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Transgender Students' Responses to Systemic Stressors in South African Universities

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Abstract

This paper explores the retorts of students with transgender identities towards structural exclusion in institutions of higher learning. This cohort of student's studies and reside in spaces that are suppressive, oppressive and marginalising for them. These and similar institutions of higher learning do not affirm inclusion and diverse gender diversity among student populations. For this reason, these transgender students are obligated to retort against these structural exclusions. This study is interested in finding out how students with transgender identities navigate through institutions of higher learning in pursuit of inclusivity. Eight participants who identify themselves as transgender students were sampled using a purposive sampling method. To comprehend their realities, a phenomenological approach is utilised through the adoption of an arts-based approach to collect data. Content data analysis is suitable to assess the reliability and validity of the raw data collected for this study. Furthermore, the minority stress theory (MST) underpins this study. The

theory brings understanding of the impact of distal and proximal stressors caused by structural exclusions in the lives of students with transgender identities at institutions of higher learning. The findings of the study revealed that students with transgender expressions are excluded, discriminated and *'othered'* because institutions of learning are characterised by direct and structural discrimination known as heterosexism. This article argues that the system is silent (or silencing) about the needs of students with transgender identities. These experiences create distal and proximal stressors that affect the well-being and academic work of transgender students. Therefore, radical transformation should be prioritised to ensure that institutions of learning are safe and inclusive spaces for *all* students.

Keywords: Structural Exclusion; Inclusion; Institution of Higher Learning; Oppression; Transgender, Cisnormativity

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning must create inclusive and socially just learning environments (Msibi, 2013) for everyone (including transgender students). Transgender students should not be 'bodies' that are victimised and discriminated in learning spaces because they deviate from the societal norms and standards (Bottoman, 2021; Sanger, 2014). Francis & Le Roux (2011) advocate for social justice education that supports all students' full and equal participation in the education system. Students, regardless of their gender identities, should be acknowledged and respected. Social justice education requires institutions of learning to revise their outdated, oppressive, heteronormative and cisnormative educational policies (Reygan, 2019). According to Francis and Le Roux (2011), social justice education is a form of education that emancipates every student (regardless of gender expression) and allows them to participate fully and equally in the education system. Higher education must transform because currently, it emphasizes '*race*' transformation while paying scant attention to transformation for '*diverse gender expressions'* (Vincent & Munyuku 2017, p. 16).

It is absurd to increase access to education for all students without building opportunities for success (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). Such a practice creates a new norm of social exclusion within the higher education system (Walker, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2011). *Social exclusion*

can be defined as a process of non-participation in societal institutions, such as institutions of learning, which prevents an individual from fully participating in the education system (Sparkes, 1999). Transgender students experience exclusion in institutions of higher learning. According to Klasen (2001), the (social) exclusion is about the alienation and distancing of people, especially those who deviate from the norm, from the mainstream institutions of society. Students with transgender expressions are regularly confronted with specific systemic gender-binary constrains (Bottoman, 2021).

Literature Review

The inclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) students in higher education has become an increasingly important topic as institutions strive to create more diverse and welcoming environments (Beemyn et al., 2005; Bilodeau, 2013; Nicolazzo, 2016). Despite this growing focus, TGNC students continue to face various forms of discrimination and marginalisation on higher education campuses. This includes systemic gender binary constraints related to housing, restrooms, locker rooms, and administrative policies that lead to feelings of exclusion and discomfort (Beemyn et al. 2005; Seelman 2014). Furthermore, TGNC students frequently experience microaggressions, misgendering, and harassment from peers, faculty, and staff (Goldberg et al., 2019; Pitcher, 2017).

The lack of inclusive policies and practices in higher education institutions contributes significantly to the precariousness experienced by TGNC students. As Seelman (2014) argues, many universities struggle to accommodate diverse gender identities due to persisting heteronormative and cisnormative discourses. This results in inadequate healthcare services, limited access to gender-affirming facilities, and non-inclusive curricula (Goldberg et al., 2019; Woodford et al., 2017). These pervasive forms of institutional discrimination produce conditions in which TGN students' lives may feel precarious (Bonner-Thompson et al. 2021). To understand the impact of these oppressive experiences on TGN students, scholars have utilized Meyer's (2015) minority stress model. This model posits that TGNC individuals face unique stressors due to their gender identity status, which can have severe negative mental and physical health consequences (Cardona et al., 2022; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). At the same time, the model also highlights the critical protective factors of individual and community-based resilience among TGNC individuals in combating institutionalised discrimination (Meyer, 2015). This underscores the

importance of examining both the challenges faced by TGNC students and their strategies of resistance.

