

Talking back: trans youth and resilience in action

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ABSTRACT

In 2015 the Gender Vectors research team received a major research grant to conduct research with and about transgender youth in the Greater Vancouver Area. A unique aspect of this research project involved combining social action research with the development of a prototype of a video game as a knowledge translation tool to depict the life experiences of trans youth. We draw on transformative gender justice theory to document and address the diminished life chances of and the need to promote resilience among trans youth in the region and more broadly, across Canada and the United States. This article provides an overview of the research project and concludes by identifying key insights relating to resiliency that resulted from 15 narrative interviews with transgender youth, focus group meetings with the Project's Youth Advisory Council, and dialog from an intergenerational workshop for transgender youth and adult care/service providers and allies. These themes informed the creation of the prototype.

Introduction

Transgender youth are a vulnerable population according to a wide range of equity and inclusion measures. In 2015, the Gender Vectors of the Greater Vancouver Area (Gender Vectors) project received a major grant to undertake social action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Kindon, et al., 2007) in order to identify the intersectional vectors of insecurity, vulnerability (Spade, 2011) and risk as well as resiliency (Hillier et al., 2019) experienced by transgender youth as they navigate their daily lives. Our study featured the formation of a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) to inform all aspects of the research, including the parallel development of a video game prototype as a knowledge translation and mobilization tool. The prototype reflections the amalgamation of life experiences of transgender

youth (age 6 -19) in the Greater Vancouver region who participated in this study. It is part of a longer-term project to produce a complete game that includes a local resource portal for providing information and services to trans youth and their families and service providers.

This article begins with a brief overview of existing literature relating to research on trans children and youth, followed by an introduction to transformative gender justice and other theories that inform our work. It goes on to describe social action research and the methods we used to conduct the multiple phases of the research: narrative interviews with transgender youth; formation and facilitation of a Youth Advisory Council; and the creation and testing of the video game in its various stages, including via an intergenerational workshop. These complementary avenues of inquiry produce the data that we analyze in the subsequent section. We conclude by identifying important mechanisms whereby researchers and adult allies can support the resilience of trans youth, both individually and collectively.

Literature review

Trans youth and social marginality

The general problem driving the Gender Vectors project is the diminished life chances of, and the need to promote resilience amongst, transgender youth in the region and more broadly, across Canada and the United States (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Meadow, 2018; Travers, 2018). As Susan Stryker does, we define transgender broadly as ‘an umbrella term’ for people whose gender identities are non-normative or inconsistent with the sex they were assigned at birth (1998: 251). Like Florence Ashley, we use ‘trans youth’ “to refer to all youths who profess a gender identity other than the gender they were assigned at birth, regardless of how they identify in adulthood” (Ashley, 2019: 2)

Research reveals the vulnerability of trans youth to violence, poverty, trauma and self-harm and hence their need for social justice and public sector support. An increasing body of literature has identified the myriad forms of vulnerability and insecurity that disproportionately affect trans youth in western contexts, including but not limited to, violence, poverty, trauma, increased risk of precarity in housing security and a lack of access to a wide-range of public sector supports and high rates of suicidal ideation and attempts (Ashley, 2019; Gill-Peterson, 2014, 2018; Grossman et al., 2005; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Grossman et al., 2006; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007; Hatchel et al., 2019; Luecke, 2011; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Meadow, 2018; Perez et al., 2013; Reck, 2009; Travers, 2018). Trans youth are vulnerable to coercive pressure to conform to societal gender norms, resulting in bullying and harassment by peers, and often debilitating

social stigmatization (Roberts et al., 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Veale et al., 2017; White Holman & Goldberg, 2006; Whittle et al., 2007). Studies also show high rates of violence by parents and other caregivers against trans kids and youth (Ashley, 2019; Beemyn & Rankin, 1972; Roberts et al., 2012) who, in turn, experience high rates of homelessness (Spade, 2011:147; White Holman & Goldberg, 2006; McKenzie-Mohr et al., 2012) and other forms of social exclusion and marginalization (Gattis, 2013; Hunter, 2008; Keuroghlian et al., 2014). Sociologist Tey Meadow (2018) observes that trans kids from families already disproportionately subject to state surveillance via child welfare institutions due to racialization and/or poverty, experience greater surveillance and pressure to ensure that their children conform to cisgender norms.

Institutions, social policy, and everyday cultural interactions actively maintain a rigid gender binary, resulting in both institutional and informational erasure of transgender people (Bauer et al., 2009; Namaste, 2000). Trans youth experience both institutional and individual discrimination. According to Wishart et al., individual discrimination is “social exclusion, stress, prejudice, and violence from individuals” (Wishart et al. 2019, 2) whereas institutional discrimination is “socially systemic discrimination codified into rules and regulations that limit the resources, opportunities, and the physical and emotional health of socially disadvantaged groups.” On an individual level, trans kids are often “non-apparent” (Hellen, 2009) or invisible due to their tremendous efforts to avoid teasing, scorn, harassment, and violence from peers, teachers and family members (Whittle, et. al., 2007). This can impede the development and provision of supports for trans youth at an institutional level.

