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## The Experiences of the Transgender and Gender Diverse Community on Coming Out at the University of Arkansas

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The Experiences of the Transgender and Gender Diverse Community  
on Coming Out at the University of Arkansas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Social Work

by

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West Texas A&M  
Bachelor of Science in Psychology, 2018

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

Researching the experiences of the TGD community can help better understand the unique struggles this community may face, specifically regarding the unique experiences southeastern United States TGD individuals have encountered. We draw on previous studies regarding the entire LGBTQ+ community and the minimal research on the TGD community. There is minimal research looking specifically at the experiences college TGD students have when coming out in different aspects and the perceptions TGD individuals have about themselves as a result of their experiences coming out. We conducted a survey with 37 respondents as well as 4 qualitative interviews. We present interviews conducted with TGD individuals and their experiences coming out to their family of origin, religious institute, place of work, and at the University of Arkansas, to better understand the unique experiences individuals have had. The findings were conflicting and complex due to the variety of experiences shared by interviewees. Both positive and negative experiences were shared by interviewees regarding their experiences, and the events that led to their different reactions to coming out were explored.

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## 1. Introduction

Approximately 0.36% of adults in the United States identify as Transgender or Gender diverse (TGD). The estimated number of TGD adults ranges from 854,066 to 2,293,511 in the United States (Herman, et al. 2017a). Transgender individuals have a gender that differs from their gender assigned at birth. Gender diverse individuals are individuals whose gender also differs from their gender assigned at birth, but typically are not on the binary (e.g., trans male or trans female) and identify as non-binary, genderfluid, or other identities. Additionally, cisgender individuals identify as the same gender that they were assigned at birth. There is limited research exploring coming out experiences of the TGD community in the southeastern United States than other areas. Research on southern culture has found that the TGD community faces more adversities in the southern United States than in other areas. Although there is some literature looking at the TGD community in the south, frequently, the literature focuses on the entire LGBTQ+ community, meaning representation of the TGD community is limited. This research study uses minority stress theory (MST), which states TGD individuals experience minority stressors due to societal stigmatization of their identities.

The TGD community potentially faces many barriers to expressing their gender identity. Many TGD individuals face similar struggles to their cisgender peers and manage minority stress relating to their gender identity throughout their lives. Although MST has many potentially harmful outcomes, it also has been linked to minority resiliency. Another added barrier to southeastern TGD individuals is the culture that they must navigate. This study will look at the impact MST and southeastern culture have on coming out for TGD individuals. This study explores experiences TGD individuals have coming out to their family of origin, religious institute, place of work, and at the University of Arkansas.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress theory (MST) posits that in addition to the general stressors we all face, marginalized people experience minority stressors due to societal stigmatization of their identities. MST was originally developed to explain mental health inequities between sexual minority (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual) and heterosexual individuals. Since its inception, MST has been modified to explain similar processes in the TGD community. Minority stressors fall across a distal to proximal spectrum. Distal stressors are situated in the social environment and include experiences of discrimination and victimization. Proximal stressors result from an individual's perception of their identity within the environment including internalized transphobia, concealment of identity, and expectation of rejection (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Testa et al., 2015).

As well as the same stressors that cisgender individuals face, TGD individuals also experience minority stress, such as ostracization from social and emotional supports, more frequent incidents of violence, and discriminatory experiences, such as being forced to resign from a job or eviction (Herman, Brown, & Haas, 2019; Herman & O'Neill, 2021). The impact these stressors have on the mental health of TGD can be seen in recent research. Herman and colleagues (2019) examined suicide among a large sample of TGD people ( $n = 27,715$ ) and found that approximately 81.7% of their participants have seriously thought about suicide in their lifetime. Additionally, 48.3% of the study participants reported that had attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime. Approximately 97.7% of those who had experienced more than four discriminatory experiences, like minority stress, in the last year thought about suicide and an astounding 51.2% of that group had attempted suicide (Herman, Wilson & Becker, 2017).

The result of these experiences has been linked to increased depression, and suicidality, with the TGD community at even higher risk of experiencing these adverse effects (Burton et al., 2013; McGuire et al., 2010). Studies looking specifically at the TGD community have found similar results from previous MST studies on sexual minorities with minority stress impacting mental health disparities. (Bockting et al., 2013; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011; Testa et al., 2012). Although minority stress is strongly linked to adverse experiences, minority stress has also been linked to resiliency (Meyer, 2003). Individuals that have a strong sense of community regarding their minority identity, see fewer adverse effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2015; Pacey et al., 2020).