In the South African context, research on the experiences of TGNC students in higher education remains limited (Sanger, 2014). However, the few existing studies suggest that TGNC students face similar challenges to those documented internationally. For example, Beukes and Francis (2020) found that gender non-conforming students at Stellenbosch University experienced exclusion and marginalisation, having to navigate heteronormative spaces that failed to affirm their identities. Similarly, Mampane and Brown (2021) highlighted the difficult transitions of gender non-conforming students from school to university, encountering institutional environments ill-equipped to support their needs. These findings align with international scholarship on the barriers to inclusion for TGNC university students (Goldberg et al., 2019; Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). However, significant gaps remain in understanding how these students navigate and resist structural exclusion, particularly in the South African context. Much of the existing research focuses on the challenges faced by TGNC students, with less attention given to their strategies of resilience (Nicolazzo, 2017; Singh et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a need for more context-specific research that explores the unique experiences of TGN students in relation to the social, cultural, and institutional forces that shape their lives, especially in the Global South (Msibi, 2013; Reygan, 2019).

This is a critical oversight, as research by scholars such as Boonzaier and Mkhize (2018) illustrates how the intersections of race, class, and gender shape the experiences of queer students at historically White universities in South Africa. Their findings highlight the institutional betrayal felt by Black queer students whose expectations of inclusivity and freedom of expression are met with experiences of alienation and "bodies out of place" in a heteronormative and racially exclusionary environment. Ongoing struggles around decolonization in South African higher education have foregrounded issues of racial belonging, yet Boonzaier and Mkhize (2018) argue that an intersectional approach is necessary to fully understand the complexities of marginalised student subjectivities. Similarly, Matthyse's (2017) autoethnographic account details the pervasive homophobia and transphobia at the University of the Western Cape, despite the institution's stated commitment to social justice and inclusion. Matthyse highlights how genderism manifests in both overt discrimination and more subtle forms of silencing and erasure, affecting TGNC students' safety, mental health, and academic success. Challenging the

heteronormative status quo, Matthyse (2017) argues, requires awareness-raising and collective efforts to transform institutional cultures. Msibi (2013) further critiques the limited approach to transformation in South African higher education, which has tended to focus narrowly on race and gender to the exclusion of other forms of difference. Msibi advocates for a "queer approach" that examines the intersectional ways in which various forms of oppression and discrimination find expression in university spaces. This approach demands that institutions move beyond a superficial politics of inclusion to interrogate the "bitter knowledge" (Jansen, 2016) and uninterrupted prejudices that continue to shape the experiences of marginalised students.

Taken together, this emerging body of South African scholarship underscores the urgent need for transformation efforts that take seriously the lives of TGNC students. By centering their voices and experiences, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of how TGNC students navigate and resist the gender-normative spatial and discursive practices of university environments (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). In doing so, it seeks to generate insights that can inform more inclusive, affirming approaches to institutional change. While the growing international literature has documented the significant challenges faced by TGN students in higher education, there remains a critical need for more research that explores their strategies of resistance and resilience, particularly in understudied contexts such as South Africa. By examining how TGNC students in South African institutions retort to structural exclusion, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences and inform efforts to create campus environments that are truly inclusive and transformative. Ultimately, radical change is necessary to ensure that higher education can become a space where all students, regardless of their gender identity and expression, are able to learn, grow and thrive.

Theoretical lens: Minority Stress Theory (MST)

This study employs the minority stress theory (MST), a framework originally developed to understand the unique stressors experienced by sexual minorities (Meyer, 2003) and later expanded to include gender minorities (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). MST posits that sexual and gender minorities face distinct stressors related to their marginalized identities, which can lead to adverse mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2015). For transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students, minority stress manifests through experiences of

discrimination, rejection, and stigma in educational settings, often reinforced by heteronormative and cisnormative policies, curricula, and practices (Goldberg et al., 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016).

In this study, we apply MST as a framework to examine the experiences of transgender students in South African higher education institutions. We argue that MST provides a useful lens for understanding how structural exclusion and marginalization contribute to minority stress among this population. Transgender students in South Africa navigate educational environments that are often hostile and unaccommodating to their identities (Msibi & Jagessar, 2015; Ndelu et al., 2017). They face discrimination, harassment, and violence based on their gender identity and expression (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017), as well as institutional policies and practices that reinforce cisnormativity (Matthyse, 2017; Msibi, 2013).

According to MST, these distal stressors - external, objective experiences of stigma and prejudice - can lead to proximal stressors, which are internal and subjective (Meyer, 2003). For transgender students, proximal stressors may include expectations of rejection, concealment of identity, and internalized transphobia (Testa et al., 2015). The theory also recognizes general stressors, such as academic pressures or financial strain, which may be exacerbated by minority status (Meyer, 2003). In designing this study, MST informed our research questions and methodology. We sought to explore not only the structural exclusions faced by transgender students, but also their subjective experiences of minority stress and resilience. Our arts-based approach, using found poetry, was chosen to elicit rich, nuanced accounts of participants' lived realities (Wang et al., 2017). The open-ended prompt allowed participants to reflect on both distal and proximal stressors, as well as their strategies for coping and resistance.

