Affirmation and Safety: An Intersectional Analysis of Trans and Nonbinary Youths in Quebec

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This article presents the results of a combined grounded theory and community-based participatory action research project with 54 trans and nonbinary youths (TNBY) residing in the province of Quebec, Canada. The project includes two important sensitizing concepts: intersectionality and recognition. In the research, *intersectionality* was defined as an approach that explores how people navigate manifold identities (class, race, disability, and so on) in the context of structural oppression. Authors applied an intersectional lens to the recruitment of research participants through an iterative, community-based process, and to the analysis of the oppressive structures that negatively influence the well-being of TNBY and the specific factors that enable TNBY to thrive. Drawing on Honneth's concept of recognition, authors argue for a contextualized, dynamic, and relational understanding of how well-being is produced. Specifically, they show two presenting needs: one for affirmation and one for safety, access to which springs from resources of privilege that emerge in the environment in which young people are embedded and from which they self-advocate. Understanding the dynamic relationship between these two needs and how they shift according to context is an important component of applying an intersectional approach to supporting TNBY in social work settings.

KEY WORDS: *community-based participatory action research; grounded theory; intersectionality; transgender; youths*

To be young and transgender in North American society today is—in and of itself—an indicator of strength. As Shelton, Wagaman, Small, and Abramovich (2018) recently argued, trans and nonbinary youths (TNBY)—that is, young people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth—require a reservoir of fortitude to navigate the transphobic environments in which they are embedded. Although we know much about the challenges TNBY face, less is understood about how they overcome them (Bry, Mustanski, Garofalo, & Burns, 2018; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011) or the strategies they deploy while navigating the impact of multiple forms of oppression and exclusion. Because of the diversity of experience among TNBY, it is critical to explore how race, class, ability, and language, among other factors, intersect with the ways that youths navigate transphobia and shape the strategies that they deploy in the world. This article takes up intersectionality as both a method and a form of analysis to do just that.

In this article, we present the results of a combined grounded theory (GT) and community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) project with 54 TNBY residing in the province of Quebec, Canada. Our project includes two important sensitizing concepts: intersectionality and recognition. We define *intersectionality* as an approach that explores how people navigate manifold identities (class, race, disability, and so on) in the context of structural oppression. An intersectional lens was applied to the recruitment of research participants through an iterative, community-based process. We also applied this lens to explore oppressive structures that negatively influence the well-being of TNBY and the specific factors that enable TNBY to thrive. Drawing on Honneth's (1996) concept of recognition, we argue for a contextualized, dynamic, and relational understanding of how well-being is produced. Specifically, we show two presenting needs: one for affirmation and one for safety. Access to affirmation and safety springs from resources of privilege that emerge in the

environment in which young people are embedded and from which they self-advocate. Understanding the dynamic relationship between these two needs and how they shift according to context is an important component of applying an intersectional approach to supporting TNBY in social work settings.

TNBY EXPERIENCES OF OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

Although most studies of trans resistance and resiliency draw from larger samples of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths and include only a small subsample of TNBY, TNBY generally face higher levels of adversity than cisgender, sexual-minority youths. Indeed, TNBY are at specific risk of experiencing abuse, violence, and mental health challenges (Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018; Veale, Watson, Peter, & Saewyc, 2017); homelessness (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015); and suicide (Toomey, Syvertsen, & Shramko, 2018). Studies have suggested that the difficulties TNBY experience are not intrinsically linked to their feelings about their gender identity; rather, they are the product of living in negative social contexts characterized by discrimination, violence, and nonrecognition as TNBY (Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016; de Vries, Steensma, Cohen-Kettenis, VanderLaan, & Zucker, 2016; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018). Conversely, environments that recognize and affirm TNBY gender are identified as key protective factors and linked to improved well-being (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018; Veale et al., 2017). It is notable that strong parental support has been shown to reduce the risk of suicide among TNBY by 93% (Travers, Bauer, Pyne, & Bradley, 2012). Research has also shown that TNBY have the capacity to live openly as their affirmed gender with supportive parents and are as healthy as cisgender (non–TNBY) youths and only marginally more anxious than their peers (Durwood, McLaughlin, & Olson, 2017). Parental support also plays a major role in facilitating access to trans-affirmative resources and medical care (Pullen Sansfaçon, Medico, Gelly, Kirichenko, & Suerick Gullick, forthcoming).

In this article, we define *resilience* as the inner and outer resources that enable youths not only to resist or survive challenging environments, but also to thrive. Although it is difficult to identify patterns of risk and resilience among vulnerable youths

(Ungar & Hadfield, 2019), it is important to consider both the environment and the individual (Boden, Sanders, Munford, & Liebenberg, 2018). Undergoing a personal growth process allows some TNBY to strengthen their ability to manage transphobic experiences and hostile environments, which are all parts of developing strategies of resilience (Wagaman, Shelton, Carter, Stewart, & Cavaliere, 2019). However, the environment has an even greater influence on resilience than individual characteristics (Ungar, 2017). Examples of these environmental factors include the family (Olson & Gülgöz, 2018; Singh, 2013), friendships (Singh, 2013), and affirming schools and neighborhoods (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018). Resilience thus takes shape over time and in relation to other factors.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Our study incorporates a combination of CBPAR (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012) and GT methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1991), and it is the first Quebec-based, in-depth, qualitative research to examine how experiences of oppression and mechanisms of resistance are interlinked and influence life outcomes. Whereas traditional applications of GT tend to ignore the wider theoretical literature in their analysis, more recent applications allow the use of sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2017). *Sensitizing concepts* are ideas that provide guidelines for research rather than a fixed theoretical framework (Bowden, 2006). Considering that social contexts and relational ties shape TNBY's experience and their capacity to develop resilience and resist oppression, we chose to draw on recognition and intersectionality as sensitizing concepts from the outset of the study.