While there is a vast body of clinical literature about transgender children and youth (documented, for example, by Bryant, 2006, 2008, 2011; Pyne, 2014; Tosh, 2014; Winters, 2011), there is considerably less research undertaken *with* transgender youth. Although national surveys of LGBT youth in Canada (Taylor & Peter, 2011) and the USA (GLSEN, 2015) report responses from trans youth and the first Canadian Transgender Youth Health Survey (Veale et al) focused specifically on transgender youth, there is little qualitative data from the perspective of trans youth themselves. One exception is Travers’ (2018) interviews with trans youth and parents of trans youth which explored the intersectional social forces that restricted the agency of trans youth and resulted in their being ‘at risk.’ Another is Hillier et al.’s youth participatory action research project with trans youth in Philadelphia regarding their experience of high school. This work focused on moving beyond the representation of “trans youth as one-dimensional passive victims” to consider resilience and agency (Hillier et al, 2019: 1).

Theoretical frameworks

The Gender Vectors project is situated within the tradition of social action research to work with youth to “study up” on and contest the structures and processes that marginalize trans youth (Chen, 2011; Messner, 1996) in contrast to the previous generations of clinical studies that focused on “studying down” (Nader, 1972) on gender nonconforming children and youth as deviant populations in need of “correction” or “repair” (Pyne, 2014; Ashley, 2019). This method is consistent with Pennell’s (2017) recommendation, in the case of teacher training, “that rather than focus on inclusion, teacher training should encourage the identification of systematic heterosexism within educational institutions and address underlying issues that create homophobic and transphobic environments” (Bradley et al., 2019: 320). Our research ties in with a longstanding tradition in social science of uncovering oppressive practices (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2010:1997), including those relating to sexuality and gender expression (Enke, 2013). In short, we start from the premise that transgender youth are not a problem to be solved or a population to be saved but a rather a wide-ranging group of young people who are harmed by imposed binary gender systems and other attendant aspects of oppressive social hierarchies.

Although trans youth are indeed a vulnerable population, reducing their lives to suffering and victimization is to add to the social forces that dehumanize and disempower them. Thus, we move away from a damage-centered framework (Tuck, 2009) and orient ourselves to consider the resiliency of trans youth. Hillier et al define resilience as it applies to trans youth in terms of “psychological resilience, the ability to cope, restore balance, or ‘bounce back’ in the face of physical or verbal abuse and other stressful experiences ... Taking the form of equanimity, determination, self-esteem, and sense of personal mastery, resilience mitigates and protects against the harassment and discrimination experienced by trans youth” (2019: 3).

The literature suggests that there are a number of factors that promote resilience in trans youth, including socioeconomic security, parental support, supportive school personnel, peer acceptance, institutional flexibility and a sense of collective and non-prescriptive trans identity (Bradley et al., 2019; Meadow, 2018; Travers, 2018). These factors were highlighted by trans youth in our study and some are featured in the prototype.

Aside from understanding the perspectives of trans youth through a resiliency lens, we are also informed by gender theories. The perspective on gender that grounds our research about and with trans youth is that of gender self-determination (Stanley, 2014) within the context of a wide range of options for people of all ages. We do not assume that non-

normative gender identity must be static or permanently fixed to be legitimate (Ashley, 2019). With this in mind, a transformative gender justice (Travers, 2014) theoretical orientation that draws on the intersectional theoretical framework provided by Black feminists (Crenshaw, 1991, 1998; Higginbotham, 1992; Hill Collins 1998, 2005; and Wynter, 2003) drives our work. Travers' transformative gender justice paradigm incorporates scientific evidence that the two-sex system is ideological rather than natural (Connell, 2009; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Lorber, 2005) and emphasizes how the binary sex system intersects with other vectors of discrimination such as race, colonialism, class, ethnicity, and nationality in shaping the distribution of life chances.

The transformative gender justice paradigm is strengthened by later scholarship. Travers (2018) emphasizes that racialization and poverty coalesce significantly with gender in determining life chances for trans and gender nonconforming people of all ages. The disproportionate vulnerability of trans women of color to violence and imprisonment (Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013) is a case in point. Trans youth also experience the temporal dynamic of "adulthood" whereby they are legal minors and are often considered to be incapable of making decisions for themselves about gender and sexual identity (Hillier et al., 2019; Toft et al., 2019).

A transformative gender justice framework supports a research process that studies up on the social institutions and structures that transgender youth bump up against in their daily lives, and echoes Meyer's (2010) insistence that advocacy and activism designed to achieve gender justice for children and youth requires the integration of an antiracist/anti-oppression framework that links processes of gendering, racialization, and economic marginalization. Our study draws on this analysis to uncover the ways in which gender operates within racist, classist, colonial and neoliberal nationalist systems (Bucar & Enke, 2011; Lozano-Neira & Marchbank, 2016; Skidmore, 2011; Stryker & Currah, 2017).

In this article we describe a 2015-2019 social action research project with trans youth in the Greater Vancouver Area that revolved around the parallel construction of a prototype for a unique knowledge mobilization tool: a multi-player video game with the working title, *Trans Youth Worlds*. We identify the experiences of vulnerability, insecurity and resilience of transgender youth in the Greater Vancouver Area in order to build the game prototype, to advocate for greater public sector support for this population and to empower trans youth to advocate for themselves, both individually and collectively. Like Toft et al (2019), our goal in the study and this article is "to amplify the voices of a group of marginalized young people (p. 158). To this end we asked three questions:

1. What are the main challenges transgender youth in the Greater Vancouver Area experience in their daily lives that are specific to their transgender identities and how do they respond to these challenges?
2. How are these challenges for trans youth mediated by other vectors of vulnerability and security (race, gender, Indigeneity, class, citizenship, disability)?
3. What practices and processes are necessary to ensure that trans youth participate in social action research in an empowered way?