During the analysis stage, MST provided a framework for interpreting participants' narratives. We looked for instances of distal stressors, such as experiences of discrimination or exclusion in university spaces. We also attended to proximal stressors, such as participants' anticipation of rejection or internalised self-stigma. At the same time, we remained open to themes of resilience and agency, recognizing that minority stress is not deterministic and that individuals can develop coping resources to buffer its impact (Meyer, 2015). While our study is primarily concerned with experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, we argue that MST is still a relevant and valuable framework. Minority

stress is inherently linked to structural inequalities and institutional practices that privilege dominant groups (Meyer, 2003). By examining the ways in which transgender students navigate and resist exclusionary environments, we shed light on the processes through which minority stress is produced and maintained. Moreover, MST attends to the health and wellbeing implications of minority stress, recognizing that experiences of exclusion and discrimination can have tangible impacts on mental and physical health outcomes (Meyer, 2003).

It is important to note that while MST provides a useful starting point for understanding the experiences of transgender students, it is not without limitations. The theory has been critiqued for its focus on individual-level factors and its potential to pathologize minority identities (Riggs & Treharne, 2017). In this study, we aim to balance attention to individual narratives with an analysis of structural and institutional factors that contribute to minority stress. We also acknowledge the diversity within transgender populations and the need for an intersectional approach that attends to multiple, overlapping forms of oppression (Seelman, 2014).

MST provides a valuable framework for exploring the experiences of transgender students in South African higher education. By attending to both distal and proximal stressors, as well as general academic challenges, we aim to capture the complex ways in which minority stress shapes transgender students' lived realities. At the same time, we highlight the resilience and agency of transgender students in navigating and resisting oppressive institutional environments. Through this application of MST, we seek to generate insights that can inform interventions to create more inclusive and affirming university spaces for all students.

METHODS

In this paper, we adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of transgender students in South African institutions of higher learning. Qualitative research is well-suited for understanding complex social phenomena and giving voice to marginalised populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We utilised a phenomenological research design, which aims to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology emphasises that only those who have directly encountered a phenomenon can

communicate its nature to the outside world (Mapp, 2008). This approach aligns with our goal of centering transgender students' own narratives and insights about structural exclusion and resistance in higher education.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (clearance code Sem 1-2022-038). Eight participants were purposively sampled based on their self-identification as transgender students currently enrolled in South African universities or colleges. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to recruit information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insight into the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). Our sample included seven transgender women (TGW) and one transgender man (TGM) from diverse geographic locations and educational levels (see Table 1 for participant profiles).

Table 1: Participant profiles

No.	Participant pseudonym	Gender identity	Location	Level of study	Research sites
1	Lay	TGW	Gauteng	2nd Year	University (1)
2	Ace	TGW	Gauteng	Honours degree	University (1)
3	Mshophi	TGW	KwaZulu Natal	Honours degree	University (2)
4	Champ	TGM	Western Cape	1st Year	University (2)
5	Leo	TGW	Western Cape	3rd Year	University (3)
6	Kay-Bee	TGW	Gauteng	Honours/N6	University/college(4)
7	Tea	TGW	Northwest	1st Year	College (5)
8	Thendy	TGW	Western Cape	2nd Year/N5	College (6)

We used pseudonyms throughout the study to protect participants' identities and privacy and refrained from naming their specific institutions. This decision was made in consultation with participants, who expressed concerns that disclosing personally identifiable information could expose them to further discrimination or marginalisation within their universities. As Holmes (2020) notes, respecting participants' requests for anonymity is an important ethical practice in qualitative research, particularly when studying vulnerable or stigmatised populations.

Data were collected through a three-cycle process incorporating both arts-based and dialogic methods. Arts-based research uses creative processes to generate and interpret data, offering unique insights into participants' subjective experiences (Leavy, 2020). In cycle one, participants were trained in writing found poetry using the pantoum format, which employs repetition of lines to highlight salient themes and emotions (Furman et al., 2006). Participants also provided written informed consent during this cycle. In cycle two, participants independently drafted pantoum poems in response to the prompt: "Write a poem that highlights your experiences and feelings about the inclusion of students with transgender expressions at your institution." Cycle three involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant to discuss the meanings and significance of their found poems. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were audio-recorded with permission. Questions focused on participants' interpretations of their own poetry, the experiences and emotions they sought to convey, and the broader context of inclusion/exclusion for transgender students at their institutions. The interviews followed a flexible, conversational style to build rapport and allow for emergence of unanticipated insights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Data analysis was conducted using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an approach that aims to explore participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences (Smith, 2011). IPA is characterized by an idiographic focus, attending to the particular details of each case before cautiously drawing more general conclusions (Smith, 2011). The analysis followed the step-by-step process outlined by Smith (2011), including: 1) reading and re-reading transcripts, 2) taking descriptive and interpretive notes, 3) developing emergent themes, 4) searching for connections across themes, and 5) moving to the next case. This iterative process generated three overarching themes: systemic exclusion, systemic inclusion, and resilience in resisting oppression.