An intersectional approach invites researchers to attend to context, converging sites of discrimination and vulnerability, and their combined effects as they operate in relation to one another. Our intersectional analysis centers a process approach by which we "place primary attention on context and comparison at the intersections as revealing structural processes organizing power" (Choo & Ferree, 2010, p. 134). Our analysis also draws on the social justice origins of intersectional research, an approach that Collins (2015) described as a critical praxis. As Spade's (2013) intersectional critique of resistance argues, for example, neither marginalization nor precarity can be resolved through single-axis issues of legal reform, but rather must

be addressed as part of intersecting systems of power that require, in turn, collective, intersectional struggle. Hence, we built an intersectional perspective not only into our analysis, but also into the methodological approach informing the study, as is evident in many of the comments made by the young people interviewed.

The concept of recognition developed by Honneth (1996) draws attention to three areas of social life in which recognition can be produced or is lacking: intimate and personal relationships, the state (laws and rights), and social interactions. A focus on these areas can help identify where factors of oppression and resistance may emerge. A person who feels positively recognized by others at an intimate, social, and legal level can more easily achieve self-realization and self-esteem (Honneth, 1996), which we understand as well-being in this study. However, whereas lack of recognition may be detrimental to well-being, it can also lead to the development of resistance strategies (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). By allowing a more complex analysis of recognition within the three sites described by Honneth (intimate, legal, and social), intersectionality grounds our understanding of the development of self-realization and well-being. Together, these two sensitizing concepts—intersectionality and recognition—framed our data collection and analysis.
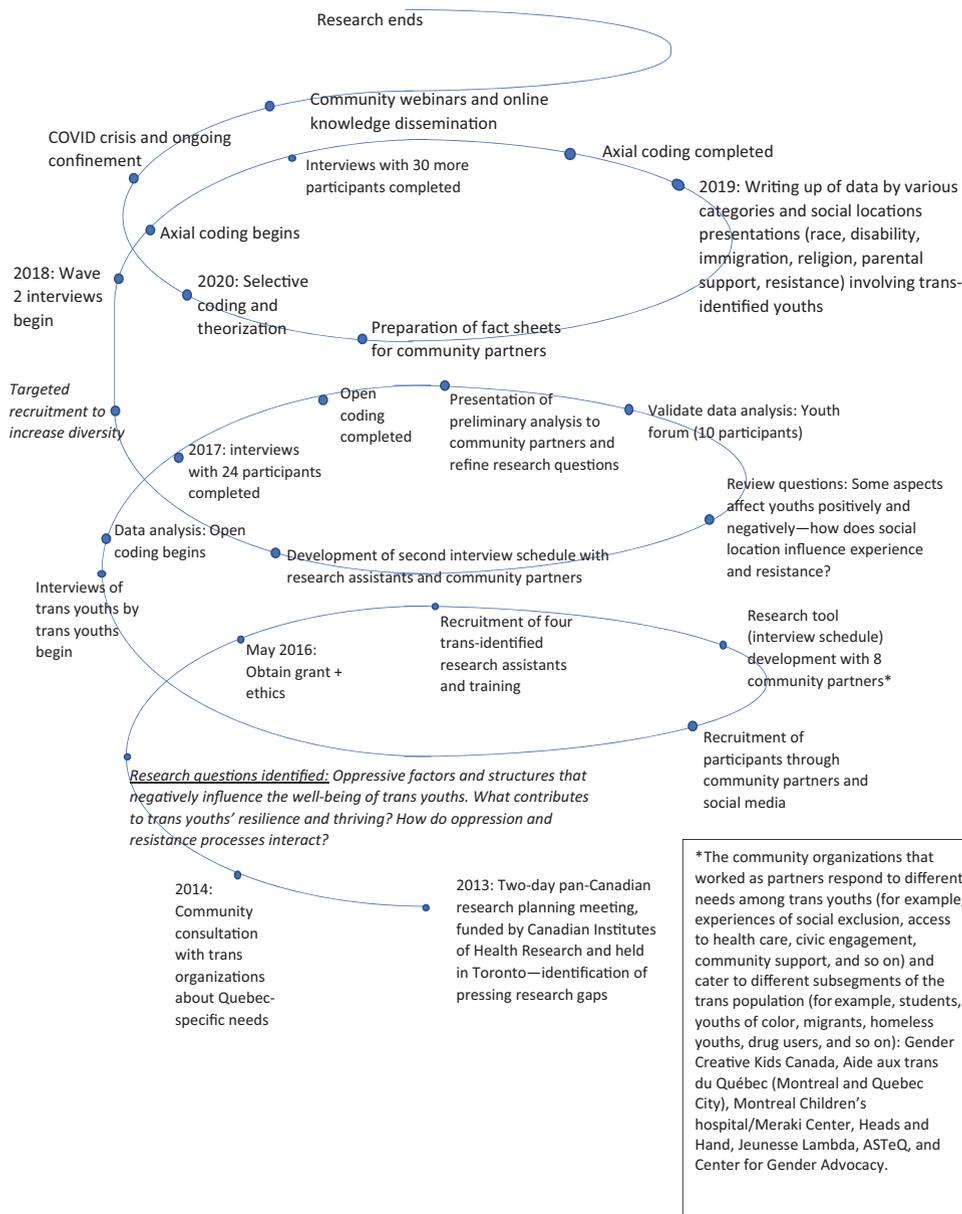
The research process began in 2013 at a meeting of trans and cis professionals and researchers funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and was followed by community consultations with Quebec-specific organizations working with trans youths. Aligned with the principles of democratic knowledge production, our combined GT and CBPAR methodology included participatory and simultaneous data collection and analysis (Ayala, 2009; Torre et al., 2012), which ensured that the understanding of trans youths informed data collection and analysis and encouraged an iterative exchange (Torre et al., 2012). Data collection and analysis were primarily conducted by TNB research assistants and involved a process of feedback and knowledge co-construction with additional members of the wider trans community. This process also helped the team verify emerging findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Figure 1 shows the research process of GT and CBPAR as applied to the project.