Experiences of minority stress among the TGD community have lasting effects on the mental well-being of the members. The construct of wellbeing looks at a variety of conceptualizations including, but not limited to, self-acceptance, happiness, and perceived social support (Riggle, Rostosky, & Danner, 2009). Research demonstrates TGD individuals that report having supportive families also report higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Erich et al., 2008; Simons et al., 2013). Well-being has been understudied among TGD people and many gaps are left in the research, including the impact self-acceptance and happiness have on overall wellbeing (Riggle, Rostosky, & Danner, 2009).

## **2.2. Southeastern Culture**

It has been seen that TGD, as well as sexual minorities, experience higher rates of unacceptance, unsupportive sentiments, and victimizations in the Midwest and Southern regions of the United States (Kosciw, et al., 2016; Pacey, et al., 2020). With the southeastern United States including the southern portion of the 'Bible Belt', an area where Protestant fundamentalism and Christianity are widely practiced, less support of the LGBTQ+ community



has been seen. Previous research has seen that Christian sexual minorities often face prejudice and discrimination that often leads to socially conflicting identities of their Christianity and sexual or gender identity. These beliefs not only affect the social interactions with sexual and gender minorities, but the legislation proposed in these areas.

In the United States, more than 50 bills were proposed in 2021 that infringed on the autonomy of the TGD community. Of those 50 bills, 40 came from states in the Southeastern region, specifically Texas, Tennessee, Missouri, and Arkansas (Freedom For All Americans, 2021; Pacey et al., 2021). Of the seven bills Arkansas proposed, three became laws, and of these, one was overturned by the U.S. Department of Justice (i.e., bill designator) with *Dylan Brandt et al v. Leslie Rutledge et al.* Bills such as these can create a hostile social and political climate for marginalized groups. Additionally, these bills reinforce the minority stress this community already faces with policies threatening the autonomy and basic rights of the TGD community.

Past research has found legislation, such as bathroom bills and limiting access to gender-affirming care, negatively impact mental health, including increased suicidal thoughts and attempts in the TGD community (Herman et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2013; Reisner et al., 2015). Regarding the social climate in the Southeastern United States, in 2014, research was completed to create an “*LGB Social and Political Climate Index*” that was based on opinions of LGB individuals in four categories including approval of same-sex marriage, laws that protected sexual minorities from employment discrimination, approval of same-sex couples to adopt, and beliefs that homosexuality is a sin; scores ranged from 45 to 60. Using this index, they determined that the Southern United States has the lowest regional social climate score, with an average of 55. Also, in this study, it was presumed that the TGD community is also implied to

face the same struggles due to the discourse about the LGB community also including the TGD community (Hasenbush, et al., 2014).

Specifically in Arkansas, a study done at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock found that 16% of faculty, 19% of staff, and 23% of students stated that working or interacting with a member of the TGD community would make them uncomfortable (Mallory & Sears, 2015; Univ. of Ark. at Little Rock, 2013). Regarding employment, approximately 40% of nearly 1,000 LGBT people in Arkansas stated they were not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity at work due to fear of discrimination. Their fears of rejection, job loss, and discrimination impacted their willingness to come out at work.

### **2.3. Coming Out**

Coming out can be defined as stating a sexual or gender orientation that differs from the societal expectation. Coming out for TGD individuals is slightly different from sexual minorities since some will transition identifiable characteristics, such as name, pronouns, gender expression, and attire. Given the multilevel and bureaucratic components, individuals who come out as their gender identity must change government identifications, such as driver's license or birth certificates, as well as may seek out medical changes such as starting hormones or gender-affirming surgeries (Bennett & Donatone, 2020).

Although there are several differences between sexual and gender minorities' experiences coming out, there are also many similarities. Heteronormativity, the assumption that people are heterosexual unless otherwise told, is one struggle that sexual minorities face, as societal expectations assume individuals as heterosexual, requiring individuals to come out who go against this assumption. Similarly, TGD individuals are faced with cisnormativity, the assumption of cisgender and binary gender, that shapes their coming out. This requirement of

coming out also frequently is accompanied by questions, supportive or not, about the gender identity, community, and ‘why’ an individual has decided on their identity (Bennett & Donatone, 2020; Rouse, Chu, & Gash, 2021).

Many TGD community members face potential invalidation, misunderstanding, and rejection, all components of minority stress, regarding coming out to their families and others in their lives. Coming out to potentially unsupportive individuals can be both emotionally difficult and physically dangerous. The U.S. Transgender Survey Report from 2015 ( $n=27,715$ ) found that individuals over the age of 18 who experienced rejection from family when coming out were more likely to experience adverse effects when compared to those that had a supportive family when coming out (James et al., 2016). Forty-nine percent of individuals who had experienced rejection from their families had attempted suicide at some point in their life (Bennett & Donatone, 2020; James et al., 2016).