To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we employed several strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data sources (i.e., found poetry and interviews) and member checking, wherein participants reviewed and provided feedback on our interpretations. We maintained an audit trail documenting all methodological decisions and engaged in reflexivity to examine our subjectivities as researchers. Detailed participant quotes are included in the findings to support the transferability of conclusions to other contexts.

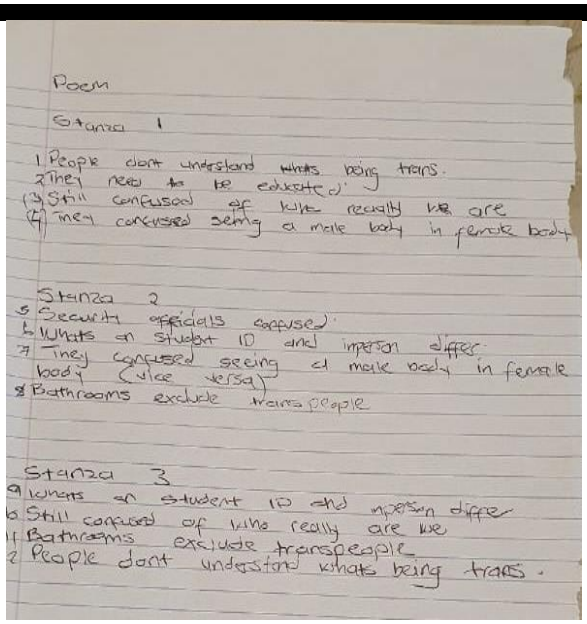
This qualitative phenomenological study used arts-based and dialogic methods to explore transgender students' experiences of structural exclusion and resistance in South African higher education. Ethical procedures were followed to protect participants' autonomy, privacy, and well-being. The creative found poetry process, coupled with in-depth interviews, generated rich insight into participants' lived realities. IPA offered a framework for idiographic and interpretive analysis, generating three key themes. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and thick description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that transgender students in South African higher education institutions experience systemic exclusion and marginalisation. Applying the lens of Minority Stress Theory (MST), we identified three key themes: systemic exclusion, systemic inclusion, and resilience in the face of oppression. These themes illuminate how distal and proximal stressors, arising from heteronormative and cisnormative institutional structures, impact the well-being and academic experiences of transgender students.

Systemic exclusion

Cisnormativity, the assumption that all individuals identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, permeates the policies, practices, and campus cultures of South African universities. Participants' narratives and poems powerfully convey how this systemic erasure of transgender identities produces exclusionary and discriminatory experiences. Students with transgender expressions are questioned because they do not align from what is known as the *'norm'*. Below is Leo's found-poem showing the same sentiments as Rothmann and Simmonds (2015):



They don't get it

People don't understand what's being trans
They need to be educated
Still confused of who really, we are
They confused seeing a male body in [a] female body.
Security officials confused
What's on student ID and in[a] person differs
They confused seeing a male body in female body (vice versa)
Bathrooms exclude trans people.

What's on student ID and in person differ
Still confused of who really are we
Bathrooms exclude trans people
People don't understand what being trans.

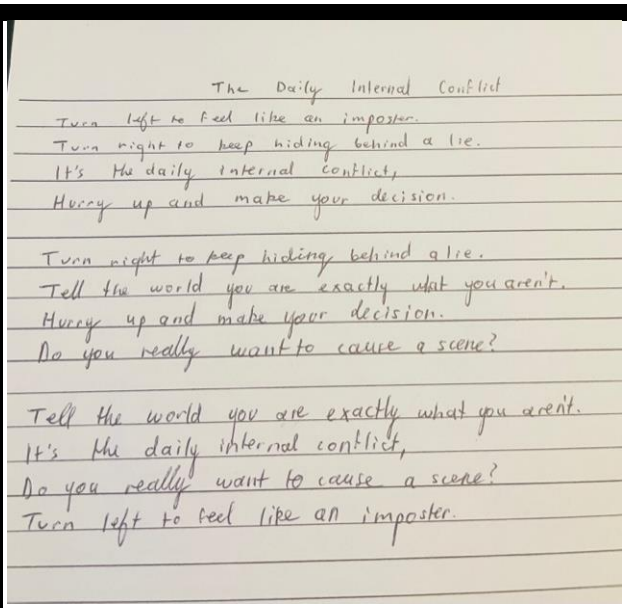
Figure 1: Found-poem written by Leo

In lines 4 and 7, Leo explains that employees of the institution where she is studying are confused by who she is because. And it is unacceptable to have a transgender student in the institution (Sanger, 2014). When we engaged with Leo about the meaning of her poem, she expressed the following:

> *My poem… being in an institution that does not acknowledge our rights as transgender students. Look I can't use the bathroom that makes me comfortable, or my student ID makes me to feel bad about who I am.*

Leo's poem highlights, confusion and lack of understanding among university staff and students contribute to the 'othering' of transgender individuals. This finding aligns with existing research on the marginalising effects of cisnormative educational environments (Goldberg et al. 2019; Matthyse 2017). It further demonstrates how gender dysphoria involves the internalization of negative social experiences and stressors faced by transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals.