We conducted two waves of data collection and feedback activities with communities of trans youths and organizations that serve them. For each wave, we used a sociodemographic questionnaire to gather information on social identities (gender, race, disability, income) that was followed by an in-depth, semistructured interview. During the first wave, we asked 24 TNBY to share their experiences of oppression and resistance. Interviews were transcribed, and the data were analyzed through open coding. The analysis of the first wave informed the themes and questions explored in the second wave. We also sought feedback on our analysis of the first wave during a knowledge exchange activity with TNBY. For the second wave, we interviewed an additional 30 TNBY and asked them about their experiences of well-being and oppression; how they navigate difficult situations; the quality of their relationships with friends, lovers, and family members; and how these factors affect their lives.

In both waves, participants were recruited following a logic of diversity sampling around axes that included gender expression and identity, age, race and ethnocultural background, and class affiliation. The themes that emerged in wave 1 directed us toward differences emerging through social location (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). With the support of social media campaigns and community partners, we explicitly sought to recruit Indigenous youths and young people of color, youths with an immigration trajectory, and transfeminine youths to better capture how social location affects resistance of oppressive structures (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018). A total of 54 interviews (38 in French and 16 in English) were conducted with youths ages 15 to 25 years. At the time of the interviews, 41 participants resided in the region of Montreal and 13 lived in other Quebec cities. Most ($n = 47$) participants were Canadian citizens at the time of the interviews, 44 from birth. A total of 38 described themselves as White and 14 identified as non–White, including five who identified as Indigenous or two-spirit. Asked to self-define their gender identity, 18 identified on the spectrum of transmasculine, 14 as transfeminine, and 20 as nonbinary. Finally, 72% of participants self-identified as having a disability, whether physical, sensory, or related to learning or mental health. Ultimately, the sampling strategy used for this project was successful at recruiting diverse participants, allowing for a robust analysis of the interaction between oppression and resistance.

Figure 1: Grounded Theory and Community-Based Participatory Action Research Process

Research ends

Community webinars and online knowledge dissemination

COVID crisis and ongoing confinement

Interviews with 30 more participants completed

Axial coding completed

2019: Writing up of data by various categories and social locations presentations (race, disability, immigration, religion, parental support, resistance) involving trans-identified youths

Axial coding begins

2018: Wave 2 interviews begin

2020: Selective coding and theorization

Preparation of fact sheets for community partners

Targeted recruitment to increase diversity

Open coding completed

Presentation of preliminary analysis to community partners and refine research questions

Validate data analysis: Youth forum (10 participants)

2017: interviews with 24 participants completed

Review questions: Some aspects affect youths positively and negatively—how does social location influence experience and resistance?

Data analysis: Open coding begins

Development of second interview schedule with research assistants and community partners

Interviews of trans youths by trans youths begin

May 2016: Obtain grant + ethics

Recruitment of four trans-identified research assistants and training

Research tool (interview schedule) development with 8 community partners*

Recruitment of participants through community partners and social media

Research questions identified: Oppressive factors and structures that negatively influence the well-being of trans youths. What contributes to trans youths' resilience and thriving? How do oppression and resistance processes interact?

2014: Community consultation with trans organizations about Quebec-specific needs

2013: Two-day pan-Canadian research planning meeting, funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research and held in Toronto—identification of pressing research gaps

*The community organizations that worked as partners respond to different needs among trans youths (for example, experiences of social exclusion, access to health care, civic engagement, community support, and so on) and cater to different subsegments of the trans population (for example, students, youths of color, migrants, homeless youths, drug users, and so on): Gender Creative Kids Canada, Aide aux trans du Québec (Montreal and Quebec City), Montreal Children's hospital/Meraki Center, Heads and Hand, Jeunesse Lambda, ASTeQ, and Center for Gender Advocacy.