Social action research

In keeping with a transformative gender justice orientation toward studying up, our research methodology is situated within the tradition of Social Action Research geared toward solving “practical problems in specific locations” (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Kindon, et. al., 2007). Through interviews and the youth advisory council, we bring the everyday experiences and perspectives of trans youth into critical dialog with current public sector and social service practices and the theories that inform these practices.

Youth advisory council

There is a considerable amount of extant literature on the various youth advisory structures that exist. Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (United Nations, 1989), there has been increased awareness of the need to consult with youth in meaningful ways to involve their voices in the creation of policies and services, from parks and recreational facilities (Canada Parks Council, 2011), to involvement in local and municipal governments, health (Hohenemser & Marshall, 2002) and on research on youth development (Roth et al., 1998; Zeldin, 2000). Zeldin (2000) notes, for example, that by 1998 nearly 50 percent of USA based nonprofit organizations included youth in some capacity in informing decision-making by leadership, though most of these were under the auspices of youth development where “... young people gain leadership skills” (Hohenemser & Marshall, 2002, 156). Much of this relates to examining how youth are involved in participating to measure the level of real engagement and youth leadership. In 1992, Hart published his “Ladder of Participation” which delineates the various modes of involvement and leadership of youth advisory groups. This ladder indicates that not all examples of youth advisory structures actually qualify as participation in decision-making. Our aim, however, was to create and sustain an empowered Youth Advisory Council while providing flexibility for each

youth member to determine their own level of participation in as supportive and positive manner as was possible. Our team also drew inspiration for this aspect of our process from the critical disability slogan, “nothing about us without us.” (Charlton, 2000)

Video game

The long-term goal of the Gender Vectors project is to produce *Trans Youth Worlds*, a full version, multi-player video game that will provide an interactive educational and social support tool for young people and adults, orienting users to the self-worlds of trans youth and potential resources in the Greater Vancouver region. We utilized the medium of a video game to engage trans youth as they have grown up with gaming, social media, and the internet, making this an ideal way to convey information about their lives and local resources.

The internet is well-established in the literature as having the potential to offer privacy and safe spaces for youth to explore and find information on gender and sexuality (Magee et al., 2012). Digital spaces offer anonymity, community, and the opportunity to explore and receive validation of identity (Bryson et al. 2009; Horvath et al., 2012; Huffaker & Calvert, 2006; Maczewski, 2002; Suler, 2004). Online support and education translates to change offline: trans youth directly link online spaces to their ability to come out offline (Selkie et al., 2019).

Scholarly literature, however, also attests to problems youth face related to accessing and existing in digital environments. There is a well-documented digital divide whereby technology haves and have-nots mirror socio-economic divides more broadly (Chow-White et al, 2018; Harris et al, 2017) and this is a limitation researchers need to engage with in efforts to reach the most marginalized (impoverished, racialized, Indigenous, undocumented, street-involved) trans youth. Alongside who can access digital spaces is the issue of who has the skills and knowledge to exist safely online. Youth are vulnerable to cyberviolence and cyberbullying (Fisk, 2016), algorithmic oppression (Noble, 2018) and the potential of losing control of their online representation (Selkie et al., 2019). The hostility to trans people in online spaces is well-documented (Olson & LaPoe, 2017) and attending to issues of safety via controlled access to gaming and online environments has informed our actions at every stage of the research process.

Despite the risks, engagement through technology is an optimal means to conduct research and foster dialog about social justice (Liang et al., 2010). Online communities facilitate conversations with many groups,

across differences, to “facilitate the diffusion of social justice efforts between distinct youth groups” (Kornbluh et al., 2016).

Video gaming has long been a site of LGBTQ resistance (Ruberg, 2019), and digital gaming in particular offers an ideal avenue for strengthening the resilience of LGBTQ populations. Evidence suggests that gaming is a particularly embodied experience for LGBTQ participants in that games are spaces and activities that enable “queer worldmaking” (Ruelos, 2018). Many queer/trans gamers are drawn to role player games because they can control their engagement with a digital world in ways that they might not be able to in their own lives (Ruelos, 2018). For example, in a study of trans adults it was found that gaming has positive psychological implications for gender dysphoria due to the ability for players to experiment with characters of various genders (Griffiths et al., 2016).

While existing studies generally focus on adults, there are some exceptions. Strauss et al (2019) explored the potential for digital game-based mental health interventions targeting trans youth. This builds upon previous work that found that similar to their cisgender peers, trans youth immerse themselves in digital media as a coping strategy to feel better (Strauss et al., 2017), as well as a preference among LGBT youth to access services and information in digital forms (McDermott et al., 2016).

Our purpose in building a video game prototype was to provide a view into the worlds of youth (both for trans youth and adult policy makers, service/care providers and allies) and the multiple vectors of vulnerability, resilience and security they experience and which shape their lives (Spade, 2011). We did this through mapping the *unwelten*¹ (von Uexküll, 1934) of trans and gender nonconforming youth based on our data collection (see Methods). The video game format is a nontraditional means of sharing knowledge about, with, and on behalf of a marginalized population via an interactive format, integrating first person and systems perspectives to make visible the ways in which trans youth experience and navigate multiple barriers to thriving and surviving. Our project harnessed the flexibility of video game spaces to develop a digital resource designed to enhance the wellbeing of specific, unique subgroups of marginalized youth.