Regarding college students, they may have to navigate not only coming out to family, but also at the university. It has been seen that many individuals opt to only come out to their friends and other social supports, while others require familial acceptance of their identity. Navigating the potential emotional and physical danger can add significant stress to the individual. Many college students coming out are faced with statements invalidating their gender identity due to generational unfamiliarity and negative stereotypes. This pressure to be authentic in their identity but also have a fear of rejection when coming out is apparent in college students, specifically when coming out to their families (Bennett & Donatone, 2020)

Although there is the risk of rejection when coming out, there is the potential development of resilience. When individuals explore their gender identity, it can lead to self-empowerment, acceptance, and esteem (Rouse, Chu, & Gash, 2021). Regarding the life course perspective,

conflicting research exists where sexuality stigma in adolescents impacts goal attainment in adulthood, while research also suggests that sexuality stigma in adolescence minimally impacts goal attainment due to the resilience sexual minorities develop (Troiden, 1989; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). Further research is needed to determine the outcomes the TGD community frequently faces regarding the struggles they may face later in life.

The stigma and unacceptance the TGD community faces are apparent across the United States, but even more so in regions that are less supportive of the community, such as the southeastern region. The unique oppression and struggles that the southeastern TGD community faces have yet to be explored in depth. This study focuses on understanding the experiences that the transgender and gender diverse community face regarding coming out.

#### **2.4. Current Study**

This literature finds the array of coming out experiences of TGD emerging adults are shaped by minority stress and resilience and the social environment. One significant gap in this line of research is on the way the unique political and social climate of the southeastern United States shapes coming out for TGD emerging adults. This study aims at looking at the experiences of college TGD students and the experiences they have had coming out in this area. Most of the research looking at the experiences coming out in the southeastern United States is focused on the entire LGBTQ+ community, which does not take into account the experiences and perspectives of TGD emerging adults. Although MST has proposed the positive and negative outcomes of being a minority, there are still questions about how exactly MST affects the TGD community, such as the impact their experience coming out effects their perception of themselves.

This study aims to fill that gap by asking how the experience of coming out relates to perceptions of self. This research question encompasses the gaps that were seen in research looking at the effects of MST on the LGBTQ+ community by looking specifically at the TGD community. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What identity-related experiences do TGD individuals have when coming out in the southeastern United States?
2. How do the experiences of coming out relate to perceptions of self with college students?
3. What life events impact having positive or negative experiences when coming out?

As previously stated, having a positive experience when coming out to family as a sexual minority, has been linked to higher levels of self-acceptance and esteem. This link is important to explore and see if there is a similar pattern regarding TGD individuals who come out in the southeastern United States, as well as with college students. This study will specifically look at individuals' experiences coming out to their family of origin, religious institute, at their place of work, and as a student at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas

### **3. Methods**

To answer these questions, we utilize a multi-method study to understand the demographic profile of TGD students on one southern campus via survey data and experiences students have coming out via semi-structured interviews. The proposed research was approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Figure 1). Participants were recruited via Instagram, University email listservs, and the University of Arkansas newsletter. To participate in either the survey or interviews, participants had to be: a) a student at the University of Arkansas; b) identity as a member of the TGD community; and c) be 18 years of age or older. Upon completion of the survey, participants were entered into a raffle with a chance to win one

of two \$50 Amazon gift cards. Participants who completed an interview received a \$25 Amazon gift card. Funding for this project was supported by the University of Arkansas: School of Social Work Graduate Thesis fund. A total of 36 participants completed the survey portion of the study and five of those were asked to complete the interview. The multi-method approach was vital to capturing the existence and voices of TGD community members in a southern context, as this is often a neglected area of research.

### **3.1. Survey**

Potential participants provided virtual informed consent before completing the survey via Qualtrics. Participants were asked about characteristics including age, gender identity, pronouns, field of study, race/ethnicity, work status, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. All questions included an "other" with some including write-in option as well. These demographic questions were chosen to describe the TGD community attending the university and to give background information for selecting interviewees. At the end of the survey, participants had the option to opt into the interview portion, with no consequence to them if they declined, and the option to opt into the raffle for one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards.

### **3.2. Interview**

Recruitment for the interview and survey collection ran concurrently. Participants who indicated an interest in the interview were contacted via email for scheduling. Interview participants were selected to maximize diversity, with a focus on diversifying the race/ethnicity, gender identity, and age of interviewees ( $n=5$ ). Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and uploaded to a secure Box folder for transcription. The first author listened to the audio recordings and created verbatim transcripts for data analysis. Identifying information (e.g., town, chosen name, name of siblings) was removed. Upon completion of the transcription, the audio

and video files were deleted, leaving only the typed transcription. Participants provided a pseudonym.

