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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, 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, contrast analysis 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 in understanding ERI and mental health differences across race in among gender variant students, and how it influences positive development across emerging adulthood.

Methods

Participants & Procedure

Secondary data from the Split 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, and age ranged 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 experience exceptionally 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 & Umana-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) = 4.49, p < .00.
- There was a significant difference in ERI affirmation for White gender variant students (M = 3.33, SD = .30) and gender variant students of color (M = 3.66, SD = .64), t(106) = 2.23, p < .01.
- There was a significant difference in depression levels for White gender variant students (M = 3.27, SD = .85) and gender variant students of color (M = 3.29, SD = .77), t(106) = 5.61, p < .00.
- There was 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) = -0.62, p < .95.

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 gender variant 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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References


Figure 1: Summary of mental health and ethnic-racial identity results.