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Differences in Mental Health and Ethnic-Racial Identity between White Gender Variant Students and Gender Variant Students of Color



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Abstract

This current study examined whether there was a difference in mental health (i.e., depression and anxiety) and ethnic-racial identity (i.e., exploration, resolution, and affirmation) between White gender variant college students (i.e., transgender, genderqueer, and questioning) and gender variant students of color. Findings supported our hypothesis that gender variant students of color would have higher depressive and anxiety scores than White gender variant students; however, the difference was not statistically significant. Further, consistent with hypotheses, gender variant students of color showed overall higher levels of ethnic-racial identity exploration, resolution, and affirmation compared to White gender variant students. This suggests that gender variant students of color have a more developed ethnic-racial identity as a result of their double minority status, compared to White gender variant students. Future studies that explore limitations and gaps in this area will be instrumental to understanding ERI and mental health differences across race in among gender variant students, and how it influences positive development across emerging adulthood.

Introduction

- In comparison to their cisgender counterparts, gender variant college students experience increased risk for discrimination, bullying, family disownment, homelessness, and hate crimes (Eisenberg, 2017).
- Consequential disparities in mental health are likely to arise when the intersections of gender and race are both considered, however, few studies have tested developmental outcomes, such as ethnic-racial identity (ERI) and mental health among gender variant emerging adults of color and White gender variant emerging adults.
- The majority of existing studies involving gender variant individuals tend to focus on adolescents (e.g., Simons et al, 2013), and/or include a disproportionately larger number of White participants (e.g., Eisenberg, 2017) than individuals of color, which limits our understanding of differential experiences based on key identity factors, such as gender and race.
- Further, studies to date have examined experiences of being gender variant among different racial/ethnic groups, but limited studies have focused on ERI development (Kattari, 2016), which is predominantly tested in cisgender populations (e.g., Aoyagi et al, 2017; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).
- This is a notable gap given that ERI is a normative aspect of emerging adulthood that is associated with positive development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Understanding ERI and mental health among this population specifically is important to be able to create effective interventions and resources for gender variant emerging adults across ethnic-racial backgrounds that considers their unique lived experiences (Mossakowski, 2003).
- To address these gaps, the current study tested differences in mental health (i.e., anxiety and depression) and ERI (i.e., exploration, resolution, and affirmation) between White gender variant students and gender variant students of color.
- Based on the minority stress framework (Meyer, 2003) and ERI frameworks (Umaña-Taylor et al., 201), we hypothesized that gender variant students of color would have higher levels of ERI and higher rates of depression and anxiety symptoms than White gender variant students.

Methods

Participants & Procedure

- Secondary data from the Spit For Science (S4S) annual online surveys was used in this study.
- The sample in the current study consisted of 112 gender variant students who identified as a White student ($n = 72$) or identified as a student of color ($n = 40$) from cohorts 1-6 in their first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth year at Virginia Commonwealth University.
- Students were 64.29% White and 35.71% of color, ranged in age from 18-24 years old (Mean = 20.15, $SD = 1.61$), and were 4.6% transgender women, 11.11% transgender men, 30.16% questioning, and 53.97% genderqueer.

Methods Continued

Measures

- The 90-item Symptom Checklist 90-R (SCL-90-R; Derogatis & Cleary, 1977) was used to measure levels of depression and anxiety.
 - *Anxiety*: e.g., “At any point in your life, did you ever have a period of at least one month or longer when you tended to worry excessively about minor matters?”
 - *Depression*: e.g., “Looking back over your lifetime, did you ever have a period lasting 2 weeks or longer when you felt sad, blue, or depressed?”
- The 9-item Ethnic Identity Scale-Brief (EIS-B; Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015) was used to assess ERI. This scale includes three subscales containing three items each:
 - *Exploration*: e.g., “I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity.”
 - *Resolution*: e.g., “I have a clear sense of what my ethnicity means to me.”
 - *Affirmation*: e.g., “I feel negatively about my ethnicity.” (items are reverse coded).



Results

- First, descriptive statistics were conducted to examine correlations among variables (Table 1).
- Next, hypotheses were tested with five t-tests that tested mean differences in anxiety, depression, and ERI exploration, resolution, and affirmation between gender variant White students and students of color.
 - There was a **significant difference** in ERI exploration for White gender variant students ($M = 1.78, SD = .83$) and gender variant students of color ($M = 2.91, SD = .95$); $t(107) = -6.49, p = .00$.
 - There was a **significant difference** in ERI affirmation for White gender variant students ($M = 3.33, SD = .80$) and gender variant students of color ($M = 3.66, SD = .64$); $t(106) = -2.23, p = .028$.
 - There was a **significant difference** in ERI resolution for White gender variant students ($M = 2.37, SD = .85$) and gender variant students of color ($M = 3.29, SD = .77$); $t(106) = -5.61, p = .00$.
 - There was not a significant difference in depression levels for White gender variant students ($M = 12.57, SD = 4.08$) and gender variant students of color ($M = 13.58, SD = 4.06$); $t(110) = -1.25, p = .21$
 - There was not a significant difference in anxiety levels for White gender variant students ($M = 10.42, SD = 4.39$) and gender variant students of color ($M = 10.48, SD = 4.40$); $t(107) = -.062, p = .95$.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables for Gender Variant Students ($N = 112$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Depressive Symptoms	--					
2. Anxiety Symptoms	.71***	--				
3. Ethnic-Racial Identity Affirmation	-.17	-.18*	--			
4. Ethnic-Racial Identity Resolution	-.12	-.13	.20*	--		
5. Ethnic-Racial Identity Exploration	-.07	-.06	.05	.55***	--	
	Mean	10.20	7.52	3.72	3.1	2.25
	Standard Deviation	4.19	3.72	.54	.84	.98

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

- Consistent with hypotheses based on ERI frameworks, gender variant students of color demonstrated significantly higher levels of ERI exploration, resolution, and affirmation than White gender variant students.
- One study finds that ERI has a strong association with lower levels of depression, and thus acts as a buffer or coping resource to the stress of perceived discrimination (Mossakowski, 2003). Our findings build on this prior work with cisgender individuals by demonstrating that ERI is an important identity that gender variant students are navigating, especially students of color. It is possible that greater ERI may be a protective factor for gender identity-based risk factors among gender variant students of color, which will need future investigation.
- It is crucial to continue studying ERI among gender variant students to understand how ERI may influence mental health. Such knowledge would be beneficial to creating effective interventions and resources for the well-being of gender variant populations.
- In addition, given that there were significant differences in ERI between White gender variant students and gender variant students of color, it is important for future studies to examine ERI and gender identity development in emerging adults to understand underlying factors of these differences.
- Regarding mental health outcomes, gender variant students of color demonstrated higher depression and anxiety scores than White gender variant students; however, the difference was not statistically significant. It is possible that these findings did not emerge because of our modest sample size. Statistical power has the potential to become stronger with a larger sample size and will be an important direction for future research.

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