The five interviewees were chosen to try to get a diverse sample but was also influenced by the participants willing to participate in the interview. Liam and Newt were both 21 years-old, with Moshe Pitt and Dinah at 22 years-old, and Jake at 25 years-old. Two out of the five identified as non-binary, Liam and Newt, while the remaining three identified as androgynous, Moshe Pitt, a trans woman, Jake, and genderqueer, Dinah. Liam and Newt both also identified as agnostic, Moshe Pitt as Christian, Dinah, as Jewish, and Jake as atheist.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

Two coders assisted with data analysis and interpretations. The data was then coded using thematic analysis protocols. After transcription of the data, 19 initial codes were created based on finding similarities within and across interviews. Themes were seen in the transcriptions, that then led to reviewing, defining, and naming the themes. The four superordinate themes, acceptance, negative experiences, chosen relationships, and experiences at the University of Arkansas were created. Within those superordinate themes, they were broken down into subthemes, with each superordinate theme having at least two subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Quantitative Findings**

The quantitative findings represented a small number of TGD community members at the University of Arkansas ( $n=37$ ). It is estimated that approximately 0.36% of the adult population in the United States identifies as a TGD individual. Using this approximation, it was estimated there are 100 TGD individuals at the University of Arkansas. The findings from the survey were

that 43% ( $n=16$ ) of participants identified as non-binary, 40% ( $n=13$ ) identified as a trans male, trans female, and 'gender not listed', and 19% ( $n=7$ ) identified as genderqueer or gender diverse. Regarding the Race/ethnicity of the sample, 78% ( $n=28$ ) identified as white without Hispanic, Latine, or Spanish origin, 11% ( $n=4$ ) identified as white with Hispanic, Latine, or Spanish origin, and the remaining 11% ( $n=4$ ) identifying as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black or African American, or Prefer not to say.

Additionally, their religious affiliation was 22% ( $n=8$ ) identified as spiritual, but not religious, 19% ( $n=7$ ) identified as agnostic as well as 19% ( $n=7$ ) identified as atheist. 17% ( $n=6$ ) of respondents identified as Christian and the remaining 22% ( $n=8$ ) identified as another religion, 'prefer not to say', or left the question blank. With the almost 40 responses from the survey, a general idea can be seen within the TGD population at the University of Arkansas. Most interviewees and survey respondents identified as white without Hispanic, Latine, or Spanish origin, and most survey respondents identified as spiritual, but not religious. Although most survey respondents identified as spiritual, but not religious, none of the interviewees identified as spiritual, but not religious. The lack of representation within race/ethnicity indicated that not all voices were heard, as people of color may have had different experiences on campus. This lack of representation in the interviews means that an entire religious affiliation was not represented in the qualitative portion of this study. Additionally, trans male and trans female individuals made up 19% of our sample, but there was only one interviewee that identified with that gender identity. With most of the interviewees identifying as non-binary, it is difficult to see if there are any differences between the experiences of different TGD identities and the experiences they have.



## **4.2. Qualitative Findings**

Coming out can be common within the TGD community, yet each person's experiences can be drastically different. In the five interviews conducted, differences in coming out were apparent, but there were also common themes. Generally, the common themes discussed throughout the interviews were separated by positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences spoke of acceptance, validation, and usage of correct name/pronouns, while negative experiences were categorized by rejection, internalized transphobia, and moments where authentic gender expression felt unsafe. These experiences were discussed across social environments, including family and campus. We report results from four of the superordinate themes: (a) acceptance, (b) negative experiences, (c) chosen relationships, and (d) University. Overall, these categories impacted the participant's perception of how coming out went and their thoughts and feelings about coming out in other aspects of their lives.

### **4.3. Acceptance**

Acceptance was defined by participants as feeling supported and validated by those they came out to. The experiences discussed were incidents when the individual came out and was met with support and validation from their family of origin, as well as the privilege discussed of having a positive reaction from family members. Validation in this context can be defined as feeling affirmed in one's gender identity. Subthemes of acceptance include validation and perceived support.

