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# "I Didn't Come Here to Make Trouble": Resistance Strategies Utilized by Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth in the Midwestern U.S.

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**Abstract:** Research on transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth demonstrates the negative outcomes associated with trauma and oppression based on gender identity and expression. Related research illustrates how TGD youth are resilient in the face of oppression through individual (e.g., navigating difficult relationships, seeking mental health support) and community (e.g., access to community resources) factors. However, this research is limited by an understanding of resilience as overcoming challenges rather than exploring the possibly unique ways that TGD youth resist oppression as a form of resilience. This qualitative study utilized in-depth interviews with 19 TGD youth living in two Midwestern states, a region of the U.S. characterized by high levels of hostility and victimization toward TGD young people. Thematic analyses revealed the ways in which TGD youth engage in resistance strategies in the face of oppression. At an intrapersonal level, strategies included resisting oppressive narratives, affirming one's own gender, maintaining authenticity, and finding hope. At an interpersonal level, strategies were standing up for self and others, educating others, and avoiding hostility. Finally, at a community-level, TGD youth were engaging in activism and organizing and enhancing visibility and representation. Findings are discussed and implications are identified.

**Keywords:** transgender; gender diverse; adolescents; resilience; critical consciousness; resistance

## 1. Introduction

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth have genders that differ from their sex assigned at birth (e.g., male or female), including binary, nonbinary, agender, and gender fluid identities. Much of the scholarship on TGD youth has examined the prevalence and causes of health disparities and other poor outcomes, illustrating the very real consequences of stigma, discrimination, and victimization of TGD youth [1,2]. Although critical in establishing an understanding of the relationship between oppression and mental health, a deficit-oriented approach fails to account for the strengths of TGD youth and the ways in which they cultivate resilience [3] or resist oppression [4].

Resilience is "the quality of being able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity" [5] (p. 210) and may include both individual and contextual factors [6]. It has been conceptualized as both a positive outcome and a process for dealing with challenges [7]. While the concept of resilience is useful and important in shifting away from a predominant focus on risk, it has also been critiqued for "inadvertently put(ting) the burden on youth to build resilience and navigate discrimination, instead of focusing on how to change,

challenge, and dismantle the oppressive structures" [4] (p. 4). Indeed, a growing body of literature emphasizes the importance of tending to community and contextual resilience strategies, or the ways in which communities support TGD youth to reduce oppression and increase support to avoid placing the onus on individual youth to manage external risks and oppression [4,8].

Alternatively, resistance allows us to move beyond resilience and explore the strategies young people use to resist oppression and marginalization. Commonly situated within a critical consciousness framework, resistance includes individual and collective acts to oppose or reject oppression, stigma, and violence rooted in oppression [9]. In a call to action for LGBQ and TGD youth scholars, Robinson and Schmitz argue that focusing on resistance rather than just resilience illustrates the work required "to dismantle systems that create hardships" [4] (p. 7). They note that resilience and resistance are often used interchangeably, and that resistance may be a form of resilience. Similarly, critical consciousness scholars have urged researchers to focus on the systems that marginalize youth instead of focusing solely on individual efforts [10]. It is through that lens that we situate our study exploring resistance strategies utilized by TGD youth as a form of resilience. We focus specifically on TGD youth in the Midwest U.S., a context with high rates of stigma and victimization [11]. We begin by centering our study in critical consciousness theory [12–14] and then reviewing the literature on TGD youth risks, resilience, and resistance.

## 1.1. Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness theory posits that historically marginalized groups, such as TGD youth, can learn to analyze their social position critically and engage in actions to change conditions contributing to their oppression [12–14]. Rooted in educator Paulo Freire's emancipatory work with socio-politically oppressed Brazilians [13], the theory argues that critical consciousness (CC) consists of three main components: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action [12,14]. Critical reflection refers to understanding, analyzing, and rejecting inequities between social groups; critical motivation is one's capacity and commitment to social justice; critical action is individual and collective efforts to address social injustices [12]. Many scholars believe critical reflection is the precursor to action, but empirical evidence shows CC components broaden and build upon each other [12,14,15].

When applied to youth who experience marginalization, specifically youth of color and low-income youth, higher CC produces myriad positive outcomes, including optimal behavioral health, academic achievement, and occupational success [12,16]. A recent longitudinal study found that critical action among African American adolescents helped foster career aspirations that predicted their higher-status occupations in emerging adulthood [17]. The development of CC among marginalized youth stems from social connections with like-minded individuals, increased understanding and communication regarding institutional oppression, and perceived agency in addressing injustices [12]. Moreover, a recent systematic review identified a few studies that suggest experiences of marginalization, oppression, or violence contribute to the development of CC [16]. In addition to improved individual outcomes, greater CC among youth who experience marginalization relates to improvements in the social environment. Studies find that CC has led youth to improve school facilities, campaign to prevent violence, and increase the inclusivity of non-dominant identities [12,18].

A few studies have applied CC to TGD youth, sometimes including LGBQ youth in the sample. Poteat et al. [15] examined critical motivation and critical action at the beginning and end of the school year among youth engaged in school-based gender sexuality alliances (GSAs) in one U.S. state. The researchers found that greater engagement with GSAs at the start of the year was associated with greater critical motivation at the end of the year through critical action, further confirming the reciprocal nature of the CC components. Moreover, youth-led GSAs encouraged greater critical motivation than those led by adults, although critical action was lower in this group. Other studies have found

CC to relate to optimal mental health [19] and predict feelings of empowerment critical to civic engagement [20]. Although few studies have examined CC specifically among TGD youth, related research suggests many in this community are actively engaged in efforts to undermine their oppression [6,21–24].

### *1.2. TGD Youth Risks, Resilience, and Resistance*

Consistent with calls to action by TGD youth scholars [3], we situate an understanding of TGD youth resilience and resistance within a broader understanding of their risks.