We contend that public sector policy makers, service/care providers and adult allies need to learn about trans youth worlds in order to support them more effectively. A video game based on youth life experiences serves a pedagogical purpose of exposing supportive adults and service providers to information regarding trans youth oppression and resistance, as well as how institutional practices adapted and support provided to youth. The value of simulation as a learning tool for higher order learning that has real potential to change beliefs and behaviors cannot be overstated. In a study of anti-bullying education among school personnel,

Bradley et al. (2019) posit that realistic simulations are an ideal form of training allies to intervene and prevent LGBTQ bullying, as digital role-playing is a low-stakes way to encounter issues and consider responses. In particular, this method of engaging allies does not position trans youth as having to continually share trauma in a damage-centered storyline (Tuck, 2009).

We acknowledge that we are not the first to utilize games to further social justice aims², nor is our game the first to address transgender issues³ whilst others⁴ provide the option of players designing their own avatar (with options to be trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming) and using non gendered pronouns. However, we believe the social action research methodology used to inform the format and storyline of the game prototypes is unique: it not only focuses on justice for trans youth but is informed *by* trans youth participation.

Narrative interviews: Recruitment and interview protocol

Individual interviews with trans youth were employed to generate data about the life-worlds of trans youth in the Greater Vancouver Area. The authors used our personal networks as members of LGBTQ+ communities to distribute a recruitment flyer explaining our project and asking potential participants to contact us via a project email account. Between July 2015 and September 2017, 15 semi-structured narrative interviews (Riessman, 2008) with trans youth that elicited stories were conducted by the Principal Investigator (PI) and a doctoral student Research Assistant (RA), both of whom are white settlers, and identify as trans non-binary/masculine queer. Six participants described themselves as 'white' (Euro-Canadian), two as Indigenous, three as Black-Canadian, two as Indigenous/Euro-Canadian and two as Asian-Canadian. Their ages ranged from six to 19. The interview schedule covered areas that allowed youth to share their experiences regarding many issues from schooling to safety, to available support to what support they seek, to how they are resilient and the micro (and not so micro) aggressions they encounter. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and focused on trans youths' daily experiences of safety, resilience, and vulnerability.

Usually, guardian/parental consent is required to interview minors (anyone under 19 in our region), however, we were able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of our University's ethics board that for some youth, asking for parental consent may negatively impact the youth. As a result, we received permission to allow those over 12 years of age to consent for themselves if necessary.

Narrative interviews: Data analysis and findings

Audio recordings of narrative interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service and then reviewed by a Research Team member for accuracy. The Research Team worked collectively over three meetings to develop a thematic coding scheme that was then used to analyze the transcripts using NVIVO software. For example, under the heading, “gender self-determination strategies,” we coded according to actors involved (family members; school personnel; medical/other care providers; peers; athletic coaches; other [define]) and strategies adopted (out and proud; situational disclosure; double life – gender self-determination at home only; no labels, I’m just me; social and medical transition – stealth mode – keeping trans identity private; social and medical transition – out and proud; invisibility; gender dysphoria without understanding oneself as transgender for a long period of time. Under the heading, “resisting gender norming/surveillance,” we coded according to actors involved (family members; school personnel; medical/other care providers; peers; athletic coaches; other [define]) and strategies adopted (talking/fighting back; educating; disavowing gender norming; asking pointed questions to facilitate self-education for other people; humor.

We linked this coding scheme to central concepts from the literature and transformative gender justice and resilience. These concepts included:

- Individual discrimination
- Institutional discrimination
- Intersectional vectors of vulnerability, security and risk
- Resilience – factors that supported; factors that undermined.

Four findings emerged from our analysis of interview data.

1. All trans youth in our study experience challenges related to non-normative gender identities but those who are non-binary feel particularly misunderstood and out of place;
2. Supportive school personnel are at least as and perhaps even more important than school policy. Supportive policies are insufficient without significant investments in personnel training and changes to school cultures;
3. Peer support or peer antagonism has an enormous impact on resilience or lack thereof;
4. Adulthood and trans negativity are heavily mediated by race, class, and colonialism.

Trans youth in our study adopted various approaches and strategies related to gender self-determination and these often varied situationally, i.e., a youth might present as openly trans, stealth – meaning to “maintain total privacy about their gender histories,” (Meadow, 2014), or cisgender depending on the specific place, time and combination of people they are interacting with. All trans youth in our study expressed some frustration with people (family members, school personnel and other adults in positions of authority, medical personnel, peers and/or strangers) failing to understand their gender identities. They made decisions about sharing/displaying non-normative gender identities contextually, weighing the possible comfort from being able to assert their own gender identities against losses (safety, inclusion, being seen as a ‘normal’ kid). Some youth were openly trans in all non-anonymous social situations, two youth had always been visibly gender non-conforming, while others picked their moments to be open about their identities. Some youth operated in stealth mode, passing seamlessly as cisgender in all but their most intimate contexts, while others, particularly non-binary trans youth, struggled with feeling invisible as trans, even while acknowledging the relative safety this afforded at times.

In spite of the difficulties related to acceptance that all of the trans youth in our study experienced to some degree – ranging from occasionally to often to “all the time,” those who present in a “transnormative” (Stryker, 2008: 155) or binary-confirming way, whether intentionally or not, tended to experience more institutional accommodation than those who affirm a non-binary identity. The lack of non-binary role models can make non-binary trans youth feel especially alone. As Travers (2018), observes, trans kids who conform to binary gender systems are more easily institutionally accommodated than kids whose gender identities or agender refusal to situate themselves in terms of gender at all challenge the binary system.