#### **4.3.1. Validation**

Participants defined validation was defined as feeling supported and accepted within their gender identity. Interviewees mentioned validation several times in the interviews. Regarding coming out to their family, Liam (non-binary, 22 years old) shared:

*“I haven't come out to my entire extended family, um, but those that I have come out to have also been very supportive and certainly very, like, open to being with me in the transition process.”*

Liam felt the affirmation that gave them validation from family members regarding their gender identity. Moshe Pitt (Androgynous, 22 Years-old) shared feeling supported and validated when coming out to their family: *“They became very, very supportive and as, like, gender identity and presentation have shifted over the years, like, I've never had an issue.”* Moshe Pitt’s experience speaks to prolonged acceptance from immediate family members—starting with coming out at 14 years old and maintaining through their gender development. Both Moshe Pitt and Liam expressed feeling affirmed in their gender identity throughout the changes in their expression and development.

Both Moshe Pitt and Liam had positive experiences coming out to their immediate family and mentioned feeling privileged by having such supportive and accepting family members, Liam juxtaposed their experience with friends: *“And I have a lot of trans close friends who didn't have the same, like, support, especially with coming out or why they haven't come out.”* This awareness of the differences in experiences with coming out emphasizes the variety of experiences shared within the TGD community.

#### **4.3.2. Perceived support**

Perceived support refers to positive and affirming reactions from others when coming out. Moshe Pitt discussed their parents’ initial reaction: *“They were super—they were very loving, like, there was never any question of, like, something bad happening.”* This initial reaction set up for Moshe Pitt to feel supported by their family, and their parents’ actions taken after coming out also proved their support of Moshe Pitt’s gender identity. Moshe Pitt shared: *“You know, they*

*were doing all the research they could, and they were liberal, they knew transgender people.”*

Moshe Pitt attributes political liberal ideology to their parents’ support.

Liam also stated that they felt supported by their parents when they initially came out: *“My parents were all very supportive, and- about as supportive as I feel like it could be given their own experiences.”* Liam additionally went into detail about coming out and how it made them feel a sense of relief after coming out by stating: *“It definitely went well, um, considering that- there- I feel like, even though I know my parents are supportive, there’s still pressure and that doesn’t make it easy.”* Liam’s experience coming out to their family of origin spoke to the feeling of support that may not have been immediately evident. Liam speaks about how initially their parents were shocked, but as time went on they became more supportive and accepting of their identity.

#### **4.4. Negative Experiences**

Although many of the participants shared positive experiences, they also shared some negative experiences regarding coming out to their family of origin and at the University. Within the negative experience superordinate theme, subthemes of the impact of others’ experiences and transphobia were seen.

##### **4.4.1. Negative Expectations**

Negative expectations refer to expecting a negative reaction when coming out with their gender identity. When asked about coming out to their family of origin, one participant shared their identity remains concealed due to their family’s response to a TGD friend coming out. Newt (Non-binary, 22 years old) shared:

*“I reintroduce them to my mom with the different name but they looked really similar to how they used to and my mom kept saying like oh [L] does this, like she did it and I think, ‘oh no*

*no no it's they' and after like the third time of correcting my mom she just kind of like- like she didn't like make a huge deal about it, but I know my mom she's like a really nice lady, but I know she's the kind of person who's like if she gets annoyed about it there's obviously something a lot deeper going on with it, So, I was like, okay, well I hadn't said anything about myself yet I'm just simply not going to, um, and I haven't told my dad anything yet because he's kind of like weird about stuff. He's not, like, bad or anything, he's just, like, weird and I don't have the mental energy to explain it to him so."*

Newt saw their family's negative response regarding their friend coming out as non-binary and expected a negative reaction if they were to come out, so they kept their identity concealed. Newt's experience of seeing another individual come out gave them some information on how their family might react to them coming out as non-binary.

Dinah also assumed their parents would react negatively to their coming out due to their parents' political beliefs. Dinah stated: *"They're very, very conservative, and already pretty weird about things, like, I'm-I'm gay, I was, like, gender non-conforming. They're still not okay with that."* This experience alludes to Dina's experiences throughout their life that political parties exhibit hostility toward TGD people, which have influenced their desire to come out to their family of origin.

#### **4.4.2. Transphobia**

Transphobia was salient to negative coming out experiences. Transphobia for this study was described as any statement or action that directly or indirectly went against the TGD community. Moshe Pitt discussed the initial reaction of their parents when coming out as a trans man, their gender identity at the time of coming out: *"But they did, like, I remember they showed me these blogs about butch women, you know... they were pretty resistant to*

*calling me by a different name for a little bit.*” This experience Moshe shared speaks to the subtle transphobia their parents had in their initial reaction, which Moshe Pitt stated could have been due to feeling shocked about them coming out. This experience falls under the transphobia subtheme due to their initial response to accepting their transgender identity, but instead hoping for them to be a sexual minority