### 1.2.1. TGD Youth Risks

In a process identified as the gender minority stress model [24], TGD youth are at risk of experiencing victimization and oppression based on their marginalized gender identities. These experiences are associated with high rates of behavioral health concerns such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidality, and substance abuse when compared with cisgender youth. For example, one study found that, compared to cisgender heterosexual youth, TGD heterosexual youth and TGD LGBQ youth were 6–9 times more likely to experience forced sex, respectively [25]. Furthermore, TGD youth who experience multiple forms of marginalization may be at increased risk of victimization. One study found that transgender people whose gender expression did not conform to societally sanctioned gender norms faced higher rates of discrimination than those whose did [26]. Additionally, transgender people of color report higher rates of victimization [27] and healthcare discrimination [28] than white transgender people. These experiences of victimization and marginalization are associated with higher rates of depression, substance abuse, stress, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation and attempts [1,29–32] when compared with cisgender youth. Despite the gender minority stress model including complex factors and variables beyond victimization and health outcomes, a review of literature on TGD youth health and minority stressors found that most studies focused on this "single-path model" between victimization and health outcomes [33]. Delozier et al. [33] argued that these single-path models fail to account for other critical components of the gender minority stress model, such as social context and social support and other resilience factors.

### 1.2.2. TGD Youth Risks in the Midwest

One important social context in which TGD youth are situated is their geographic context. Within a U.S. context, the region of the country where TGD youth live impacts their risk factors for victimization and health outcomes. In the Midwest and South, TGD and LGBQ youth report higher rates of victimization and stigma than in other regions of the U.S. [11]. These regions are often characterized as being more politically conservative, rural, and with more hostile attitudes toward TGD people [34], increasing the risks TGD youth face. For example, rural TGD and LGBQ youth report higher rates of suicidal ideation and drug use, with fewer supportive resources than TGD and LGBQ youth in urban areas [35,36]. Given the limited scholarly attention to TGD youth in the Midwest, additional research in this social context is warranted.

### 1.2.3. TGD Youth Resilience

Research on TGD youth and resilience is often situated within studies that include both TGD and LGBQ youth and attends to either individual or community-level resilience. For example, Asakura [21] found that TGD youth engaged in strategies that led to resilience through the ways in which they coped with challenging family and peer dynamics, navigated safety in their homes and communities, and established their personal agency. TGD youth may also engage with resources and contexts outside of themselves as a form of resilience. For example, TGD youth may use social media as a form of escapism, to resist oppression, to express themselves, and to foster community among other TGD youth [22,23]. TGD youth can also build resilience through community support, having their correct name/pronouns used, and having trusted adults in their constellation of

support [37]. Singh et al. [6] noted five themes of resilience among TGD youth: (1) being able to theorize and self-define their own gender, (2) proactive agency and access to supportive school systems, (3) connection to trans-affirming community, (4) reframing of mental health challenges, and (5) navigation of relationships with friends and family. The themes reinforce the notion that resilience can come from multiple mechanisms, rather than just a single approach.

These forms of resilience have real-world impacts, especially on the health and well-being of TGD individuals. For example, relational support for TGD individuals is related to emotional stability, which in turn is correlated with lowered risk of suicidality [38]. Pollit and colleagues [37] also found that being affirmed and having inclusive adults reduces mental health risk factors to the level of the general youth population. In regard to sexual health, Harper et al. [39] noted that among transfeminine adolescents and youth adults living with HIV, having positive self-regard and other positive internal self-cognitive processes are connected to higher engagement with the HIV cascade of care.

### 1.2.4. TGD Youth Resistance

As both a complement and counter to the limitations of resilience, TGD youth resistance includes the myriad ways youth act to counter oppression, stigma, and victimization. We argue that, while resilience may sometimes be viewed as simply the foil to the challenges of ongoing marginalization and oppression, it is also a form of resistance in and of itself. When TGD youth "survive and thrive in the face of adversity" [5] (p. 210), in a society that regularly diminishes their worth, their survival is an act of resistance. Some research on TGD youth resilience situates these resilience strategies within a resistance framework. Asakura's [21] research on resilience with TGD and LGBQ youth suggests that two of the ways youth operationalized resilience was through (1) un-silencing their marginalized identities and (2) engaging in collective healing and action, strategies that certainly fall under the definition of resistance. Additionally, Wagaman [40] spoke to the importance of counternarratives and storytelling being a critical approach embodied by LGBQ and TGD youth as a form of resistance against structures of oppression. Wagaman discussed how TGD young people work to create spaces for themselves through self and communal definitions as one form of resistance. In a study of TGD youth homelessness [41], youth spoke to their experiences of oppressive narratives and the need for self-definition and resisting these narratives as a way for them to be resilient.

In these ways, we see how resilience and resistance may be intertwined. While we tend to separate out the two as two different ways of responding to oppression and ongoing trauma, for many TGD youth, resistance may be a form of resilience. In order to expand on this important literature and better understand resistance strategies utilized by TGD youth, this study explored ways in which TGD youth engaged in acts of resistance to oppression as a means of cultivating resilience.

## 2. Methods

This study was part of a larger community-based, qualitative study in which TGD youth participated in in-depth interviews about their experiences in their families, schools, and communities. A TGD youth advisory board assisted with the development and completion of the study, including sample recruitment, revising the interview guide, assisting with data analysis, and reviewing emerging findings. The first two authors conceptualized and designed the study, both of whom are queer and cisgender. Therefore, it was critical that we included the voices and expertise of TGD youth within the advisory board.

### 2.1. Sampling and Participants

Youth were eligible to participate if they met all of the following criteria: (1) self-identified as transgender or gender diverse (including trans male, trans female, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, questioning, etc.); (2) were between 13 and 24 years of age at the time of the interview; (3) lived in one of two Midwestern states in which data collection

took place; (4) provided assent (13–17) or consent (18–24) to participate. Eligibility criteria initially included adolescents only, however, the advisory board recommended increasing the age to 24 to recruit a more diverse sample of youth, reasoning that those who are at most risk (trans girls, trans people of color) may not be able to participate while still dependent on their families. Therefore, the age range was increased to include young adults. This definition is consistent with how the United Nations [42] defines youth as continuing through the age of 24.