Many trans youth in our study struggled with mental health challenges, relating to anxiety and depression; we observed that much but not all of it stemmed from “minority stress,” defined as the ways in which “stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems” (Meyer, 2003: 674), associated with being trans in a cis world.

The negative experiences youth reported with adults in authority almost always related to school settings where most youth were forced to spend time and subjected to the rules of the institution and the ability of adults in these settings to exert power over them. Trans youth experienced a range of responses from adults in positions of institutional authority and these do not clearly correlate with the presence or absence of formal policies to support transgender students in their school district. Some youth, with the support of their parents, found school personnel to be totally

accommodating. Our interviews confirmed our expectation, based on existing literature, that supportive behavior of adults in positions of institutional authority is a key factor for resilience, mental health outcomes, and school success for trans youth. Peer relationships in school contexts also figured prominently in trans youth' reports, in terms of numerous incidences of bullying, teasing and ostracism, but some kids also had mixed or relatively good experiences with peers that increased their resilience.

YAC: Recruitment and facilitation

While themes for the video game were identified through narrative interviews and translated directly into the prototype, researchers worked in parallel to recruited trans youth to advise on the game. We recruited the first six members of the YAC during the first six months of the project via the same networks we used to obtain interview participants. Along with our recruitment materials for interviewees, we distributed a recruitment document asking for youth 13- 21 years who identify as transgender, gender nonconforming, and non-binary to participate in a youth council for an honourarium of \$250 per year. The purpose of the YAC was to work with a team of researchers to build a video game. While confidentiality and safety require us to avoid sharing too many specific details, the youth on the first YAC were between the ages of 13-18, three were in school, two home schooled and one out of education (without having graduated from high school). At the time of the YAC these youth self-identified across a range of gender identities (three trans masculine; one trans feminine; two gender fluid) and they resided in five different towns and cities within the Greater Vancouver area. Four out of the initial six were Euro-Canadian, one Biracial and one Indigenous youth. With the notable exception of the Indigenous youth who was living in considerable poverty, members of the YAC were relatively privileged in that they had stable housing and the support of at least one adult in their family. Yet, not surprisingly, YAC members also struggled with issues of mental health (anxiety attacks) and other conditions (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, autism) that had to be empathetically approached to enable the youth to continue participating on the YAC. While the youth that made up the YAC reflected many of the social barriers to trans-affirming and trauma-centered care, it was not possible to access youth with no parental support or street-based youth within the parameters of established institutional research ethics.

Working with youth, particularly those who live within multiple vectors of vulnerability and precarity, required flexibility on the part of the research team. In keeping with the social action research model of collaboration and keen awareness of power dynamics in research relationships, we

worked to give the youth plenty of time to answer emails and connect with us; to keep our time demands to a minimum; and provided each youth with an honorarium for each meeting they attended, lunch, and bus tickets if applicable. In spite of the relative privilege that five out of the six YAC members enjoyed and their proficiency with gaming, all of them required a lot of encouragement about the expertise and abilities that qualified them for the YAC before agreeing to participate.

The YAC worked directly with members of the Gender Vectors team, providing feedback on early ideas for the game through three focus groups. Each meeting was facilitated by a Team Co-Investigator – a white settler, cis-lesbian, professor with extensive experience working with youth and a Research Assistant – white settler, trans masculine, graduate student who was enrolled in a Counseling Psychology program and who also worked with marginalized youth as an outreach worker. After testing prototype 1 – which was just a single scene – the youth met with the research team via individual interviews and a focus group discussion.

Video game prototype 1: Development and testing

The Research Team entered into an agreement with a cohort of (n=5) Masters of Digital Media (MDM) students to build a game prototype over the course of a 13-week semester beginning in January of 2016. Delivering on our project represented a substantial part of student requirements for their degree but we were made to understand they were not our employees. During this semester, the PI and an RA met with the cohort on a weekly basis for approximately one hour to decide upon video game format, assist with storyline development, and approve or reject aspects of the prototype as it developed. These meetings involved a two-way educational process: with the MDM team educating the PI and RA on videogame design and the MDM team learning about what it means to be trans in terms of identity and injustice from the Research Team. The Research Team learned that only a one scene prototype was possible, given the limited time and resources, and were provided with an overview of video game design options to choose from. The MDM team received a Trans 101 workshop which included appropriate language usage and awareness raising on privileges and vulnerabilities based around gender, class, race, sexuality, citizenship, and ability. The MDM team were open to this education and enthusiastic about the project.

In keeping with social action research and the primary pedagogical purpose of the video game, the PI and RA chose a story driven/mystery format for the video game. It was the MDM team's job to write a storyline for the game. We provided them with these ground rules: the single avatar

featured in the prototype should be a trans non-binary youth of color and the trans-oppression they experience in the game cannot be stereotypically attributed to racialized individuals or groups. This is what the MDM team came up with:

Aja is a trans non-binary South Asian/Euro-Canadian, originally from Kleinberg Ontario, who moves out to Vancouver to stay with their Aunt Marta and her partner, Luce, when things at home get too tough because of Aja's Euro-Canadian intolerant father. Aunt Marta is the sister of Aja's South Asian-Canadian mother and offers Aja a refuge from a harsh and potentially dangerous home environment.