Champ highlighted his proximal stressors in a form of a found-poem entitled *The Daily Internal Conflict* to show how heteronormativity in the institution is affecting his life.



The Daily Internal Conflict
Turn left to feel like an imposter.
Turn right to keep hiding behind a lie.
It's the daily internal conflict,
Hurry up and make your decision.

Turn right to keep hiding behind a lie.
Tell the world you are exactly what you aren't.
Hurry up and make up your decision.
Do you really want to cause a scene?

Tell the world you are exactly what you aren't.
It's the daily internal conflict,
Do you really want to cause a scene?
Turn left to feel like an imposter.

Figure 2: Found-poem written by Champ

When we asked Champ to unpack and explain the meaning of his found poem, he narrated,

> *My poem is obviously in reference to the bathrooms because that's one of the biggest problems that I have face in terms of like accommodating trans people. I'm not comfortable with using bathrooms because I'm not fully transitioned. So, I don't fit in going to the guy's bathroom and obviously go into the girl's bathroom is like that doesn't feel right you know. If you go to the girl's bathroom, I feel like I'm just emphasising to everybody what they think of me already. So, by using the female bathroom then it's like scrap any idea that this person [Champ] is male because they are female since they are going to the female bathroom.*

Drawing from Ace's experiences with campus consultations or visits, it is evident that medical providers assist her only if the medical assistance required is not related to her transitioning process (hormonal therapy). She narrated,

> *Erh… I get help when I am sick at the campus clinic, but hormones are not available. I believe that hormones should be available at the campus clinic for us [trans people] who are transitioning.*

Thendy, on the other hand, was silent after her lecturer reminded her that she was born male and she should not use a female bathroom. She did not report this transphobic

practice to the relevant authorities. Leo too has not acted upon the violation of human rights.

> *Erl… for me as long as what they are doing is not physical or there is no physical abuse I just stay away from that person because there is no physical abuse in it. So, I just stay away from those people because they do not know whom I am. They just see me but they do not know who I am.*

Lack of access to gender-affirming facilities, such as restrooms and healthcare services, emerged as a critical form of systemic exclusion. Champ's poem and narrative poignantly capture the daily internal conflict and discomfort caused by binary, gender-segregated bathrooms. This supports Brown et al.'s (2020) argument that gender-neutral bathrooms are essential for mitigating the oppression experienced by transgender students. Similarly, participants' accounts of inadequate access to transition-related healthcare, such as hormone therapy, underscore the urgent need for gender-affirming medical services on campus (Goldberg et al., 2019). As Tan et al. (2020) propose in their critical review of the gender minority stress framework, understanding systemic exclusion requires considering the interconnected nature of health and well-being for transgender individuals. The current findings demonstrate how exclusionary institutional policies and practices negatively impact transgender students' comfort with their bodies and social identities. Future research should explore these connections further, operationalizing constructs like family support and cultural connectedness in ways that align with indigenous definitions of health (Tan et al., 2020).

> *We do not have a single unisex bathroom on campus.*

As a result, he is compelled to use a female-only bathroom. Brown et al. (2020) acknowledge that binary gender bathrooms can create negative experiences for queer students. Therefore, they suggest the adoption of gender-neutral bathrooms in institutions of learning, believing that gender-neutral bathrooms can liberate students with non-normative identities from the constant oppression and gender policing in the facility (Brown et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the participants indicated that the healthcare system in their respective institutions of higher learning is excluding them, explaining that campus clinics do not provide hormonal therapy from campus healthcare services. Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2019) and Goldberg et al. (2019) agree that non-gender-affirming healthcare systems are oppressive and should be regarded as a systemic exclusionary practice. Tomson et al.

(2021) argue that the healthcare system, ideally guided by the constitution, should eradicate all elements of exclusion in the sector. The South Africa Constitution and Bill of Rights clarify that all citizens should access quality healthcare services (DOJ 1996). According to Tomson et al. (2021), healthcare facilities should ensure that services are accessible and provided with dignity to every citizen (irrespective of gender expression). Hence, Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2019) call for gender-affirming healthcare services or clinics. Drawing from Ace's experiences with campus consultations or visits, it is evident that medical providers assist her only if the medical assistance required is not related to her transitioning process (hormonal therapy). She narrated,

> *Erh… I get help when I am sick at the campus clinic, but hormones are not available. I believe that hormones should be available at the campus clinic for us [trans people] who are transitioning.*

According to Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2019), policy or administrative delays may be the main reason why gender-affirming healthcare services roll-outs are delayed in campus clinics. Hormone therapy involves psychosocial assessments which are used to determine whether an individual is appropriate to receive the therapy or the medication for the transitioning process (Unger 2016). Furthermore, it includes informed consent about reviewing the risks and benefits of starting therapy (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. 2019). Ace indicated that campus health services do not give students hormone therapy, but she sees a need for institutions of higher learning to provide hormone therapy to students with transgender expressions. KayBee experienced the same: that campus clinics are selective with the medication they provide students with transgender identities:

> *There is a clinic on campus, but then they do not provide pills for hormones. They don't provide such. They don't accommodate transgenders.*

Gender-affirming clinics require well-trained staff that can offer specialty medical care to people with transgender identities (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2020). Well-trained clinic staff are able to recognise and respect transgender bodies (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2020). Even though Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2019) did their work in Canada, South Africa must adopt their approach to implement gender-affirming clinics if the aim is to provide inclusion experiences for students with transgender expressions in institutions of higher learning.