Project leads undertook axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1991). Through constant comparison, we examined how categories that emerged in the process (for example, resistance strategies, specific privileges, family experiences, well-being experiences, experiences of oppression and violence) compared between and within groups of TNBY according to their various social identities, allowing for patterns and variations to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). As illustrated in Figure 1, the COVID crisis and provincial health directives required that we adjust our final community consultations. Consequently, we organized a series of webinars in which community members were invited to comment and discuss the results of the project.

RESULTS

Legal Recognition and Its Limits: Quebec's Rapidly Changing Context

Conditions for trans people in Quebec have changed rapidly in recent years. In 2016, at the time of wave 1 interviews, Quebec added gender identity and expression as prohibited grounds for discrimination to its human rights code. And in 2017, Canada added new legislation to protect gender identity and expression. Quebec also recently undertook a series of sweeping legislative reforms including the removal of gender-affirming surgery preconditions and age limits for young people to alter their identification documents.

These ground-breaking changes, including a recent Quebec Superior Court ruling (*Centre for Gender Advocacy v. Attorney General of Quebec*, 2021), were spearheaded by trans and nonbinary people and student- and community-led organizations. As in other contexts, marginalization and resistance—experienced at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race—acted as driving forces for social movement participation (Labelle, 2019). Indeed, Quebec's recent multifaceted legal mobilization for trans recognition stands in sharp contrast to both the quests for legal equality of the early 2000s, which often privileged White, cis, middle-class people (Spade, 2013) and the transphobic legislative atmosphere that deepened significantly in the United States in the wake of former President Trump's election in 2016 (Chan, 2018). However positive these developments in Quebec have been, they are insufficient in and of themselves to address the daily expressions of transphobia, which manifests through multiple forms of oppression. This background is critical for understanding the experiences of some participants who, while noting improvements, were nonetheless deeply critical of the capacity of legal reform to improve trans well-being at the time of interview. (In the following direct quotes, we have retained labels used by the young people themselves to describe their identity, including gender or other descriptive label. We have also respected their pronouns in discussing their experiences. Pseudonyms were given.) Zoe (21-year-old White nonbinary woman whose parents were described as not understanding her) said,

> I feel that as far as laws and charters are concerned, it's getting better. At the same time,

I feel that there is still prejudice. . . . I mean, I'm not visible myself, so maybe there are some kinds of violence that I don't have to go through, but I get the impression that what I see around me, it's all about prejudice, comments, forms of microaggression, like . . . I told you, at the dentist or on the bus, there are lots of jokes about trans people.

Gaps in trans protection continue to make life difficult for youths under the age of 18 years. For example, despite the 2021 Superior Court ruling, minors continue to need a letter from a professional to change their gender marker. Moreover, in other cases, legal reforms may have little impact when one's life conditions are shaped by racism and poverty (Spade, 2013). This theme was particularly salient among racialized and Indigenous youths, in a context in which the ongoing impact of colonization and racism have yet to be fully confronted, much less addressed. (For example, Tourki, Lee, Baril, Hébert, and Pullen Sansfaçon [2018] showed that some of the barriers migrant TNBY face are specific to reduced legal protections, but also how some of those barriers differ between groups of migrants, for example, racialized and nonracialized trans migrants.) According to Dakota, a 23-year-old Indigenous two-spirit, trans woman who is physically disabled, has a mental health diagnosis, and has no parental support,

> Racism is the most, biggest impacting force, and it's the main cause of my problems, the main cause of . . . It's the main cause of everything! It's even the main cause of the transmisogyny. So basically racism is the biggest thing, and then with poverty . . . because if I had a shit ton of money, then people wouldn't say shit, but I would be able to buy my way out of it more or less. More or less, I would still experience racism . . . but I would have more resources to combat it. But right now, I'm so broke that one single bad month could put me back in the streets.

Even in its fairest forms, the impact of legal recognition is still limited. Youths reported many forms of oppression, materializing in multiple contexts including at school, at work, in families, in

medical and other institutional contexts, through social representations (for example, in the media), and in public spaces such as bathrooms. In many cases, while gender identity was identified as an oppressive factor, other forms of oppression mediated the potential for experiencing well-being. Specifically, the presence of disabilities (neurosensory, physical, or related to mental health) was identified as an important factor that created even greater vulnerability. Among the 30 TNBY interviewed during the second wave of data collection, 22 declared a disability (diagnosed or not) and 15 said that their disability greatly affected their ability to work or study full-time. The combined impact of gender identity and disability had an even greater impact on the capacity of youths to navigate and resist oppressive environments, and on their experience of transness. For example, Sophie, a nonbinary trans woman with a diagnosis of depression (21 years old, White, with limited parental support), explained that her mental health challenges affected the way she perceives herself and expresses her gender identity:

> Related to my experience of being trans, those negative thoughts, they affect my vision of myself ... I have so little energy for anything that I am never able ... I don't know, to find the energy to take care of myself and become a little bit more cis-passing. Because, this is something I aim for, to become a little bit more cis-passing ... There are some aspects of myself that brings me dysphoria ... I don't have the energy to shave, but that makes me so dysphoric, fuck, that is so difficult.