As we navigated the limitations on time and resources and gaps in knowledge between the MDM team and the PI and RA over the semester, the game significantly got away from the Gender Vector team's vision: the PI and RA allowed ourselves to be convinced to accept plot devices that are unequivocally inappropriate for a youth-centered game. These included: the hosting of a large welcoming party at Aunt Marta's apartment upon Aja's arrival; the theft of Aja's notebook from the bedroom while they slept; and a creepy anonymous texter contacting Aja to prompt them to go on a scavenger hunt in order to recover their stolen notebook. The MDM team's concerns about the playability and "fun factor" of the game conflicted with the research team's focus on ensuring that the game reflected the genuine experiences of trans youth without inflicting additional trauma. The PI and RA pushed back on the MDM's initial upscale design of Aunt Marta's apartment, shifting it to signal modest rather than high socioeconomic

status, but failed to address issues of safety for Aja and for youth playing the game. Of crucial importance, however, our project had a built-in check on mistakes like this, in the form of the YAC.

The YAC tested the prototype as a group at the MDM team's institution in April 2016. Two Research Assistants interviewed the YAC members (n=6) individually and then collectively as a focus group about their impressions of the prototype immediately after the testing session. These relatively short – 10-20 minutes – interviews and the focus group discussion – 30 minutes – were audio recorded and transcribed by the Research Assistants. The Research Team applied a coding scheme established for narrative interviews (see below) without revision.

After exploring Prototype 1 in a computer lab setting, the YAC individually and collectively pronounced it to be a complete failure. YAC members immediately focused on the violation and threats involved in plot devices relating to the stolen notebook and what several referred to as the “creepy texter.” As we have written elsewhere:

[...] this pronouncement did not shock [the PI and RA]; rather, with some relief, we were forced to confront our own complicity in creating an unsafe virtual environment via self-silencing in our collaborations with the digital media students who had the technical skills we lacked (Travers et al., 2019).

The YAC informed us that in our process of creating a game with the goal of increasing safety for trans youth we had actually done the opposite. In consequence, the Research Team scrapped all but the opening storyline of the game and started over. We address the complex process of working with the MDM cohort to develop Prototype 1, the results of YAC testing, and a change in work process to develop Prototype 2 in a previous article (Travers et al., 2019). In this publication, we identify factors that interfered with our accountability to trans youth and corrective strategies to improve it. The presence of an empowered YAC was key to learning this and to our eventual success in developing the more successful Prototype 2. Members of the YAC individually and collectively demonstrated resilience by refusing a prototype that made them feel unsafe and unseen.

Feedback from the YAC prompted the PI and RA, with input from the other two research team members, to critically examine the context of and process whereby we silenced ourselves around discomfort with the inappropriate aspects of the prototype. We concluded that gaps in knowledge, gratitude to the MDM students, all of whom were cisgender, for their willingness to support trans people, white guilt (the PI and RA are white while three of the five members of the MDM team were women of color and four out of five were cis women with the remaining member a white cis man) and feminine socialization into niceness and conflict-avoidance were factors that caused us to go along to get along. The PI and RA were also

conscious that the design team needed to produce a product to showcase to future employers and were experiencing tremendous stress about this during the semester.

Feedback from the YAC ultimately changed everything about the game: the premise of the stolen notebook and everything that followed this plot device was completely abandoned and we began a whole new design in the context of a new working relationship with a different team of digital media students. In essence, the intervention of the youth forced us to scrap the first model of the game and start over with a radically different relationship between the PI and RA and the game developers. The YAC were sufficiently empowered to talk back to the Research Team, resulting in radical changes to the development of the video game prototype and to the work process of the Research Team.

Video game prototype 2: Development and testing

The fact that the YAC was empowered enough to sharply criticize the first prototype speaks to the project's success in establishing and facilitating the YAC. This critical rupture in the development process resulted in the PI and RA becoming much more deliberate and controlling in the next phase of prototype design and development, and hence more accountable to the purpose of the project. This was done primarily by establishing a different working relationship with MDM students in building Prototype 2. The PI and PM hired 3 new MDM students, paid them an hourly wage, and oversaw every aspect of development and design. The PI and Project Manager (PM) began the working relationship with the premise that the MDM students worked *for* us and while we structured our working relationship with them on fair wages, respect, and consideration, the PI and PM firmly took the reins and drove the work. This working relationship resulted in the development of an entirely new game. We retained the same opening storyline, but the welcoming party, the stolen notebook and the 'creepy texter' scenes and plot devices were eliminated. Prototype 2 has three scenes⁵:

In Scene 1 – Aja arrives at Aunt Marta's and is greeted by her and her partner Luce. Aja is then offered food and made to feel welcome. The revised pilot stage of the video game featured three gameplay scenarios that re-create the lived experiences of youth trauma, the systemic vulnerabilities trans youth navigate in domestic, school and wider public spheres, and their resilience and agency in striving to make their lives more livable. One story line, for example, explored the experience of a trans youth navigating Vancouver's Sky Train metro system.