Potential participants were recruited via email and word-of-mouth within the first two authors' professional and social networks, as well as via social media advertisements and fliers shared with organizations serving TGD youth, schools, and other places in which youth congregate (e.g., libraries, coffee shops). Participants received a $20 gift card for their time. A total of 19 youth participated in the study and the sample was evenly split between the two states. The majority of participants (*n* = 15) lived in cities with populations less than 100,000; eight of these youth lived in towns with populations smaller than 50,000. Youth were between the ages of 15 and 22 (M = 18) and self-identified their gender as transgender man/boy/masculine (*n* = 8), non-binary/gender fluid (*n* = 8), or transgender woman/girl/feminine (*n* = 3). Their race/ethnicities were White/non-Hispanic (*n* = 14), multiracial (including Latinx, Native, Asian, and white; *n* = 3), Black (*n* = 1), and Latinx (*n* = 1). Participants provided their own pseudonyms and pronouns for use in the study.

### 2.2. Data Collection

Data collection took place between September 2017 and December 2018. Potential participants contacted the researchers at an email address provided in study advertisements. After establishing eligibility, participants were provided with assent/consent information and given the option to complete the interview in person or online. The advisory board recommended the online option as a measure of safety for participants, especially those who may not have disclosed their gender identity to others in their family or community. If youth elected to meet in person, researchers traveled to them and met in a space they identified (their home, library, etc.) that would ensure privacy and confidentiality. For those who wished to participate electronically, they were given a link to a Zoom video chat. All procedures were the same whether youth participated online or in person. A waiver of parental consent was granted by the University of Kansas Institutional Review Board due to the inherent risk of requiring TGD youth to disclose their identities and participation to guardians [43]. All youth provided verbal assent (13–17) or consent (18–24) and provided permission to audio record the interviews. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide that we modified throughout data collection based on feedback from the youth advisory board and emerging findings. The interview guide included questions about youth's gender identity; their experiences related to being TGD (positive and negative) in their families, schools, and communities; their internal beliefs about gender and being TGD; coping; health/mental health. Example questions included: *(1) Tell me about some of the beliefs you have about being trans? Are there things you say to yourself that are affirming of your trans identity? Do you have negative feelings about being trans? (2) What are the ways in which you cope with negative things you hear about your gender? (3) Tell me about a time you felt really happy or proud about being a trans person.*

### 2.3. TGD Youth Advisory Board

TGD youth were recruited for an advisory board to assist with the study's development, methods, analyses, and dissemination of findings. Eligibility criteria and recruitment strategies were identical to the larger study, except that all participants lived in only one sampled state to facilitate in-person meetings if they elected to do so. A total of nine youth participated in the board and were selected to maximize diversity across geography, gender identity and expression, race/ethnicity, and age. Board members were an average age of 18 and self-identified their gender as non-binary/gender fluid (*n* = 4), transgender

man/boy/masculine (*n* = 3), and transgender woman/girl/feminine (*n* = 2). They identified their race/ethnicity as White (*n* = 3), Asian (*n* = 2), Black (*n* = 1), Latinx (*n* = 1), and multiracial (including Black, Native, and White; *n* = 2). The board met monthly via video chat for 12 months, and youth were provided $20 for each meeting they attended. Parental consent was waived by the Institutional Review Board.

*2.4. Data Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and then analyzed using thematic analysis [44] in Dedoose [45]. After establishing familiarity with the transcripts, an initial round of data processes was conducted to identify excerpts related to resilience and resistance. Once these segments of text were identified, five members of the research team engaged in initial coding, sorting the quotes from youth participants into codes that represented the ways in which they demonstrated resilience and/or resistance. Following initial coding, the codes were explored in depth by the research team to identify patterns and create a codebook. At this time, the codebook included four overarching themes with 3–4 subthemes each. Subsequent rounds of coding were conducted by multiple authors to define and refine these themes and sub-themes. As a final stage of analysis, writing the findings section revealed additional nuances worth exploring and re-analyzing, resulting in the set of findings presented below.

**3. Results**

Findings revealed that TGD youth engaged in resistance strategies at multiple levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community/macro.

*3.1. Intrapersonal Resistance Strategies*

At the intrapersonal level, TGD youth engaged in resistance strategies within themselves. These strategies were used to resist internalized oppression or oppressive comments or actions from others. Regardless of where the oppression was situated, these intrapersonal strategies manifested within how youth managed their own thoughts, expressions, or behaviors. Intrapersonal resistance strategies included affirming self, maintaining authenticity, resisting oppressive narratives, and finding hope.

3.1.1. Affirming Self

TGD youth navigate an external world that invalidates and marginalizes their gender identities, expression, and inherent value as a member of society. To actively resist these oppressive messages and actions, TGD youth engaged in strategies to affirm their own gender, validity, and worth. These strategies showed up intrapersonally in the ways that TGD youth talked to and thought about themselves. Specifically, TGD youth engaged in self affirmation related to (1) their own gender and transness and (2) inherent dignity and worth.

First, participants shared the strategies they used to affirm their own gender and identity as TGD youth, especially when others in their lives dismissed or discounted them. Joseph described how conflicted he often felt about being transgender because of the negative messages he received from others. He shared that as a way of resisting these messages he would sometimes say to himself "Yes, I'm trans, I love being trans." Several youths described this type of self-talk about their gender identity or expression, while others discussed behaviors that they engage in to affirm their gender for themselves. For example, Alex shared how they "reaffirm" their own gender by "correcting something simple like my posture." He added: "(I put) myself in . . . an affirming headspace . . . if I can't find that external validation . . . going home and putting on my binder, even if it's just sitting at home for a while. Or messing around with makeup and giving myself facial hair . . . " Kyle and Tyra discussed the powerful strategy of photographing themselves as a way of affirming their own gender. Kyle said: "I take a picture with me in my binder and say screw you. This makes me feel comfortable." Tyra echoed this sentiment:

> *For the first two years of my transition, I took a picture every single day . . . it's taking*
> *these little things . . . reminding myself daily that I'm doing this . . . I'm navigating*
> *being trans and Black and I'm still thriving . . . my transness is a huge part of my success*
> *because without having to navigate all of this, I don't know who I would be. It's a part of*
> *who I am at the core.*

In these ways, TGD youth resisted the messages meant to disbelieve, harm, or oppress them by countering these messages with statements of affirmation.