A gender-affirming healthcare system should be holistic. In other words, it should encompass the mental, physical and social well-being of people with transgender identities (Tomson et al., 2021). This means healthcare transformation should also include

psychological services. The participants of this study mentioned that they need counselling or therapy because they are struggling to resist minority stressors on their own. Fortunately, institutions of higher learning in South Africa offer psychological therapy or counselling services to students (Cilliers et al., 2010). However, the study participants were dissatisfied with the services obtained from some of the psychologists or counsellors in their institutions. For instance, Mshophi raised a concerned about not receiving proper counselling (mental health treatment) on campus. She detected that her counsellor was not gender-sensitive. In these instances, these units do not result in positive experiences for students with transgender identities (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). She expressed her exclusion experiences as follows:

> *Uhm… in 2018, I was really not coping about who I am erh… so I wanted to or erh… So, on that year I just realised how expensive it is to do the surgery. So, I wanted someone I can talk to erh… because I was surprised about that amount and how I am going to pay for it. Then, I booked myself at Student Support Services. Because I knew there are psychologists there at campus, I thought that they will help. But-ke (then), when I got there, the person I was with during the session was not comfortable, he was also rushing the session. He was not even asking me follow up questions or giving me advice. I think he was not interested on what I was saying. Instead of spending an hour with him because I booked for 1 hour, I think the session was uhm…. 30 or 35 minutes.*

Mshophi felt that the psychologist was unhelpful and did not execute his role (as a healthcare specialist) of providing care and support. Formby (2017) argues that universities and colleges have counselling and medical services that should provide support and pastoral care for students with psychological and medical needs. However, these structures fail to produce positive outcomes for students with transgender identities (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017) based on the fact that most counsellors and psychologists are non-specialists on the issues of gender diversity and sexuality (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, then, Mshophi had negative experiences at the Student Support Services because she received therapy from a psychologist untrained in supporting students with transgender realities (Formby, 2017). Challenging this form of systemic or structural exclusion will require institutions of higher learning to acquire more knowledge on minority gender identities through research (and other source of information).

However, systemic exclusion is not always initiated by the institutional systems or heterosexual individuals (Sanders & Mathis, 2013). In Champ's and Thendy's narratives, they indicated that they prefer to keep their lives private. Champ, in his found-poem, indicated that he does not '*want to cause a scene*' to show that he prefers to ignore activities or practices that will expose his identity. Thendy, on the other hand, was silent after her lecturer reminded her that she was born male, and she should not use a female bathroom. She did not report this transphobic practice to the relevant authorities. Leo is another participant who typically does not act when her human rights are violated.

> *Erl… for me as long as what they are doing is not physical or there is no physical abuse I just stay away from that person because there is no physical abuse in it. So, I just stay away from those people because they do not know whom I am. They just see me but they do not know who I am.*

According to Sanders and Mathis (2013), victims of discrimination (transphobia or homophobia) who choose to be silent about exclusion practices or incidences are actually complicit in systematic exclusion. In other words, silence promotes heterosexism (DePalma, 2013). The system will not transform if the marginalised group within society downplays their experiences and realities (Sanders & Mathis, 2013). Most the of participants used the term *ignore* when we asked whether they report transphobic practices. However, throughout the discussive processes, it was clear that they are not ignoring these incidence or practices but rather they are *downplaying* them.

Systematic inclusion

This theme emerged from participants' accounts of discussions and initiatives aimed at addressing the experiences of transgender students in their institutions. However, these efforts often fall short of providing accurate information or challenging the prevailing cisnormative culture. Participants' experiences also revealed instances of systemic inclusion, whereby discussions about transgender identities occur but are often superficial or problematic (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Sanders and Mathi, 2013). While some participants acknowledged the existence of LGBTQI seminars and webinars, they questioned the effectiveness of these initiatives in challenging cisnormative practices and creating meaningful change. This finding suggests that universities must critically examine the content and framing of diversity and inclusion efforts to ensure they accurately represent and support transgender students (Nicolazzo, 2017).