Intersecting forms of oppression thus create conditions of real hardship. But whereas some environments are so oppressive that young people are consequently endangered, other related but slightly less oppressive environments enable young people to engage in resistance. Moreover, some forms of privilege—located within the same dimension of oppression (for example, having a disability that is not visible) or stemming from other social dimensions (for example, being disabled and a White, educated male)—also create opportunities to resist. The intersectional nature of oppression and privilege, especially as it manifests through key relationships, is thus an important key for understanding how young people navigate their environments.

Navigating the Impact of Intersecting Forms of Oppression and Privilege

Our analysis of the data shows that intersecting forms of privilege and oppression profoundly shaped the experience of the TNBY in our sample. Indeed, and similar to the findings of Wagaman et al. (2019), our data show how social and individual factors stabilize and destabilize TNBY. As Ambre and Ari, both from the Middle East, explained, their experiences of racism have been very much socially located:

> My race, it depends ... like my ethnic origin ... I don't know ... Where I live, I don't really have any problem with it because everyone comes from a similar origin ... But more broadly, yes [racism affects me] ... But in my direct circle, it is not a major problem. (Ambre, 21 years old, nonbinary trans woman, low parental support)

> Sometimes, I don't even want to tell [I am from the Middle East] when someone ask me "Where do you come from?" because I know I have White passing privilege, and this allows me to navigate more easily than other people. (Ari, 21 years old, nonbinary transmasculine person, strong family support)

The context of this interaction and what many participants referred to as "passing privilege"—whether White-passing or cis-passing privilege—emerged as an important theme for youths, some of whom explained that it could mitigate their overall experience of oppression. (*Cis-passing* refers to the capacity of a trans person to be read as cisgender, not trans. Some criticize the term for reinforcing cisnormativity and discrediting trans identities [Serano, 2007]. We want to draw attention to the fact that young people are using this expression, and that it was explicitly described as a strategy by research participants.) Similarly, other forms of privilege, such as having a higher social status, being transmasculine, or being able-bodied, emerged as protective factors, but not for every youth. Javier, a migrant youth from South America, explained the dynamic as follows:

I do think it's important to acknowledge one's privileges. Like, I'll say, I'll pass as White and that allows me certain privileges.... But, yeah, I guess, in [country of origin], I do have class privileges, but that doesn't mean, like, my parents are paying for my transition. (22 years old, South American Metis, noncitizen, mitigated parental support)

The context of interaction is also evident when viewed through the lens of age. Young people are sometimes seen as less able to make their own decisions, and whereas some younger youths benefit from parental support, which confers important privileges (emotional, financial, and access to other resources), others may experience reduced options as is evident in the comparison between the experiences of Olivier and Marlie:

Just for the blockers, at the beginning, at $90 a month, if I hadn't had a job and my parents didn't pay me for them, I wouldn't have been able to get them.... The first sex therapist I went to see, it was still expensive per week. And they paid for it, and my mother's insurance, too. So, I'm lucky to have parents who have money. (Olivier, 17 years old, White trans man)

In contrast, Marlie explained,

If my parents were actually help[ing] me, like, go through things, like hormones, or stuff like that, I would be probably, like, bring my happiness a lot like higher I guess.... My mom kind of didn't really care. (15 years old, White trans woman)

These examples illustrate the deeply contextual experience of oppression and demonstrate that even within different spheres of oppression, some privileges may emerge as protective factors. The experiences shared by participants illustrate the importance of understanding the relational (Glenn, 2000) and dynamic intersection of oppressive factors, not their sum (Mullaly & West, 2017). As we turn to an examination of how youths resist oppressive contexts and situations, we do so with a close eye on this relational intersection of privilege and oppression.

Resisting Oppression

Our research shows that youths actively resist oppression based not only on gender identity, but also on other social identities. Young participants described how they defended themselves by deploying various strategies to protect their well-being and, sometimes, to improve the well-being of their community. Emerging as a continuum of strategies rather than distinctive categories, resistance strategies deployed by TNBY were numerous and adaptive insofar as they evolved or changed depending on the confronted situation. During the interviews, it became clear that all youths, without exception, engaged in strategies that promoted their sense of self and their sense of community belonging. What differed between individuals, however, was the types of strategies used and how participants' varied experiences of social inequalities affected the strategies they chose.

Affirmation Strategies. Most TNBY engage actively in what we call "affirmation strategies," such as education and awareness raising. These strategies are a way for youths to affirm themselves as trans individuals and become more visible and recognized in society. Affirmation strategies can take different forms: answering questions, educating people in institutional and community settings, redirecting people to resources, creating groups, and correcting people when they are misgendered or say problematic things. Many participants had sought to educate others, a strategy described as more efficient than other active strategies (for example, participating in demonstrations or direct confrontations) because people are less likely to become defensive.

