents of scientific value or relevance in respect of the topic under investigation as it relates to Thailand as a whole or the geographic areas of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The aim of this small-scale research initiative was therefore to provide some initial data and information that might contribute towards filling this gap.

Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study were to explore the impact of social support by education institutions on the coping capacity of a small sample of transgender youth and young adults in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in Southern Thailand. Also, to establish what the nature of their relationship with friends at their places of learning were, what positive social support had been offered by their places of learning, and how they had coped with their sexual identity in response to the ways their instructors, administrators, and co-learners had related with them.

Located on the Malay Peninsula, Southern Thailand has an area of around 70,714 km² (27,303 sq mls). Its north is the Kra Isthmus, the narrowest part of the peninsula. There are steep coasts on its western coast, while many rivers dominate its east side. At the last census, the population of the region was found to be 9,256,000 (National Statistics Office of Thailand 2017).

Buddhists are the most prominent religious groups (90%) in the region. The rest of the population is made of equal proportions of Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and indigenous groups of animistic believers. The provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have the highest proportion of Muslims.

METHODOLOGY

In February 2018, notices of the research were distributed at formal learning places like local secondary schools and universities, explaining the goals and objectives of the research as well as inviting volunteers to participate. In terms of the selection criteria, and with the use of the snowballing sampling method, 30 respondents were selected from those who responded (Creswell 2014; Terrell 2012). Only males with feminine inner-feelings and behaving like women in their daily life were selected. These were: between the ages of 15 and 25 years; engaged in formal education; of different religious backgrounds; and, in favour of the qualitative research goals and objectives. The size of the sample was considered suitable to meet the research goals and objectives as it was not meant to produce results that might be regarded as representative of the larger population (Creswell 2010).

The distribution of respondents in this study was: 17 respondents (56.7 %) were 15-19 years old and were studying at secondary school, while 13 respondents (43.3 %), aged from 20 to 25, were pursuing Diploma and Bachelor degree courses at local, higher education institutions.

Between July and September 2018, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather data from the study sample. Prior to the interviews, the interviewer orally explained the information sheet with each respondent and once again described the purpose and ethical considerations of this study. During this pre-interview stage (and observed during the interviews) ethical considerations were also explained. This covered the need for: sensitivity in recognition of the vulnerability of the respondents; the sensitivity of the topic of transgenerism; avoidance of physical and psychological harm; guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality; safe collection and handling of information and data; respect for human rights; non-discriminatory, non-sexism and non-sectarianism treatment; non-compulsion of participation; social justice; and, the intention to serve the greater good through the research (Iphofen 2016; Creswell 2014). This research had also gained Ethical approval by the Research Ethical Committee Board of the Prince of Songkla University, Thailand.

Open-ended questions were put to respondents consistent with the objectives of the study. These therefore focussed primarily on their relationship with friends at their places of learning, what positive social support had been offered by their school, college, or university, and how they had adapted to or coped with positive and negative responses to their transgenerism. Responses were meticulously recorded, analysed, and enumerated in Table form for purposes of easy reading and analysis.

RESULTS

As depicted in Table 1, it is significant that respondents scored identically for each of the three manifestations of friendship chosen for specific research analysis. The finding also shows a strong degree of positive inclination by the respondents' places of learning towards their distinctive sexual identity. Respondents generally, and voluntarily, expressed their experiences of satisfaction, relief, and worthiness as the result of the friendship and acceptance that they had had at their places of learning.

Table 1: Relationship with friends at education institutions (N=30)

	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Manifestations of Friendship</i>		
Good relationship	24	80
Casual	6	20
Total	30	100
<i>Do Your Friends Accept You?</i>		
Yes	24	80
No	6	20
Total	30	100
<i>How Do Your Friends in School Feel about You?</i>		
Satisfied	24	80
Dissatisfied	6	20
Total	30	100

All 30 of the respondents offered their responses to each of the 7 categories of positive support, which were considered appropriate for investigation in this study. The frequency distribution in Table 2 reflects experiences which had been primarily non-material and abstract, like emotional and psychological support, tailing off in descending order to support in the form of understanding, education, spiritual help,

moral guidance, financial aid, healthcare, and sexual advice (Simons et al. 2013; Harrington 2013).

Table 2: Positive social support offered by education institutions to the respondents (N=30)

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
1. Understanding Respondent's Personality	5	16.7
2. Emotional and Psychological Support	7	23.3
3. Education Support	5	16.7
4. Spiritual and Moral Support	4	13.3
5. Financial Support	3	10
6. Sexual Support	2	6.7
7. Healthcare Support (HIV and VCT Tests)	4	13.3
Total	30	100

The strong cohort of 29 Muslim respondents expressed feelings of depression, anger, and hurt that their parents had forced them to attend Muslim schools for Muslim education in order to remove their transgender identities and offer spiritual and moral support, and in an apparent response to Muslim Shariah Law (Akbar 2019; Alsufyani 2019).