Second, TGD youth engaged in self-affirmation in response to oppressive comments and behaviors by people in their lives. They discussed the ways in which these comments and behaviors were traumatizing and how affirming their own dignity and worth was a way of resisting these messages. Peter shared:

> *Sometimes I just allow myself to feel sad, and I just say, I know these people are saying*
> *these things about me. And I know they don't think that I can be this, even though this is*
> *what I am . . . it doesn't matter what they think. I'm still valid.*

Several youths shared internal messages in the realm of being valid as they are. Noel described how they tell themselves: "I am good . . . I am good, because even if someone says I'm bad, I am good. I know that I'm good". Chriss and Benton both shared rejecting messages they hear from others as "it doesn't matter what they say." Benton added "I know who I am" and Chriss shared they "remind myself of other positive stuff".

### 3.1.2. Maintaining Authenticity

The second intrapersonal resistance strategy utilized by TGD youth was maintaining authenticity for themselves. While affirming self was a strategy utilizing self-talk, maintaining authenticity was more action-based and showed up in the ways youth made decisions about what to wear, how to act, and how to present oneself so they could be authentic to their true selves. Although this strategy was often visible to others, it was done with the intention of staying true to themselves as TGD youth.

One way that TGD youth described maintaining authenticity was by being true to themselves. They shared finding ways to express themselves in the face of oppression or rejection so that they felt authentic in their bodies, interactions, and expressions. For example, Candy described making the decision to share her gender identity with others because "I don't want to hold myself back from doing more things. I want to be fully who I am". Kyle shared a similar sentiment, that he just wanted to be able to be himself: "I try to dress the way I want . . . trying to show the world who I am." Cassidy described dressing and behaving in a way that accentuated her feminine qualities in an unapologetic manner: "I will go above and beyond to pronounce any feminine quality I have . . . I think that really makes me feel better about some things." Norah described his experience with maintaining authenticity as a slow building that resulted in an excited expression of his gender. He said:

> *My mom kind of equates it to being Clark Kent. I have to wake up every day and . . . I'm*
> *awesome and great, and the body I picture in my head is not the one that everyone else is*
> *seeing. So, I work as hard as I can and be as brave as I can to just say "This is who I am"*
> *and try to put it out there every day . . . I think the defining moment was going out and*
> *being like "I'm wearing boy's underwear now. That's for me, I don't care what any people*
> *think. I'm wearing boy's underwear cause I'm a boy. Y'all can suck it!"*

Norah's comparison of himself to Clark Kent reveals the simultaneous challenges of hiding a part of oneself and the joy that can come from being wholly authentic.

Additionally, TGD young people described maintaining authenticity as a strategy for developing and expressing pride in themselves. They shared wanting others to see the joy and pride they felt in themselves and expressing these feelings "unapologetically." Tyra shared how she made the decision to change her name even without the support from her family and how this was an act of pride in herself:

> *I realized it's not their decision to make. They can be there and be a system of support, but they hold no stake in the decision making of my life or my narrative . . . Now I'm just unapologetically Black and trans and it's great. It's been some shit.*

Relatedly, Kyle shared being himself at his church, regardless of how others perceived him:

> *They don't believe in changing your gender or anything representing your gender . . . it's different to stick out but I'm pretty proud of who I am, so I go to church in a tie. I get a few stares and I don't like to go there, but it's just . . . I try to be who I am and if they like me, they do, if they don't, they don't.*

Finally, Chriss shared the desire to express themselves authentically, but how that's not always easy:

> *I have to remind myself that I can express myself the way I want to, without other people . . . they do judge, but like . . . I don't have to care about what they think all the time . . . I know that people are going to judge, but that doesn't affect me all the time.*

### 3.1.3. Resisting Oppressive Narratives

TGD youth were keenly aware of the narratives about what it means to be transgender and how many of these narratives are situated in oppression and stigma. They described actively resisting these oppressive narratives through their own self-presentation or expression. Specifically, TGD youth described resisting oppressive narratives in terms of other people's expectations of them and religious narratives steeped in oppression. Carter described people in his life trying to tell him how to act and these expectations being situated in stereotypical ideas about transgender people. He said, "I think it's that there shouldn't really be anyone else telling me what I should be other than me, 'cause why am I gonna let someone else decide for me when I should be deciding myself?" Tyra shared the beliefs others had about trans women and the expectations they subsequently placed on her to be overtly feminine and express herself as such. She resisted these narratives in the way she navigated her own self-expression: "Trans is not one thing. It doesn't look one way. It doesn't experience or operate in one way". She added:

> *As a trans Black woman, my work will be questioned and interrogated . . . it was really important for me to resist those narratives that were portrayed and say we're thriving. We're doctors. We're doing shit. We're people. We're existing. We're trying.*

TGD youth were also aware of the ways religious narratives were sometimes oppressive toward transgender and gender diverse people. Some youth experienced these narratives directly, while others heard about them through their community or in society as a whole. Kyle shared reframing the religious narrative that God would not want TGD people to "ruin" what he made by saying "Well, you know what, I think God would make us who we are—what we feel inside, you know?" Carter struggled to integrate religious narratives with his own gender identity at times, saying "I am a Christian, so a lot of what goes on in my head contradicts with how I identify. It's a lot of 'you're gonna go to hell." He added, "But it's also me saying, 'well, this is me. I don't really believe that God would make me this way if he was gonna hate me." While Kyle and Carter reframed the oppressive religious narratives they'd been told, Alex stood their ground with people in their life telling them they had to change. Alex shared being told by their father that in order to go through catechism and confirmation at their Catholic church, they had to repent and renounce their TGD identity. They resisted this narrative, saying: "I couldn't do it. I sat my dad down and I said, you know I can't do this." Alternatively, Shay took a more confrontational approach to resisting oppressive religious narratives. He shared hearing that "gay people or trans people should burn in hell" and responding with "well, I'm already here with you. See you there, bitch. If all the gays are in hell, I think I'd rather be there".