I'll give an example.... There've been transphobic seminars [at the university]. I was there, I put myself out there physically with other activists I know, just sitting there, and being there. I spoke up.... Yes, I'm a woman. Yes, I'm a feminist. And no, I don't agree with you. What you're saying is violent to me. (Zoe, 21 years old, White nonbinary woman)

Transmasculine, White, educated, and passing participants reported that it was easier for them to be seen and heard than it was for others:

Lots of cis, like in certain formal situations, are talking about—they won't go into ques-

tion[ing] me about [gender identity]. They'll just kind of be confused, but then … listen to me more. People give me more talking space now that I pass as male, and it's very strange, and it's noticeable, and it's just like, how awfully fucked the society is with that. (Greer, 20 years old, mixed-race trans man, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia diagnoses, no parental support)

Educating others can be exhausting, regardless of one's privileges, and downright dangerous for people experiencing multiple forms of oppression. One two-spirit participant, Dakota, stopped educating people about trans issues after becoming the target of hate groups: "I got tired of that and denouncing injustices. I used to speak in public a lot in the USA, and that's part of why I started getting targeted by White supremacists and the government." Dakota's narrative highlights the threat of racist violence on her advocacy over time. It is at moments such as these that young people may turn to survival strategies as a form of resistance.

Survival Strategies. Young people often deploy survival strategies as a way of protecting their security and integrity. Two of the most common survival strategies include avoidance and obfuscation. Avoidance strategies are deployed in multiple situations that make youths feel unsafe. They may choose to avoid specific places (for example, swimming pools, gyms, locker rooms, bathrooms, home, school). They may also avoid people whom they perceive as toxic or dangerous (for example, family, people who do not respect or know their gender identity, people who discriminate, White people). Finally, youths may avoid situations or contexts that pose a potential threat (for example, traveling, working, going out, using an ID card, expressing their gender, having a romantic partner, and spending time with people using drugs). Addison, for example, remained housebound for several years to avoid the possibility of discrimination:

For a long time, I didn't go out of my house. For six years, I didn't leave my apartment. Also, before that. It's been a couple of years, but, um, I was too scared. I was too scared that people know it. And, um, sometimes I stopped myself from going to parties and going into activist circles where I have interests because I don't want to. It's not

that I don't want to educate people, it's that I don't want to live violence that day, you know. (25 years old, Indigenous origins, genderfluid nonbinary transmasculine, mental health diagnosis, no parental support)

Being afraid of having a bad experience, being seen as trans, experiencing discrimination, or feeling inadequate were all reasons why youths used avoidance strategies.

I avoid bathrooms a lot.... It's like more a fear than anything else. Because there are people who perceive me as a girl, there are people who perceive me as a boy, and when I am in the bathroom, it's the same.... So, I'm a bit afraid of what could happen. (Olivier, 17 years old, White trans man, strong parental support)

Participants suggested that having privileges helped to strengthen the deployment of avoidance strategies. Being financially independent and having access to transportation, for example, can enable youths to avoid particular spaces or people if necessary. But the costs of avoidance—poverty from not being able to access employment and deteriorating health from not using a bathroom over long periods of time and isolation—can be high. Several TNBY skipped sports lessons at school because of the discomfort they generated. One of the downsides of avoidance strategies is that TNBY may end up renouncing activities that might make them feel good about themselves.

I've avoided quite a few things because of a sense of discrimination. One good example is the gym. [Weight lifting] would really help me get more buff … But then every time I actually get to do it, I just feel so uncomfortable.... So it's like I deal with the uncomfortableness of lifting this heavy weight, and then at the same time I feel uncomfortable. So, it's just too much weight to carry. (August, prismatic, suffers from depression and anxiety, limited parental support)

Even as working out is often seen as an activity that can aid in the transition process, some youths have simply avoided the gym altogether.

In addition to deploying avoidance strategies, some youths attempt to hide their identity. They do not "come out," choosing instead to present according to the gender assigned at birth, use their birth name, or avoid challenging people who misgender them. Some want to be read as cis. These strategies are often used when their security is compromised, when they are fearful of a situation, or when they do not want to be visible in a context of transphobia:

> [My method of] resistance, personally, it's to hide myself. Modifying my information, as I told my boyfriend, if we meet someone in the street and I identify myself, I say, "My name is [birth name]," and look, that's it. I will say, "Hey, hello, my name is [birth name]." … I will always say [chosen name], but if I say another name and I start to use "he," it's because I don't feel safe. There is a danger and I protect myself. So I told him and my girlfriend, "Don't intervene, let me manage it." So it's a thing, often hiding my identity. (Emily, White demigirl, mental health diagnosis, parents somewhat supportive)

Avoidance strategies can make it easier to survive in certain situations, such as finding a place to live. But these strategies can be damaging over time. For TNBY, having to pretend to be someone else can be very painful and may jeopardize their need for affirmation. Jim, a 22-year-old White nonbinary demiboy, physically disabled, with mental health challenges and only limited parental support, explained that they often hide their identity at a cost:

> Just because it's like the easiest … thing to do even though there might be a mental health cost, … it's just like an easy tactic of survivance, survival, in like a certain situation like they think I am cis.