Table 3 is clear evidence that the whole research population of 30 respondents claimed to have coped with the general responses to their transgendered identities in conformity with all 6 possible actions put to them in this study. Since questions were open-ended and hence allowed for more qualitative, uniquely personal interpretations and expressions of their coping actions, respondents generally stated a need to cope by having the 'right frame of mind' in the context of their learning centres, behaving in ways that are non-embarrassing, solving their personal and

Table 3: Types of adaptive coping actions undertaken by respondents (N=30)

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Actions</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
1.	Cognitive Adaptation	30
2.	Behavioural Determination	30
3.	Problem Solving	30
4.	Social relaxation	30
5.	Physical activity	30
6.	Cross-dressing and Make-up Therapy	30

social problems in the best way possible, engaging with other learners who freely accept them, taking part in physical exercises wherein the sexual identity is not an obstacle, and only cross-dressing and wearing female facial make-up outside of learning time (Cairney et al. 2014; Greenspan et al. 2019).

As anticipated, the study found that respondents at times had difficulty in coping well with situations where they were subjected to the overt non-acceptance, ridicule, insult, discrimination, and humiliation of some co-learners. This treatment could have continued unabated since adequate control by their places of learning was lacking especially at those times when those negative responses took place. The five maladaptive coping reactions in Table 4 were those which had seemed most appropriate for them to adopt in the hope that the weight of the label and stigma of 'transgender' would be minimised. Whereas only one had taken to substance abuse, all respondents had contemplated removing themselves from the rest of the learners, committing suicide, and avoiding all socialising. They all experienced traumatic stress disorder following negative experiences with non-transgendered co-learners (McCann and Sharek 2016).

Table 4: Forms of maladaptive coping undertaken by respondents (N=30)

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Actions</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
1.	Social Isolation	30
2.	Destructive Cognitive Behaviour (Suicide)	30
3.	Substance Abuse	1
4.	Social Phobia (Avoidance)	30
5.	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	30

DISCUSSION

Each of the four objectives of this small-scale study produced findings which echo the positive and negative fallout of transgenderism among the participant youths and young adults, as well as the sort of support which they had desired in order to circumvent the extraordinary challenges that their sexual identity presented in the context of the places of learning. As found in other, similar studies (Barbir et al. 2017; Riley 2018), the importance and value of friendship

among transgendered youth as well as with others, acceptance by non-transgendered persons, and the assurance that learner friends are satisfied with them, are well expressed in the high count for these by this research population. Not expressed by the respondents themselves, the low scores of 20 percent for casual friendships might be indicative of their mistrust of others who could well provide solace and comfort in good, lasting relationships; or, that their choice of 'casual' friendship could reflect an inability for closeness to others (McHugh et al. 2013; Stolzenberg and Hughes 2017).

There are many different forms of support that transgendered youth and young adults might desire or to which they have access. The high degree to which support of understanding, and emotional and psychological support (Table 2) respondents had received reflect a healthy injection of positivity that would have nurtured well their sensitivity and self-consciousness about their sexual identity and human conditions. The responses further echoed the strong possibility that they had been positively reinforced through these forms of support. Support, to them, would be a source of assurance of acceptability of their sexual identity (Snapp et al. 2015). Like the finding of a Nigerian study of adolescents affected and not affected by HIV, psychological support would, for example, have helped them to cope with the psychological stress associated with their sexual identity (Folayan et al. 2017; Budge et al. 2013). Alternatively, criticism, maltreatment like bullying and physical harm, exclusion, and any other expressions of non-acceptance by staff and co-learners would only have intensified their need for supportive relationships in the setting of their places of learning (Riley 2018; Stewart et al. 2018).

The equally high score by respondents for education support signifies an awareness of the value and worth that the places of learning had placed on the education of transgendered learners in a society in which it was an important lever in the search for suitable employment. Furthermore, it reflects positively on the institutions concerned as regards their belief that, like other learners, the respondents in this study were entitled to have open access to opportunities for better employment prospects and hence socio-economic well-being, qualification for govern-

ment scholarships, and access to all other education resources. Recent study by Ferfolja and Ulman (2015) found that mothers of sexually diverse learners had supported the latter role that education support by places of learning could play, and the many advantages it would bring.

Though minimally lower than those for the above forms of support, the score of 13 percent for receipt of spiritual and moral support reflects negatively on the practice of the Muslim parents who had sent their charges to Muslim schools in the hope that spiritual and moral help would be forthcoming. It might also be indicative of a lack of understanding, supportive capability, and teacher-learner rapport on the part of the Muslim learning institutions concerned. Whereas recitation of the Muslim Quran and other Islamic texts could have had a positive, emotional, and psychologically cathartic effect on their wellbeing (Alsufyani 2019), the learners concerned were nonetheless in need of spiritual and moral sustenance capable of addressing the challenges of a transgender identity.