Participants in this study highlighted the need for more accurate and affirming discussions about transgender identities in their institutions. Leo shared his experience of being called a "Satanist" by another student, reflecting the pervasive stigma and misconceptions surrounding transgender identities:

> ***P:*** *Erh... in the way I see it I guess straight people might uhm...learn a lot if the management can give them correct information about us and this info might play a huge role in the institution. This information will help them to stop name calling. Erh... I remember in my first year, another student referred me as a 'Satanist' because I am a transgender student.*
>
> ***R:*** *Uhm... sorry to interject... uhm let's talk about the that student who said you are a 'Satanist'. Why did they say that? Take me through that incident. How did you react?*
>
> ***P:*** *Uhm... they were a group of friends... erh... having lunch. So, I was approaching them. When I passed them, someone was pointing at me, and they said 'ndiyakuxelela ungusathane lo' [this one is satanic]. So, I really do not know why they were saying that. But then most people think that when you are a transgender person, you are demonic or something.*

Leo's experience illustrates how transgender identities are often perceived as deviant and unacceptable within the cisnormative culture of higher education institutions (Bilodeau 2013). This form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) can be understood as a manifestation of cisgenderism, which refers to the "cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth" (Lennon & Mistler 2014, p. 63). Cisgenderism operates at multiple levels, from interpersonal interactions to institutional policies and practices, creating a hostile environment for transgender students (Muchena et al., 2022).

KayBee emphasised the importance of providing accurate information and education about transgender identities to promote understanding and inclusion:

> *I would feel like institutions should provide information about genders and sexualities to just, you know.... educate people or students about transgender people because they are totally different gender and so complex issue... It's very important to try to see how many students want to know about transgender identities. If it's the whole institution, then the institution should organise a seminar or a class for everyone to learn.*

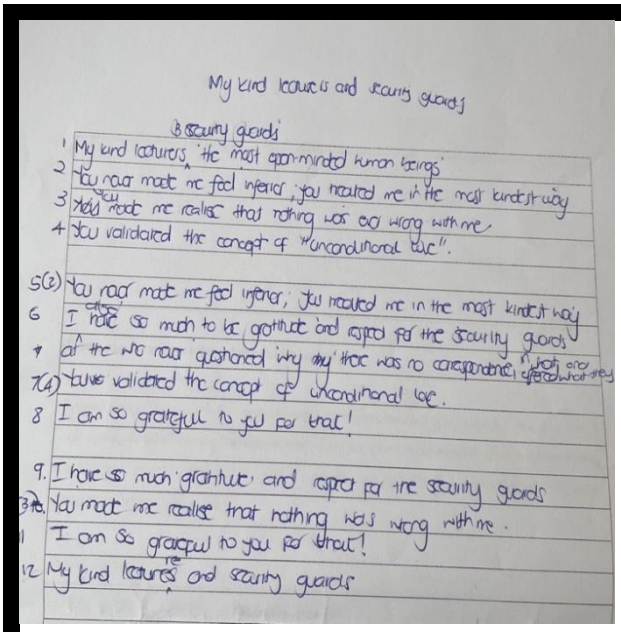
KayBee's suggestion aligns with Mampane and Brown's (2021) call for higher education institutions to "develop ongoing programmes and conversations that promote diverse

identities and expressions" (p. 458). However, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on the quality of information provided and the commitment of those involved (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Sanders & Mathis, 2013). As Evans (1999) notes, discussions that focus on non-normative identities without addressing the role of heteronormativity in oppressing these identities fail to create meaningful change.

It is important to note that while visibility and education are important strategies for promoting inclusion, they also carry risks for transgender individuals. As Catalano (2015) argues, "the act of being visible is mediated through experiences of misrecognition and transphobia, which can lead to increased hypervigilance and anxiety" (p. 422). Therefore, any efforts to promote visibility and inclusion must be accompanied by a critical examination of the cisnormative structures that perpetuate minority stress for transgender students.

Furthermore, it is problematic to suggest that transgender students who choose not to disclose their identities or confront oppression are complicit in their own marginalization (Sanders & Mathis, 2013). This perspective fails to account for the very real risks and consequences of visibility for transgender individuals, including discrimination, harassment, and violence (James-Abra et al. 2015). As Nicolazzo (2017) argues, "resilience narratives can perpetuate the idea that it is the responsibility of trans people to overcome the oppressive genderism inherent in collegiate contexts" (p. 547). Instead, the onus should be on institutions to create affirming and inclusive environments that support the success and well-being of all students.

Despite the challenges of systemic inclusion, some participants shared positive experiences of support and affirmation from faculty and staff. Ace's poem highlights the importance of open-minded and accepting individuals in creating a more inclusive campus climate:



My kind lecturers and security guards

My kind lecturers and security guards were the most open-minded beings.

You never made me feel inferior, you treated me in the most kindest way.

You made me realise that nothing was wrong with me.

You validated the concept of unconditional love.

You never made me feel inferior, you treated me in the most kindest way.

also have so much gratitude and respect for the security guards at the way you never questioned why there was no correspondence.

You validated the concept of unconditional love.

I am so grateful to you for that!

also have so much gratitude and respect for the security guards.

You made me realise that nothing was wrong with me.

I am so grateful to you for that!

My kind lecturers and security guards.