As these participants demonstrate, hiding one's identity sometimes involves aligning name and gender pronouns to sex assigned at birth, while in other cases, it involves doing everything possible to be read as cisgender. However, some youths become so tired of hiding that they affirm themselves even when they feel threatened. Dakota said,

> All right, so for a long time I tried to hide or modify my transgender identity. I don't do that anymore. I got tired of that. I am who I am, and if I'm gonna live a short life, I might as well live it as who I am. Otherwise I'd probably kill myself already.

Alternating Strategies. It is important to recognize that young people often alternate between strategies of survival and affirmation, choosing one or the other depending on the context and both the privileges and the oppressive factors experienced. For example, Clay said that being out was a strategy that they frequently used because transness was an important part of their identity and affirming it was a way to educate people, even as they still sometimes hid their identity:

> One of my friends, his roommate, who is one of his best friends, doesn't know that I'm trans. I present myself as a girl and everything. And he doesn't know all of that. I don't stop myself from going to places, but I change myself as a person. I don't say my name is Clay, I say my name is [birth name]. And things like that. I feel that it's not that accepted so I'm just, like, OK, I just pretend to be cishet [cisgender heterosexual]. (19 years old, Latinx, genderfluid, autistic, no parental support)

Many TNBY only come out when they feel safe. But deploying survival strategies can also help youths build strength and the capacity to develop and deploy more affirmative strategies later.

DISCUSSION
Fight for Recognition: Balancing Affirmation and Security

Study participants illustrate how nonrecognition takes shape in conditions of oppression, varies according to social identities, and may be more or less difficult to manage depending on the availability of particular forms of privilege. Our analysis of participant narratives highlights that youths have two fundamental needs that may conflict: the need for security and the need for affirmation. For a young person to be recognized, they must be able to be visible in the full diversity of their being. Recognition then becomes a sine qua non for achieving a sense of security, because through recognition, a young

person's identity and practices become perceived as appropriate and acceptable in the eyes of their family, peer group, and the law and society more generally. Young people who advocate for their identity develop not only self-advocacy skills that help them "stand up" for themselves, but also a capacity to challenge their environment (Singh, 2013). The more individuals can meet normative social expectations, the more they benefit from recognition and security. The more individuals move away from normative social expectations, the less they benefit from recognition and security and the farther they retreat from recognition. Intersectional understanding is key: Strategies of resistance depend not only on the capacity of youths to affirm themselves, but also on how safe they feel, which greatly depends on their environment, which changes across time, context, and various forms of privilege.

Affirmation and Security. When a young person's identity meets social expectations, they experience both affirmation of their authentic gender and a sense of security, which leads them to experience recognition. In Quebec, White, cis-passing, financially stable TNBY who have the support of key family members experience what Serano (2007) identified as "cisprivilege." Similarly, our study found that White, cis-passing TNBY can more easily navigate across security and affirmation, or even get both needs met simultaneously, and thus experience greater validation from others. When TNBY enjoy recognition, they have more social legitimacy and greater capacity for self-realization and transformative action: They can speak out and be heard, including, in some cases, on behalf of other trans people.

Security without Affirmation. Young people who simultaneously experience oppression and privilege may benefit from a partial or conditional recognition: They are accepted so long as they conform to some social norms, such as the norm of homonormativity. In this context, some of the needs for affirmation and security are met, but these needs can conflict with others. As a result, some young people must choose which needs to prioritize. For example, a young person may choose not to disclose that they are transgender while still living at home out of fear they may lose the love and financial support of their parents. The need for self-assertion and recognition is thus sacrificed for a form of security that may be necessary for survival. Youths who experience limited parental recognition of their gender identity can also suffer greatly when caught between the need for recognition and survival. For example, TNBY who receive lukewarm or neutral support from their parents experience similar mental health outcomes as those with no parental support (Travers et al., 2012).

Other examples include those who hide their trans identity by conforming to their assigned gender or by being able to pass. Our data suggest that these strategies diminish the risk of experiencing aggression and discrimination, but do not enable full social recognition. We also observed that individuals who report passing easily or have a transmasculine (versus transfeminine) identity may benefit from greater security while asserting their gender (even if they have to hide their transness) because they are meeting normative social expectations. Conversely, we found that it is more difficult for a nonbinary person, whose identity does not conform to normative social expectations, to have security while disclosing their identity. Being in this position can be tricky: Youths who benefit from security may fear losing it by asserting themselves. To be able to activate affirmation strategies, security must become secondary.

Affirmation without Security. Some youths choose to give up their security and use affirmation strategies (coming out, confrontation, education) to obtain recognition. For example, coming out can be a good way to become visible and make others aware of trans issues. However, as long as society does not recognize transness, this strategy exposes TNBY to discrimination and danger. This exposure is particularly salient for trans women of color, who often experience high levels of violence (Chih et al., 2020).