### 3.1.4. Finding Hope

Finally, TGD youth shared seeking out successful and positive stories from other TGD people as a way of finding hope for their future. Seeking out hope and feeling hopeful in a society that regularly disregards one's humanity is an act of resistance. Blake shared about a recent election and how several transgender people in his community, state, and nationally were elected to public office. He said: "(This) makes me really excited because times are changing, maybe I'll be able to do something like that someday. It makes me hopeful." Elliott shared seeking positive stories of TGD people on the internet. They shared:

> *It gives me a lot of hope and maybe a preview into my future if things get going in the right direction. I would like to take testosterone. I think that would make me feel a lot better, more comfortable. Yeah, it's like hearing a success story, especially if it's someone that I love and care about a lot.*

Kyle talked about following "positive trans people" on his social media as it gave him hope that one day, he'll feel the same joy they feel. "It gives me a comfort that I know that these people are doing great things with themselves . . . I've got something to look forward to. It's like the light at the end of the tunnel".

### 3.2. Interpersonal Resistance Strategies

Another theme that was identified in the findings included the use of interpersonal resistance strategies. In contrast to the intrapersonal resistance strategies, these strategies focused on ways that TGD youth are resisting oppression within relationships with other people, including both one-on-one relationships and within small groups. Specific interpersonal resistance strategies included: avoiding hostility, educating others, and standing up for themselves or others.

### 3.2.1. Avoiding Hostility

As a means of employing interpersonal resistance, youth shared how they make active decisions to avoid conversations or people who are hostile toward TGD people and issues. Avoiding hostility was used by youths to resist having the conditions of their environment imposed upon them by others and was noted both within in-person and online contexts. This strategy was exhibited in statements such as, "I don't talk to my mom about gender," or "I avoid those kids at school." Kyle explains this strategy when he says, "I do realize that some people are uncomfortable with me, so I just stay away from those people".

Sometimes this avoidance entailed extricating themselves out of hostile situations. As Alex shared, this could include "remov[ing] myself from the situation [and] logging off Facebook." It could also include ignoring hostility, as shared by Benton who described how they respond to hostile messages: "I might talk about it later with my friends or with another family member, but usually I don't think about it. I'll block it out and ignore it".

Other times, this avoidance was more planned in that youth were not simply walking away from or ignoring hostile situations in which they would find themselves, but instead evinced a clear strategy to avoid entering hostile situations in the first place. Cassidy demonstrated the active planning that could go into avoidance when she shared the following: "I try to stay away from a lot of the negative media. On some of the forms of social media . . . you can block certain terms. I have a lot of the trans-hate-based terms blocked." Alex provided an example of this strategy in use when they mentioned that, in times of uncertainty, "I actually avoid leaving my house or going into like really public spaces unless I'm dressed like non-trans".

The use of this strategy at times included targeted avoidance of specific people or contexts. As Cassidy explains:

> *I really take caution when I do come out to certain people. I have a very, very bigoted professor at my university right now and no matter how much I want to just be like, 'Hey, this is how it is, man', I don't want to face the backlash from him particularly. I really go through a list of the pros and cons of me coming out to this person.*

Blake further demonstrates avoidance of particular people or contexts when he says:

> *I talk to them, and if I cannot sway them—which I've found doesn't really work—then I just ignore them. Like my dad, I haven't talked to him in forever. He was really mentally and emotionally abusive even growing up, then it got worse once I came out as trans. That's one of the reasons I moved in with my fiancée.*

Describing the purpose of avoidance of hostility as a strategy for resistance, Benton explains, "It doesn't help like progress anything I guess, but it helps me get through it. So I'm not bettering the community, but I'm trying to survive it".

### 3.2.2. Educating Others

Youth shared a common desire and commitment to educating others around them in order to resist the ideas, opinions, and narratives others hold about TGD youth. While the strategy included educating others both one-on-one or in small groups, the felt need to educate others came off as particularly strong when the "others" in question were familiar acquaintances such as friends and family of the youth. As Norah shared:

> *If it's someone that is kind of already in my life, I'm more likely to want to sit down and have a one-on-one with them and be, you know, kind of like, 'Hey, this is hurtful. Even if it's what you believed, it was hurtful. So let's talk about it.'*

Alex offers a similar sentiment, adding that—for those close to them—they might be the only TGD person that person knows:

> *I'm very happy to share that with people that I am out and close to, to kind of educate them and show them other stories that aren't just my own. Because, like I said, a lot of these cases, I'm the only queer person they know.*

It is important to note that acts of educating others, while sometimes spurred by in-the-moment comments made by those around them, were at times deliberately planned in advance by youth to provide systematic and thorough information intended to counter transphobic or trans-aggressive views. Candy shares about her experience educating her father, which included organizing her efforts to educate around anticipated questions he might have:

> *I felt like I had to give a lot of information . . . If he had difficulty with name and pronouns, that was . . . okay. I went down the list of stuff like that. I also sent him an email to go back to later, with some resources at the bottom. Yeah, definitely thinking about all his questions.*

Candy further discusses the role of organized efforts at educating others via the use of "Trans 101" presentations. These presentations, conducted in partnership with her trans friend, gave Candy a sense of pride while imparting knowledge from their unique perspectives as trans people:

> *I was very proud in that space. We gave a very good and deep overview of trans issues. Good general knowledge but also very good specific knowledge that you could really only get if you were talking about trans issues with a trans person.*

When educating others, youth tended to demonstrate a degree of empathy with those they were educating when those people were viewed to be open to learning, indicating that meeting people where they are could be used by youth when engaging in education as a resistance strategy. Kyle does this when he shared:

> *Sometimes they get uncomfortable whenever they say the wrong name and they all freak out a little bit and they'll panic there, like, 'oh gosh, oh no,' and then I'll be like 'it's ok, it's fine, I get it.' It happens because I get that other people are changing too. Their ways, their views of me and how they present me verbally you know that takes some challenge.*

Youth identified numerous purposes that motivate their use of education as a mode of resistance. One purpose, as explained by Alex, was simply to encourage others to engage

in deeper dialogue and thinking around TGD issues: "A lot of the stuff [I hear from others] is, 'Oh, that's just stupid.' Like I'm sorry, you can claim anything is stupid, show me, get a little specific here." Educating others was also used to correct common and hurtful misunderstandings of TGD people. As Shay shares: "There are some people where it is like, oh, being trans isn't real, like you are born male or female or something like that. And I'm like, that's not gender boy, that's sex." Aligned with this aim, Alex evinced a desire to promote respectfulness among others: "I would love to maybe try to kind of debate with people. Figure out where these messages, these prejudices are coming from, show them my experience and then hope if nothing else, they speak a little more respectfully." Blake echoes this view, adding that with education comes safer spaces for TGD individuals: "I feel like people would be more accepting if they were more educated ... I feel like more people would feel safer to come out".

For some youth, the strategy of educating others was tied to resisting structural oppressions, with clear implications beyond changing views at an individual level. Chriss, for example, talked about their use of sharing posts on Instagram as a means of ensuring that people get "the full story" and thus catalyzing others to broader action:

> *I feel like sometimes people don't get the full story, just from watching the news or anything like that, so I do a lot of like research sometimes, just to make sure that people know what actually happened ... once I put it out there, other people also spread the word ... So it kind of starts a chain reaction ... [that could start] peaceful protests and stuff like that.*

Similarly, Tyra discussed the need to educate a candidate for student government as a method of advocating for the needs of the TGD community:

> *I was like, 'y'all cannot make us pay to change our fucking names on our (University) IDs, and y'all can help us change our name in the system easier, and y'all can get a gender identity therapist in your health center—someone who can prescribe hormone replacement therapy, direct access.' I said, 'And I understand all of those things cost money, and they're not all as easily feasible, but you can write a policy to have the $20 fee waived to change a name.*

### 3.2.3. Standing up for Self and Others

Another mode of interpersonal resistance included youth standing up for themselves or others, which entailed demanding respect from others and fighting back when faced with oppressive, anti-trans interpersonal situations. Some forms of standing up included making in-the-moment corrections when others made offensive statements, redirecting negative statements to positive ones, and setting boundaries on how they will be treated.

Shay illustrated an example of in-the-moment corrections when recounting an incident with his father: "Then he got all defensive, and then he's like, 'Oh, well, you're not my daughter.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, you're right. I'm not—I'm your son.'" Elliott similarly shared about in-the-moment corrections:

> *If the person's not there and someone's talking about them and they're using the wrong pronouns, I've had a few instances where I've been like, 'Hey, I think it's actually this. If you could do that, that'd probably be better.'*

Redirecting, a second mode of standing up shared by youth, included attempts to reframe statements in trans-accepting ways. As Noel shared:

> *I try to reflect positivity on anything negative. If somebody's saying anything negative —if somebody is saying, 'Transgender is gross'—I'll be like, 'Well, I mean, maybe possibly you're the gross one, but either way, I will love you.' You know what I mean? Like try to change what they're saying or what I'm saying into something positive to help encourage them to love instead of hate.*

Setting boundaries was another way in which youth stood up for themselves or others. Youth set boundaries with others in their lives, including telling people how they will

or will not be treated with regards to their gender identity and expression. This strategy came through most clearly when youth spoke about their relationships with their families. Benton, for example, talked about standing up for himself in the aftermath of anti-trans statements and actions made by his parents:

*There's a lot of things I probably need to tell [my mom]. I need to break things off, probably, with my parents, just because they said a lot things. I need time to heal. I can't let them keep acting the way they are towards my identity . . . I still talk to them, but they kicked me out, and I'm not okay with what they did or what they said.*

While setting boundaries was a particularly common strategy of standing up used in interactions with families, boundary setting also came out in other settings, including when TGD youth interacted with instructors. Elijah indicated:

*They see my birth name, but I emailed all of my teachers and professors at the beginning of the year and asked them to use [chosen name], and that I'm gonna be writing [chosen name] on my paper whether they like that or not.*

For some youth, standing up to anti-trans statements and actions comes easily. Tyra reflected this confidence when she said: "For the most part, I'm at a place now where I can handle my own." Kyle echoed this view with: "I'll say something about it, because I'm not afraid to stand up for who I am, and I'm not going to have people say things like that." Blake, too, said: "If I see hate, I will definitely point it out and tell them not to do it, it's wrong." Others, such as Elliott, found the confidence to stand up to be situation-dependent, such as in settings where they know the person making hurtful statements: "I will correct people if I know them".

Other youth evinced a stronger degree of hesitation or nervousness around standing up for themselves or others. Benton suggested that standing up "depends on the message" and explained: "If it is a message I can fight back, then I will, I will say something, but a lot of times I don't say anything unless someone else [does] I guess . . . I'm not good with conversation usually." Having a higher degree of nervousness did not automatically mean that youth abandoned standing up as a strategy for resistance. Sometimes, they would fight through their feelings about the confrontation to do it, nevertheless, as expressed by Dolly's statement:

*If I feel the need to join a conversation or whatever, then I'll do that. I'll feel really nervous, I guess, while doing it, but at the end when I—when I've kind of put them in their place—I feel great overall, but still like just nervous energy.*

As noted by Shay, fighting through a fear of confrontation to resist trans-aggressive messages could sometimes be facilitated when the standing up would occur via the internet:

*I can . . . build myself up enough to jump in and say something, but that never usually happens unless it's like the internet . . . In which case, I'll be like, 'oh, I don't have to build up confidence, I'll just do it now because I'm behind the screen' . . . that's pretty much how I do it.*

Peter further exemplifies ways in which TGD youth continue to resist and stand up for themselves and others despite the inherent difficulties of confrontation:

*One of the things that I like to do is to just stare in disbelief at them, just complete disbelief, and just make the dumbest face I can, just a complete blank face and just look. Because a lot of the times I can't really muster the courage to stand up for myself, but I'll be damned if I can't make a stupid face.*

As evident here, TGD youth found standing up for themselves and others to be critical to resisting transphobia, and while this is not always easy to do, youth can find ways to do so that align with their individual personalities and abilities.