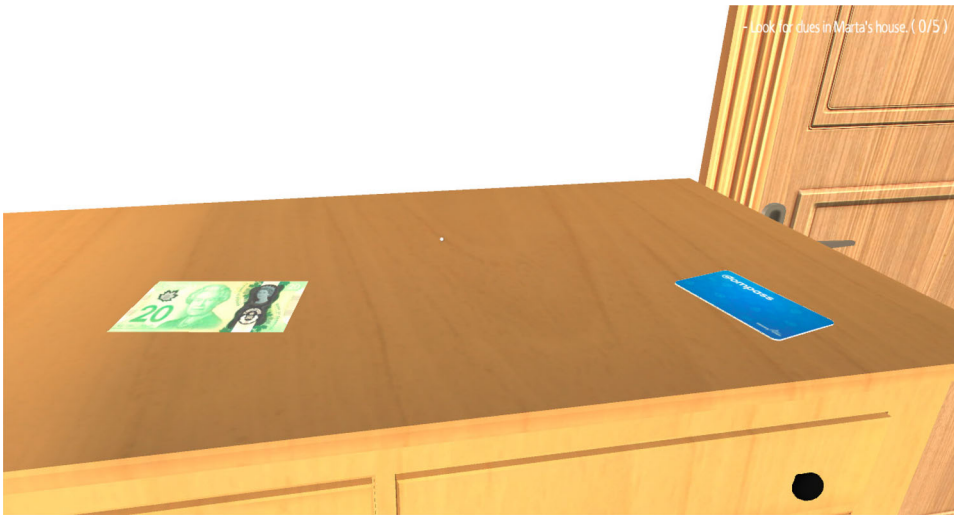
The welcoming scene at Aunt Marta's apartment



After being shown around the apartment and to their bedroom, Aja goes to sleep.



When they awake in the morning, there's a note from Aunt Marta suggesting things to do, \$20 and a transit pass.



In Scene 2, Aja is exploring the transit system. They enter a train and find the pointed stares of passengers anxiety-provoking and are fearful of potential transphobia.



Aja considers ways to cope with their anxiety.



In Scene 3, Aja arrives at an LGBTQ drop-in center in the region where they are greeted by an adult mentor and meet other trans and queer youth whilst learning about resources and the group's activities.



Intergenerational Workshop to Test Prototype 2

In May of 2018, the Gender Vectors team held a half day workshop for youth, service providers and adult allies to test Prototype 2. By this time, the members of the original YAC had fallen away, a phenomenon not unusual for people of this age as their circumstances often change so fast, so a new recruitment round was undertaken. Two youth were specifically recruited and trained to be facilitators and they conducted the post-game

testing conversations with the YAC, generating further data. This second YAC was larger (n = 15) and ranged in age from 14 to 18, from primarily middle-class backgrounds, just under half of whom were racialized as non-white, including Asian-Canadian, Black-Canadian, and 'mixed race'.⁶ Community members (n = 11) were also recruited from the networks previously used to recruit youth and included elementary and high school teachers, youth workers and adult members of the trans/queer community. Two parents also attended, one of whom is transgender. This workshop was structured to enable the youth to arrive first and test Prototype 2 in a closed computer lab, with several Research Assistants on call to assist with the game and to observe the process. The youth were then relocated to another room and divided into two small groups to debrief the game prototype. Each group was provided with a trained (and paid) peer facilitator and a Research Assistant notetaker. While youth were debriefing, adults took a turn in the lab trying out the prototype. Adults were then placed in small groups with a Research Assistant facilitator and a notetaker to debrief the prototype while the youth took a lunch break. We employed two MA students to take detailed notes of all post gaming discussions and the inter-generational dialog. These notes were integrated and organized into themes by the PI and cross-checked by the Research Team.

Youth attending the workshop were generally very positive about the game as indicated by the following statements:

- *“A great way for adults to see things from our perspective”*
- *“This is such an awesome idea and I have had some of these experiences!”*
- *“I loved this game! I related to the situations”*
- *“It really shows how it feels to be ‘othered’ in these spaces.”*

The suggestions YAC members made to improve and further develop the game in terms of both technical aspects and storyline speak to their expertise and thoughtfulness. As gamers, many identified ways to make the game more user friendly; as trans youth living in challenging contexts, they suggested additional scenes to make oppression and opportunities for resistance visible. While talking about particular scenes in the game, YAC members frequently brought up their own experiences and shared strategies for handling challenges they faced. They also reported on feelings of pride and accomplishment with regard to occasions when they had successfully advocated for themselves with peers and adults and shared strategies they employed to mitigate the impact of trans oppression. None of our interview subjects or YAC members complained about *being* trans; rather, they complained about the difficulties involved in navigating trans-exclusive

institutions and trans-oppressive social settings. Several of the trans youth who participated in the study expressed deep joy and satisfaction about being courageous enough to resist normative gender identities.

Adult allies and service providers also had valuable feedback about the game as the following sample indicates:

- *“This could be an incredible tool for those of us working with youth to really understand the barriers they face daily in a way we will never be able to see”*
- *“Amazing idea very creative – showcasing trans experience is awesome – to help with progress and making of it”*
- *“We need to literally be in their shoes to understand what it is like to navigate from their vantage point”*

While positive about the potential for the game, one service provider made a very pointed and valuable criticism, saying:

“I felt that going to a house, getting \$20 from an aunt, having food on the table – does not represent the experiences of street youth, many trans youth have access to NONE of those things. It’s very important to consider socio-economic status and how that plays out and to include youth who have access to even less.”