Newt discussed experiences of transphobia when discussing how they navigate their identity in the academic setting. Newt stated: *“Usually if I’m, like, meeting with a professor and I hate to say it, but it’s usually if it’s like a cis-male professor, I will take [my pronouns] out of [my email signature] because, especially being in STEM, um, they’re not always the most accepting people.”* The assumption of transphobia relates to how willing Newt is to be open and out with their identity, or if it is something rather not brought into the conversation. Newt’s experience can also be influenced by the southeastern U.S.’s social climate,

When discussing more blatant incidents of transphobia, Liam stated: *“I’ve definitely- I think there have been situations where I’ve, like, caught conversation and felt uncomfortable, um. But it was more just general-not necessarily actively derogatory as much as casually discriminatory or like trans- or homophobia that I didn’t want to actively, necessarily, cause a conflict there in with the risk of making myself vulnerable.”* Liam’s experience expresses the common occurrence of subtle transphobia, or a microaggression, that they experience frequently in their life. This experience can be attributed to their feelings around their gender identity which has led to additional emotional energy spent on navigating if situations or certain people would be safe to come out to.

## 4.5. Chosen Relationships

In this study, chosen relationships can be defined as who someone chooses to surround themselves with, such as in social circles and organizations. Chosen relationships were brought up in the interviews when asked if participants had experienced any harassment or discrimination. Participants framed chosen relationships buffering exposure to potential harassment and discrimination since they chose to surround themselves with individuals who were accepting of their gender identity. Perceptions of safety, acceptance, and support of their identity were frequently mentioned regarding their chosen relationships. These relationships impacted their desire and confidence to come out to others outside of these relationships. Two subthemes emerged within chosen relationships: support and exclusion.

### 4.5.1. Support

Chosen relationships directly impacted the positive and negative experiences that all interviewees have had regarding coming out. One interviewee, Moshe Pitt, stated: *“Oh yeah, I don't think I've never had like a really bad reaction. And, and some of that definitely has to do with like just the self-selection of the people I'm around.”* The chosen relationships that Moshe Pitt discussed impacted their perception of support by selecting people who support their identity. The selection of relationships supporting of the TGD community directly impacted the exposure to discrimination and harassment that Moshe Pitt had. By surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals, they avoided potentially negative reactions from those with different or opposing beliefs.

To add to the perceived support interviewees' chosen relationships had on their exposure to negative experiences coming out, Newt stated: *“I haven't explicitly had any like super negative experiences, but I think that's just because I'm lucky enough to have surrounded*

*myself with people that I don't have to do that with and that are pretty, like, chill about it.”*

Their chosen relationships provided a type of bubble where they felt accepted with their TGD identity.

#### **4.5.2. Self-Exclusion**

Although Newt and Moshe Pitt discuss the positive impact of their chosen relationships and perceived support, it is important to understand that they may also attempt to avoid certain spaces that could be beneficial to them personally or professionally. This avoidance of harassment and discrimination by the selection of who individuals surround themselves with can be beneficial, but it can also be harmful. Regarding avoidance of harassment or discrimination, a theme was seen within chosen relationships of feeling excluded or excluding oneself from experiences. The feeling of self-exclusion can be seen in Liam’s statement:

*“I have honestly sort of been adamant about trying not to put myself in a position where it would feel that way [regarding discrimination/harassment] and that has sort of manifested itself in not really correcting people if they misgender me because, while it's it doesn't disturb me enough for me to sometimes it just doesn't disturb me enough to warrant pausing the conversation to be like hey this is actually what's going on here.”*

Liam opted to keep quiet and not bring attention to their gender identity in spaces where they were not around those in their chosen relationship circles. Liam discussed this strategy as practice since it helped protect them from potentially harmful experiences.

Newt shared an experience of going to an event with supportive friends but being excluded due to their physical appearance. Newt shared: *“I went to the event with them, and they were fully like ‘you’re not allowed in here, you’re a guy.’ And I was like, I’m not*

*though, like, they/them, like, that kind of thing and were like ‘okay, but, like, no, like, you don’t look like that- like you’re not presenting femme or anything like that.’”* This negative experience supports Newt’s preference to stay within their supportive, chosen relationships. When they attempted to branch out to create more relationships, they were denied due to their physical appearance. This has impacted Newt’s desire to expand their chosen relationships and reinforced the comfortability of avoiding settings that could lead to discrimination and harassment.

#### **4.6. University Campus Experiences Coming Out**

Participants discussed their experiences with coming out at the University of Arkansas (UA). The theme of experiences coming out on campus was defined by any experience the interviewee had at or relating to UA. Subthemes included supportive climate and actions, visibility, and counter experience.