It is important to emphasize that affirmation strategies are aimed not only at individual recognition, but also at social recognition. Indeed, legal and social recognition lessens the oppressive factor of transness. Affirmation strategies were salient in Quebec's political battle to obtain greater legal recognition, which was collectively mobilized by TNBY between 2014 and 2016, resulting in recent recognition by the courts. In our study, youths discussed motivations that led them to compromise their security, including survival and the feeling of betraying or losing oneself. For some youths, this compromise had become so painful that it led to suicidal ideation. When youths considered suicide, the fear of discrimination was believed to be less

important than the unbearable lack of affirmation and recognition.

Neither Security nor Affirmation. In some cases, youths are not able to assert themselves or benefit from security because they experience too many interacting forms of oppression and have little privilege. Their experience of recognition is nonexistent. For these youths who feel that it is almost impossible to assert themselves without seriously jeopardizing security and who cannot conform to social expectations, their need for affirmation is stifled by ignorance and violence. And yet, negation of recognition can also become a powerful basis for resistance. Those with nothing left to lose may find that the only way to obtain future recognition is to influence the environment by directly challenging family members, discriminatory laws, or oppressive social norms.

Dynamics between Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance

Youths may sometimes benefit from recognition in some areas of their lives but not in others. Indeed, youths' experiences are affected by both the context being navigated (accepting and inclusive or not) and where they are on their individual pathway (age, evolution of identity, socioprofessional advancement, and so on). This process is also dynamic. For example, Ari is affirmed by his parent but not by government authorities (legal recognition), which at the time of his interview did not permit him to change his name or gender marker on his ID because he was born outside of Quebec. Greer, however, obtained recognition from the government when the law changed, but he does not feel recognized by his parents and experiences racism in his daily life. As a young person moves through these different environments, their experience of recognition may vary, which can lead them, in turn, to deploy different strategies. Furthermore, playing with identity alternation, individuals adapt to their environment and alternate between survival and affirmation strategies. For example, Ambre feels relatively safe in their cultural community because most people hail from the same ethnic origin; other youths assert themselves in a safe environment (especially within trans communities) but hide themselves in more dangerous ones (for example, at work or in the street). These dynamics are interdependent because the latitude with which TNBY choose one strategy or the other depends on their privileges and the safety of their proximal environment.

Using the Recognition Dynamic to Empower Oneself

Young people in this study consistently demonstrated their capacity to adapt to the social dynamic to get their needs for security and affirmation met. In this sense, resistance is a direct response to context (Wagaman et al., 2019). Whereas one young person may conform to a binary narrative in a medical environment or in a familial environment, which allows them, in turn, to assert themselves in other spheres, another youth with class privilege may be able to avoid transphobic spaces altogether. With a pragmatic approach to self-presentation, youths can realize new possibilities and create opportunities for social change. The individual who also meets some social expectations may ascend the ladder of recognition and deploy their access to certain privileges to assert their identity. For example, transmasculine youths recognized as men by society may leverage their greater legitimacy to amplify the voice of trans communities. Finally, and as Honneth (1996) explained, the total absence of recognition can become a breeding ground for resistance. Dakota's narrative saliently illustrates this point when she explains that she will die if she does not affirm her identity. With so little security at stake, young people at the margins are often willing to defy social expectations outright.

Limitations

Although our team strove to remain close to the experiences shared by participants while building theory from scratch, the sensitizing concepts affected our process. Combining GT with CBPAR required an adaptation of both methodological approaches. From the outset of the project, the concept of intersectionality was embedded to ensure a fuller representation of the experiences of trans youths. At the same time, the incorporation of Honneth's recognition theory enabled us to attend to the individual and structural aspects of experiences—a move which, in turn, challenged classic GT methodologies, which require research to start anew. Despite its efforts to be fully inductive, the project was influenced by prior knowledge of current research about trans youths and of theories used as sensitizing concepts. The project was also influenced by the political project of

intersectionality as it has shaped the recent mobilization of trans communities in Quebec, and the growing recognition of the links between just research and social transformation.

CONCLUSION

Young people navigate multiple contexts, which lead them to adopt different strategies to ensure the best possible balance between security and affirmation. Environment, therefore, has a very strong influence on the resiliency of TNBY (Ungar, 2017) and their capacity to resist. When social workers and other allies work with TNBY, they must be aware not only of the complexity of identity and the effects of social structure (Mattsson, 2013), but also of how young people deploy strategies of resistance that are dynamically attuned to the personal, social, and political contexts in which they are embedded. As is abundantly clear in many of the interview excerpts included in this article and in the trans mobilizing underway during the period of the interviews (Singer, 2020), young people are in many cases deeply attuned to the interplay of privilege and oppression in their lives and the lives of other trans young people. An intersectional understanding of the affirmation–safety dynamic is thus critically important to the understanding of self-advocacy among youths themselves. While developing interventions, social workers working with TNBY should consider the various adaptive strategies from which youths may draw. It is our hope that future research will explore the affirmation–safety dynamic, with further nuanced attention to difference. How does the affirmation–safety dynamic change from adolescence into adulthood? How might social workers and advocates reduce the necessity of temporary forms of resistance that may become harmful in the long run? And what constellations of oppression are most likely to lead to an absence of recognition? Specificity here is key, with the need for social workers to center the relational, dynamic process of identity development and resistance in their efforts to enable young people to support themselves, and each other, in an ageist, transphobic, and racist world. **SWR**

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