Given their poor background, the respondents in this study would often have needed financial support to attend their respective places of learning, or to advance to higher levels of education and development. The low count of only 10 percent of respondents having received voluntary financial aid from teachers, instructors, administrators, and co-learners is evidence of little empathy and care for those transgender learners in need of material help. It can only be presumed that the 90 percent who had not received financial support would have found other avenues to pursue in search of financial support (Grant et al. 2011).

Since sexual activity of the sort preferred by transgendered persons (oral and anal) is generally considered an integral social support form in the transgender community, the low count of only 2 of 30 respondents in this study having received it connotes the presence of contributory factors that might have created this occurrence. Lack of suitable mates for sexual activity, lack of motivation due to religious prohibition, fear of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and lack of opportunity are possible factors that impinged on the socio-educational contexts of the research population.

The small number of respondents who were given healthcare support – including encouragement for HIV and voluntary counselling testing (VCT) – shows that their places of learning and co-learners had found it either outside of their remit to offer this form of support, or had regarded it as a matter which the transgender learner would consider too personal and private. As in the case of education, spiritual, and moral support, the ubiquitous influence of Islamic distaste of sexual practice outside wedlock could also have made those in the education milieu of the transgender youth and young adult less keen on broaching the subject of any test that has prohibited sexual connotations (Salazar et al. 2017).

The many challenges that Transgender youth and young adults face in their attempt to elicit the acceptance and support of others in situations of learning weigh heavily on their coping capacity. The strong and nearly unanimous scores for each of the various positive and negative coping actions of adaptation to life as transgender persons attest to the reality of the challenges in the learning situations of the respondents, that different reactions to their condition by others evoke both adaptive and maladaptive coping actions by them.

The finding (Table 3) that all respondents had coped with the stresses and challenges of their life in their learning institutions with appropriately positive states of mind, by behaving non-embarrassingly, solving their personal and social problems as best they could, freely socialising with others, partaking in physical exercises irrespective of their sexual identity, cross-dressing and making up their faces only extramurally, all amount to fortitude and a self determination to rise above the imposed non-naturalness of their sexual identity (Feld and Shusterman 2015; Raposa et al. 2015; Cairney et al. 2014). It is also indicative of the research cohort's preparedness to use these actions as non-destructive, self-elevating, and psychologically boosting ways whereby their sense of worth and dignity might be asserted. It can also be deduced that this positivity had largely been facilitated by the ongoing positive social support they had received.

The overwhelming declaration by respondents having experienced four of the listed forms of maladaptive behaviour or experience (Table

4), is evidence that, at times, and for situational reasons, respondents could not cope positively. Reasons such as were found in an earlier study by The National Transgender Discrimination Study (NTDS) (Grant et al. 2011) might well have been at play in the case of the respondents of the present study. That is, high rates of negative treatment and unfair imposition of boundaries by instructors, administration staff, and co-learners in the form of bullying and badgering, harassment, and lack of financial and other material aid might have aggrieved respondents leading to maladaptive coping.

It is to their credit that, save one respondent, the respondents considered substance abuse as an inappropriate coping mechanism. The unanimity in having removed themselves from the rest of the learners at their places of learning, considering suicide, feeling reluctant to or avoiding socialising, and having experienced traumatic stress disorder following negative experiences with non-transgendered co-learners, coincides with the findings of several other studies of late (Folayan et al. 2017; Feld and Shusterman 2015; Furnari et al. 2015; Woolman et al. 2015; McHugh et al. 2013).

CONCLUSION

The range of adaptive and maladaptive coping actions and behaviour which the respondents in this research undertook in their places of formal education underscored to what extent the provision or lack of social support influenced their lives. It could therefore be presumed that transgender youth and young adults in educational settings would be positively motivated and activated to cope with the challenges of their sexual identities should adequate and appropriate support be rendered them by those who run such settings and other learners. Inadequate, inappropriate, or inconsistent support as well as unabated discrimination against and unfair treatment of them can only cause transgender learners to find it difficult to adapt and enjoy normal experiences and well-being in those settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Education institutions should monitor the social integration, socialization, and well-

being of their transgender youth and young adult learners.

2. Education institutions should provide the support of active and caring counsellors to offer aid and support in times of distress arising from social discrimination and unfair treatment.
3. Education institutions should impose stringent prohibitions against all forms of discrimination and unfair treatment.
4. Transgender youth and young adults should have access to supportive, grievance procedures in all cases of maltreatment by others in the educational setting.

LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this small-scale, mixed-method study was to use the findings of a small number of participant transgender youth and young persons in an equally small geographic area in Thailand as regards their relationship challenges, social support, and coping capacity in the context of their formal learning environments. The findings therefore have limited applicability or representativeness beyond the parameters of the study. They would nonetheless have some scientific worth and utility as basis for further, more broad-based study of the topic of this study as well as those issues and nuances that lurk behind those covered by this study.

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