##### **4.6.1. Supportive Climate and Actions**

Within a supportive climate and actions, Liam discussed their experience coming out:

*“So, I definitely know that academic context, especially now, are very actively accepting or try to be actively accepting of minorities, including gender and sexual orientation minorities. So, I feel like I’m in sort of a bubble, but within this bubble, I feel very accepted and safe.”*

This statement encompasses Liam’s perception of support that is seen on a college campus. Liam’s exposure to a supportive climate impacted their perception of acceptance throughout campus. Moshe Pitt had a similar experience as they stated: *“And then yeah, like, in [classes] we asked for pronouns all the time in [academic department].”* The supportive actions that Moshe Pitt described also impacted their perception of acceptance at UA. Liam and Moshe Pitt’s



experiences impacted their assumptions about others on campus and how, in general, people would react to their gender identity.

#### **4.6.2. Visibility**

Another theme that emerged was the visibility of TGD individuals on the UA campus. The visibility of a TGD community member in a professional setting was discussed by Moshe Pitt:

*“One of our faculty members in printmaking actually uses they/them in their professional life, and it works, and people respect the hell out of them, and I was like ‘okay, you can be a real grown up with a real grown-up job and people can be respectful about this.’”*

This emphasized the importance of representation in a professional setting and had a lasting impact on Moshe Pitt’s expectations on coming out in their related field. This experience also spoke on Moshe Pitt’s validation within their identity having the visibility of a TGD individual on campus.

Along with visibility, another subtheme seen was the desire to be accepted by professors and peers. Liam discussed their experience coming out with a story that stated: *“I introduced that by saying sort of ‘Hey, just to let you know I am trans and so I’m going to use masculine pronouns and word modifier to refer to myself in Spanish.’ And [the professor] responded very kindly. He thanked me for sharing something that was so important to me, and I felt very welcomed.”* This experience added to the positive experiences shared by coming out at the UA and spoke to how welcomed Liam felt by the positive response they got from the professor.

#### **4.6.3. Counter Experiences**

Participants shared many positive experiences during the interviews but also noted some negative experiences ones. Another important aspect to bring up is the social/political

climate at UA. Dinah (Genderqueer, 21 Years-Old) stated regarding if they would ever come out at the UA:

*“No, absolutely not but it's also, like, a conservative thing. There are multiple people in my program who have used Nazi dog whistles, um, and are identifiable online and, like, and in group chat settings. I'm just in a field that is heavily conservative.”*

This comment mentions explicitly the unique political climate the TGD community must navigate when coming out in the Southeastern United States. The support that Liam and Moshe Pitt experienced, was not the same experience that Dinah had.

Newt shared their negative experience coming out at us UA by sharing: *“There have been a few times I've been more, like, presenting more of, like, non-binary or whatever or, like, less masc. in public and, um, professors definitely, like, I can see that they are treating me differently on different days.”* Newt goes into detail that presenting more androgynous typically leads to adverse reactions on the UA campus. They also state that professors take them less seriously if they dress more femme. These negative experiences, when compared to the positive experiences, express the stark differences TGD community members may have on the UA campus.

## **5. Discussion**

This study looked at the experiences TGD individuals had when coming out and was guided by three main research questions: 1) what identity-related experiences do TGD individuals have when coming out in the southeastern United States; 2) how do the experiences of coming out relate to perceptions of self with college students; and 3) what life events impact having positive or negative experiences when coming out. Regarding the experiences related to their identity, both positive and negative experiences were discussed. Additionally, a commonality was seen

among individuals who had a positive experience coming out to their parents at an earlier age and their experiences after that. Similarly, when looking at the events that shaped individuals positive or negative experiences when coming out, positive initial reactions from their family or origin yielded more positive experiences overall regarding coming out. These three questions drove the research regarding what implications and impact coming out has on college students.

### **5.1. Identity-Related Experiences**

Many interviewees spoke about the experiences that are unique to the southeastern United States. Interviewees discussed the impact of conservatism on their perception of safety and acceptance of those around them. They also discussed their experiences in depth at a southeastern university, which yielded positive and negative experiences.

There were interviewees that discussed positive reactions with coming out reported more positive interactions throughout the interview. This idea could be supported by the research done by Erich et al. (2008) and Simons et al. (2013) that stated that TGD individuals that report having supportive families also report higher self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Specific experiences shared during the interviews shed light on the reactions or negative expectations, that those may have when coming out with their gender identity. Several interviewees discussed the impact of negative responses have had on their willingness to come out to others in the future. The minority stress that these individuals felt while navigating perceived safety surrounding their gender identity was apparent and impacted how willing they were to engage with others. This finding was supported by past research that stated minority stress, such as concealment of identity and expectations of rejection, can lead to adverse effects (Burton et al., 2013; McGuire et al., 2010). The current study assisted in filling the gaps that Riggle, Rostosky, & Danner expressed in their 2009 study on the overall well-being of the TGD

community by looking at the minority stress TGD individuals face on campus, as well as how their experiences shape their perception of themselves.