*3.3. Community/Macro Resistance Strategies*

Beyond intra- and interpersonal strategies to resist oppression, TGD youth utilized community and macro-focused strategies, often related to changing systems and organizations. Specific strategies included engaging in activism and organizing and enhancing visibility and representation. Both of these strategies were commonly talked about through a lens of acting generatively to better situations for other TGD youth, current and future.

3.3.1. Engaging in Activism and Organizing

When TGD youth engaged in activism and organizing as a method of resistance, it included formal activism and organizing, leadership in student or community groups, or other forms of community work. For example, Norah shared about his involvement in activist work, including his experience confronting school officials when transphobia happened publicly with his classmates. When school officials neglected to respond to the demands of Norah and other concerned students within a timely manner, Norah continued undeterred, organizing a sit-in with his friends. Norah's perseverance and commitment to activism is similarly seen in his view of activism as a right, regardless of others' feelings about it:

> *People get really uncomfortable when trans people are loud in spaces like that, especially white cis males like our Vice-President [or] Principals at the school. They get really uncomfortable when trans people are saying, 'You did something wrong. Can you please fix it?' That's just something people generally get uncomfortable with ... But, yeah, definitely expect resistance if you're gonna ... do something mean then they have the right to stand up and say, 'Mm-mm, no thank you.'*

Other macro resistance came in the form of leadership in groups. This was a strategy of Peter who said, "I was more of an advocate within my school ... because I tried to get myself into as many office positions that I could." Alex similarly expressed a proclivity towards leadership, especially when that leadership was perceived to be filling a need for the broader TGD community. When recounting their thoughts about starting a TGD group, they said:

> *I was very active in my college. I still am. I was president of my honor society. I served on committee boards with faculty reporting to the board of trustees. I've had my fingers in a lot of waters. I've considered kind of being that person to kind of push things along, but at the same time, it's almost kind of bystander effect, like not necessarily my responsibility. 'Oh, someone else will do it, surely.' No one else has done it. Probably no one else is going to do it. The closest thing you get to [having a GSA] is choir. So that's kind of the defacto gay club.*

A third method of macro resistance came from mobilizing others for advocacy. This was seen in a statement by Elliott who shared:

> *We were going to try to put together a panel of teachers that's just advisors on LGBT issues, because there are some teachers that are a part of that community. We're trying to have some scheduled meetings and talks, student-to-student, teacher-to-student ... there's lots of connections that can be made, people that can talk about issues as they come up.*

With this strategy, TGD youth recognized the need to involve others—often those with power and privilege—to affect change in their communities.

3.3.2. Enhancing Visibility and Representation

TGD youth engage in strategies to be visible in their own TGD identities, seek out and act as representatives for other TGD youth, and utilize Pride events as ways of pushing boundaries and de-centering cis identities. Youth talked about both how the representation and visibility of TGD individuals impacted them personally, as well as how they sought to increase representation to similarly impact others in positive ways. The idea that TGD

representation was important came out for many youths, including Alex who related their feelings about representation in popular culture:

> *Gerard Way . . . has said in interviews, you know, something along the lines of my identity isn't so binary, or something like that. And I'm like, wow [screams], I got really excited over that . . . a lot of people that I knew were excited as well. They were like, 'Wow, this representation.'*

Having visibility meant that youth felt "not alone," and that it was possible to be TGD and be happy with themselves. Peter shared:

> *Just being surrounded by people like [yourself] makes you feel you're not alone . . . I moved here on Pride of this year and it was literally right outside my window and I almost started crying because I'm seeing all these people that are proud of being who they are and they're not afraid of it . . . it just made me feel really happy to be who I am.*

For some youth, the need for representation to resist societal stigma extended beyond visibility of TGD identities to include considerations of intersectionality. Dolly explained this view with regards to their viewpoint as a biracial individual:

> *When you think of queer trans people, you don't really see many people of color, so you kind of have to search them out yourself . . . I think it's important . . . to let other people know that you can be not white—not fully white—and still queer.*

It was clear that their own experiences with representation—positive and negative—shaped youths' desire to take active efforts to shape TGD visibility for the benefit of others. Benton described this when recounting his motivations to engage in public speaking about his experiences:

> *I'm planning on going back to [the GSA] as a speaker in the spring after my voice actually drops . . . I remember when we had a speaker back in GSA my senior year, and it was a trans guy, and being very disappointed in it, because his family situation was a lot better, and I was really disappointed by that, because I didn't connect to it.*

To be able to be that representation for others tied to a desire to promote the happiness and emotional well-being of other TGD individuals. As Candy shared:

> *One of the things that they always say is you see queer people rocking it, and that makes you happy, and you can be that way for someone else. That's definitely something that I feel, so I try to be very open about that sort of thing—how I look and present and talk about things.*

Peter similarly related how the need to represent TGD individuals had strong links to wanting to help other TGD youth through their struggles:

> *[The need for representation] makes me want to go back [to the Southern state] and be a beacon for them. Sometimes I just really do want to go back and try to just have a house and paint it rainbow colors and let them know everything is going to be alright because you're not the only one.*

## 4. Discussion

Findings from this study documented the multilevel ecological strategies TGD youth in the Midwest employ to resist oppression and dehumanization and cultivate resilience. TGD youth in this study employed intrapersonal, interpersonal, and macro-level strategies to resist oppression in their families, schools, communities, and society, as well as within themselves. Although they did not always name these actions as resistance strategies, they individually and collectively engaged in these strategies in the face of oppression within a society that sends a message that they should, in fact, not be thriving. By situating these strategies as more than overcoming challenges, but also challenging oppression, these findings bring further definition to resistance. Furthermore, we added valuable knowledge on a population underrepresented in that literature by situating our findings in relation

to critical consciousness. By connecting critical consciousness and resilience to resistance efforts by TGD youth in the Midwest, we also illuminated intervention possibilities for this population that can address structural oppression as well as individual functioning.