After lunch, with the exception of the two peer facilitators who had been hired to report to the group as a whole, YAC members were given the option of leaving for the day or staying and participating in the whole group dialog, in accordance with their own time constraints/comfort levels. In addition to the two peer facilitators, two of the youth chose to stay and participate. The whole group dialog was facilitated by the PI and recorded by two RA notetakers. It began with reports from the peer facilitators on feedback from youth about the game prototype and developed into a general discussion. This discussion included brainstorming about how to show the diversity of trans kids’ experiences in terms of varying socioeconomic status. One suggestion that generated a great deal of excitement was a “choose your own adventure” style of game, where players could literally step into different pairs of shoes to walk the path of various trans kids forced to leave home. Four paths were generated via this discussion: foster care; couch surfing; on the streets; and Aunt Marta’s house. Our general observation about this closing dialog, substantiated by the notes taken, was that youth did a lot of talking about the challenges and triumphs in their lives, and adults did a lot of appreciative listening; a remarkable and transformative dynamic in terms of fostering youth resilience in itself, given the anti-youth ageism and hierarchy and mutual suspicion that often characterizes multigenerational spaces.

Discussion

The goal of the study was to combine social action research and the development of a video game prototype to identify and powerfully communicate the factors that contribute to or undermine the resilience of trans youth in the region. While we are working to obtain funding to build the complete video game, the process of working to develop Prototypes 1 and 2 supports several conclusions related to trans youth and resilience and to social action research with trans youth.

First, as a result of interviews with trans youth and research activities with the YAC, we determined that factors that promote resilience include parental support, supportive behavior from adults in positions of institutional authority, peer support, access to wealth, stable housing and food security, the ability to move to a new school to ‘start over,’ access to mental health supports, and access to affirming healthcare where desired. The attitudes and behavior of adults in positions of institutional authority over trans youth, we found, are at least as important as formal policies in support of transgender youth. School policies that support transgender kids are important but they are only as effective as the adults who interpret and implement them. We observed a correlation between the existence of formal policies and the *likelihood* of supportive school personnel but this is far from absolute. Where policies are in place, kids typically need parental support (a variable factor shaping trans kids’ resilience) to push the school to meet policy requirements. Having policies in place does not mean that school personnel are provided with sufficient training and resources to realize the policy.

Second, factors that undermine resilience included peer antagonism, unsupportive school personnel, poverty, racism/colonialism, unstable housing, food insecurity, poor access to mental health support, no access to affirming health care where desired and being non-binary in a binary world. In keeping with critical literature on transgender children and youth (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Meadow, 2018; Travers, 2018), we observed that the challenges trans youth experience and their potential for resilience are mediated by other vectors of vulnerability and security (race, gender, Indigeneity, class, citizenship, disability).

Third, in spite of documenting numerous hardships, many trans youth experience pleasure and joy related to their non-normative gender identities. Reducing the experiences of trans youth to trauma and risk (Hillier et al., 2019) contributes to the invisibility of trans youth lives.

And fourth, trans youth in our study demonstrated resilience through their willingness to participate in our research as a means to advocate for themselves and each other. YAC members and youth interview subjects clearly demonstrated capacity and resilience via their participation in our

project and via the discussions they had with the researchers and with each other, in the case of the YAC, about strategies they adopted for managing trans-negative environments. When given opportunities to be seen and heard, trans youth are keen to teach adult allies how gendered environments pose difficulties for them and what changes are necessary to lessen or eradicate these difficulties.

We also learned some very important lessons about research with trans youth in general. This includes the need for researchers working with trans youth to attend to factors that will facilitate or limit their capacity to participate; this includes finding ways to work with and support the most vulnerable trans youth – those who are nonbinary; racialized/Indigenous; poor; undocumented; street involved; unsupported by parents; use English as an additional language; living with a disability and/or have significant mental health struggles, related or unrelated to trans identity. If we do not find ways to learn from a diverse cross section of trans youth, only the life experiences and needs of the most privileged trans youth will be represented.

Trans youth must be structurally empowered within the research process to influence change agendas if policy and institutional change are to be of benefit to them. After testing Prototype 1, the Gender Vector's team realized the importance of instituting an ongoing reporting structure between the PI and RA and the rest of the research team during prototype development to ensure accountability to trans youth and to strengthen Gender Vector's control of authorship of the game. This was brought to our attention by our YAC's responses when testing the Prototype 1. Their empowerment ensured that we went back to the drawing board and changed our work process to maintain more accountability to trans youth.

This article contributes to the literature on resilience and transgender youth by documenting our project's engagement with trans youth in knowledge production and knowledge-sharing. The Gender Vectors project's process of participatory knowledge generation, game prototype design, and dialog contributes an innovative model for scholarly and public policy research. But most importantly, our work with trans youth contributes to their resilience: by engaging local communities in the larger social project of changing environments that are harmful to trans youth and facilitating connections among trans youth themselves and between trans youth, adult allies and service providers.

Notes

1. Jacob von Uexkull was a German biologist who argued that our knowledge about any living creature can only be understood by studying their *umwelten* or 'self-worlds'

2. For an analysis of social justice and gaming, see Gray & Leonard, 2018. For examples of games, see Third World Farmer: a simulation to make you think! <http://www.3rdworldfarmer.com>; Darfur is dying <http://www.darfurisdying.com/>; SOS slaves: changing the trafficking game, <http://www.sosslaves.org/>
3. See Dys4ia, <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/591565>; Transitory, <http://aliendovecote.com/uploads/twine/others/transitory.html>
4. See Queen at Arms; One Night Hot Springs and A Closed World, <https://store.steampowered.com/curator/26898915-Trans-tastic-Games/>
5. Character avatars in the prototype remain undeveloped due to the cost involved. Developers purchased models from Unity platform which is very limited. We are in the process of applying for major grants to provide adequate funds to develop multiple scenes with appropriate racial and body-type diversity.
6. Self-defined

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