## **5.2. Perceptions of Self**

Second, the research question of how the experience of coming out relates to perceptions of self with college students was proposed. This question was supported by how experiences that interviewees discussed that occurred at an earlier life stage impacted their willingness to come out to others. Several of the interviewees discussed negative reactions from their parents regarding the TGD community that informed hesitancy to come out across social situations. These negative experiences in earlier life stages, impacted their perceived support and acceptance from others, before and after coming out to them. This theme was supportive of past research that looked at the effects of negative experiences within the TGD community (Burton et al., 2013; McGuire et al., 2010)

It was also seen within the shared experiences that there was a similarity between having a positive experience when coming out to their family of origin and having a positive experience having positive experiences coming out in other aspects of their lives. This similarity can be supported by MST's assumption that positive early life experiences can impact the resilience and the outcomes of minorities in the future. Additionally, when individuals explore their gender identity, positive outcomes are seen. Increased self-empowerment, acceptance, and esteem are seen when individuals feel safe to explore this identity (Rouse, Chu, & Gash, 202).

## **5.3. Impact of Life Events**

Finally, the question asking what life events impact positive and negative experiences coming out was proposed. This question, like the others, yielded a complex answer. It was seen that the individuals who reported a positive experience coming out to their family of origin in an

earlier life stage had more positive experiences overall, but little was known about what exactly impacted the difference individuals had regarding their experiences on campus. Previous research has stated that TGD individuals who reported positive familial support also reported higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, which could help explain this theme (Erich et al., 2008; Simons et al., 2013). Another added complexity is that some interviewees stated that they specifically avoid situations where they may be subject to harassment or discrimination, which could impact their overall experience at the University. This proposes a new question asking if their positive experiences later in life are based on the positive experience regarding family, because they came out in an earlier stage of life, or another extraneous variable.

#### **5.4. Strengths and Limitations**

This study had several strengths and several weaknesses that need to be addressed. Regarding strengths, this study looked at the experiences specific to the TGD community, which is often overlooked in research. The unique perspective utilized that emphasized the TGD community allowed for the unique struggles and experiences to be seen within this community. This study also was completed by a gender-diverse researcher which may allow interviewees and survey participants to feel less tokenized. This allowed for related experiences to be shared during the interviews that may not have occurred with a cisgender interviewer.

Regarding limitations, the sample of this study was small, especially regarding the size of the University of Arkansas, but could be explained by the vulnerability of this population as well as no club or community group for TGD individuals. The survey sample could not have been representative of all TGD community members at the university due to the limited responses. Additionally, the number of interviewees was also limited, which did not allow for a lot of overlapping experiences shared by the interviewees. The small sample size also did not allow for

more experiences that others may have had that may have an impact on other TGD community members.

Another limitation is the study was unable to look at all TGD individuals in the southeastern United States. This made it difficult to see if the experiences shared in this study are unique to college aged students, or if it is something similarly seen in other demographics. Only utilizing University of Arkansas students cut out a large portion of TGD community members that are not currently enrolled at the University. This did not allow for experiences to be shared from past students or students who had left or dropped out of the University of Arkansas. This study also only looked at students enrolled at the UA, and no other universities in the southeastern United States, which may have different results depending on the political and social contexts.

### **5.5. Future Research**

As discussed previously, the lack of research done looking specifically at the TGD community should be addressed with future research. This community is frequently lumped in with sexual minorities, but the differences between sexual and gender minorities should be explored in future research. Additionally, research looking at the experiences of the TGD community throughout the Southern United States should also be conducted to understand better the unique challenges that this community faces in the South.

Another area for future research is the impact that positive experiences coming out to a person's family of origin has on coming out in other social situations. A theme was seen within the data seen in this study but warranted future research to see if there is a connection between how positive or negative coming out to their family of origin was perceived and how they have perceived coming out in other social situations, regarding positive or negative experiences.

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## 7. Figures and Table

Figure 1:



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**To:** Jacob Goffnett  
**From:** Justin R Chimka, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review  
**Date:** 12/06/2021  
**Action:** **Exemption Granted**  
**Action Date:** 12/06/2021  
**Protocol #:** 2109355018  
**Study Title:** Experience of the Transgender and Gender Diverse Community on Coming Out in the South

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

cc: Taylor Hubbard, Investigator