### 4.1. Resistance, Resilience, and Critical Consciousness

Our findings document resistance as a process occurring at the intra-, inter-, and macro-levels of TGD youth ecology, expanding past conceptualizations of resistance. Past scholars have defined resistance as the development of critical consciousness to counter oppressive and dehumanizing rhetoric directed at one's social identity [9,46]. Strategies of resistance have mainly been situated at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, such as speaking one's mind, self-affirmation, and viewing group membership positively [9,46]. We found additional support for this conceptualization while also connecting resistance to the macro-level and documenting additional forms of resistance at each ecological level.

In discerning resistance from resilience, Clonan-Roy and colleagues [46] defined resilience among girls of color as, " . . . effective coping behaviors and strategies that enable [marginalized youth] to continue to pursue their goals and maintain a positive sense of self-worth in the face of adversity: sometimes these behaviors and strategies involve resistance . . . " (p. 115). Participants in this study depicted resistance as intentional acts that decouple TGD youth from societal marginalization—it sets boundaries on oppression. Our findings were congruent with Clonan-Roy et al.'s work in that resistance is an intentional resilience strategy sometimes employed to counter oppression and dehumanization, and they were congruent with Robinson and Schmitz [4] in that TGD youth employ resistance to challenge and change oppressive systems. We believe it is critical to underscore the temporal and selective nature of resistance by individuals to be in line with current literature that research should emphasize the role of marginalizing systems by studying critical consciousness and its correlates at this ecological level (Godfrey and Burson, 2018; Robinson and Schmitz, 2021). For TGD youth, exploring resistance may enhance understanding of these marginalizing systems.

Scholars have proposed that cultivating resistance in marginalized youth can lead to the development of critical consciousness [4,10]. However, this relationship is built from a definition where resistance is transformative at the individual level but not within social and structural environments [9,10]. Our findings depicted resistance among TGD youth in the Midwest to be transformative at numerous levels such as critical consciousness. We argued that resistance and critical consciousness occur simultaneously, building off one another. Resistance is omnipresent in youths' lives—available to be used as necessary—and accordingly can become part of one's social identity. Understanding resistance as a feature of social identity for marginalized individuals may shed light on outstanding differences in CC between marginalized and privileged groups [12].

### 4.2. Critical Consciousness among TGD Youth

We are one of few studies to employ CC among TGD youth specifically rather than grouped in with the broader LGBQ community [15,40]. It is critical to identify the population-specific processes of CC for TGD youth, as interventions that employ the theory demonstrate great promise for addressing macro-level oppression and consequent individual-level impacts [12,18]. Most of these interventions are group-based, given CC's emphasis on collective learning and action, and have focused on increasing critical reflection, motivation, and action without assessing individual wellbeing as an outcome. However, Windsor and colleagues [47] designed a multilevel intervention rooted in CC and developed from community-based participatory research methods that aimed to address community-level oppression and consequent behavioral health issues among post-incarcerated men in predominantly African American communities.

*4.3. Limitations*

The findings from this study should be interpreted within the study's limitations. As a qualitative study, the findings were not meant to generalize to other populations or settings. The findings should be interpreted with geographic, contextual, and identity-specific considerations in mind. Additionally, participants were not specifically asked how they engage in acts of resistance or how these acts relate to resilience; rather, these findings emerged from a broader set of interview data. If youth participants were asked to identify how they engage in resistance, they may have additional or different answers. Finally, although we made attempts to diversify the sample in terms of age, race/ethnicity, gender, and geographic region of the sampled states, we primarily achieved age and geographic diversity. The sampled participants were still predominantly transmasculine or non-binary and white; transfeminine and trans people of color likely have different and complex strategies for resistance given their multiple intersections of oppression. Despite these limitations, this study was strong in its attention to resistance as a form of resilience, attention to an understudied geographic context, and use of a community based TGD youth advisory board.

*4.4. Implications*

The findings from this study have important implications for research and practice. More research is needed that examines critical consciousness among TGD youth in various settings and contexts. Additionally, given the relevance of social context in the gender minority stress model [24], future research should continue to explore risk, resilience, and resistance among TGD youth in diverse geographic settings. Future studies should also identify strategies to improve participation of transfeminine and trans youth of color to explore the types of resistance strategies utilized by these young people. Finally, scholars should attend to the relationships between resistance and critical consciousness and health and well-being among TGD youth.

Additionally, given the impact of resilience on the health and well-being of TGD individuals, professionals serving them should identify ways to foster resistance strategies with TGD youth. It may be particularly useful to improve relationship support, self and group affirmation, and inclusion by significant adults in the lives of TGD youth. Importantly, these findings could be used to inform a multi-level intervention based on Windsor et al. work [47]. Such a strategy rooted in critical consciousness could aim to address community oppression aimed toward TGD youth while also supporting their individual behavioral health. The multilevel intervention approach has been endorsed by social justice scholars since it shifts the focus away from the individual solely [48,49].

**5. Conclusions**

TGD youth in the Midwest face complex combinations of stigma, oppression, support, and resilience. Understanding the ways in which they cultivate resilience through resistance is an important step toward supporting TGD youth in holistic, youth-centered, and anti-oppressive ways. TGD youth's very survival, let alone their ability to thrive, is an act of resistance in a society that dehumanizes them through legislation and policy, attitudes and rhetoric, and acts of violence. This study contributes toward our understanding of how TGD youth engage in a process of resilience through acts of resistance.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the University of Kansas (00140702; 3/30/2017).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent from parents was waived by the IRB. Informed consent was obtained from all adults in the study; assent was obtained from adolescents.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to participants being youth experiencing marginalization.

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