Figure 3: Found-poem written by Ace

In the first line, Ace writes, '*My kind lecturers and security guards were the most open-minded beings*' to acknowledge that the academic staff and security guards at the institution create safe spaces for students with transgender identities. When we asked Ace to unpack her poem, she narrated her experiences.

> *Coming to varsity it was like coming to different people who are open minded, and they do not ask stupid or funny question about sex and gender. That is why in line 4 and 7, I say uhm… you validated the concept of unconditional love. And in line 8, I am thanking my lecturers and security guards by saying 'I am grateful' for being loved unconditionally. Uhm… to answer you… I am saying the varsity is more acceptable than where I come from.*

Ace's comparison between her former high school and her current university highlights the importance of creating affirming environments that validate transgender students' identities and experiences. Such environments can serve as protective factors against the negative

effects of minority stress, promoting resilience and positive outcomes for transgender students (Singh & Mckleroy, 2011).

Conceptualising gender dysphoria as a proximal stressor within the gender minority stress framework, as supported by Lindley and Galupo (2020), can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cisnormative social contexts contribute to negative health and agency outcomes for transgender students. In this theme inclusion illustrates the need for institutional efforts to reduce distal stressors and create gender-affirming campus environments. Such efforts could play a vital role in alleviating proximal stressors, including gender dysphoria, among transgender students (Galupo et al., 2019).

Resisting forms of oppression

Despite the significant challenges and minority stressors they faced, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency in navigating oppressive institutional environments. Their narratives and poems highlighted various coping strategies, such as avoidance of discriminatory situations, seeking support from affirming individuals, and engaging in activism and resistance. These strategies can be understood as manifestations of resilience, which Hendricks and Testa (2012) define as "the ability to adapt and function competently despite adversity" (p. 462). However, it is crucial to recognize that the burden of resilience should not fall solely on transgender individuals. As Nicolazzo (2017) argues, "resilience narratives can perpetuate the idea that it is the responsibility of trans people to overcome the oppressive genderism inherent in collegiate contexts" (p. 547). Instead, institutions must take proactive steps to dismantle cisnormative structures and practices, while also providing support and resources to foster the resilience and thriving of transgender students.

The participants' experiences demonstrate that they engage in practices (Metthe, 2016) that help them to navigate life in institutions of higher learning. For instance, Leo and Champ do not use campus bathrooms as a form of retorting to heteronormative bathrooms. Leo narrated,

> *Ay… but most of the time I ignore or avoid campus bathrooms. I only go uhm… when I am too pressed. As a transwoman I do not feel comfortable to go to men's bathroom. And also in the women's bathroom, girls give me the view that they are uncomfortable to have a man in their space.*

Champ retorted in a similar way.

> *I always avoid using a bathroom because it feels like I am in a parade, and everybody is observing or will see me going to the female's bathroom.*

Tea experienced exclusion in the classroom when peers mocked her in the presence of the lecturer who pretended she did not hear those transphobic comments. Tea explained,

> *When they laugh uhm… I say in my table put my earphones or I just leave the class. But when I get to my room [student residence] I cry a lot.*

Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2021) argue that people with transgender identities avoid people whom they perceive as toxic or dangerous because they feel discriminated around them. But even if they avoid perpetrators when they are practicing these forms of oppressions, emotions are challenging if they do not seek professional help. Sometimes even teaching pedagogies or lecturing styles can be excluding for students with transgender identities, as stipulated by Thendy.

> *I find it offensive when lecturers make funny jokes about gays and lesbians or examples about igenda yam (my gender identity) because uyazazi ukuba (the lecturer knows your) you identify yourself as a woman so you not expecting a lecturer that will refer you as 'lo mfana' (this boy) during a lecture or class.*

Thendy indicates that misrecognition or misinterpretation of one's gender in the classroom can be regarded as transphobia. Misgendering is a process of referring to people with transgender expressions by the gender that they do not express themselves with (Whitley et al., 2022). As a result, Thendy abscond classes to avoid humiliation. Participants of the study adopt what Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2021) refers to as survival or avoidance strategies to retort to structural exclusions. According to Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2021), survival strategies occur when a person with a transgender expression evades situations that cause minority stressors. They often utilise survival or avoidance strategies to protect their security and integrity (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2021).

The minority stress theory, as applied to transgender experiences by Hendricks and Testa (2012), offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay of distal and proximal stressors, institutional contexts, and individual resilience factors that shape the lives of transgender students. Lindley and Galupo's (2020) work on conceptualizing gender dysphoria as a proximal stressor further enriches this framework, emphasising the social

determinants of mental health disparities for transgender individuals. By attending to these factors and centering the voices and experiences of transgender students, higher education institutions can work towards creating more inclusive, affirming, and socially just environments.

CONCLUSION

Through a phenomenological enquiry, this paper sought to explore how transgender students navigate and resist structural exclusion in South African institutions of higher learning. The findings revealed two primary forms of exclusion experienced by participants: systemic exclusion and systemic inclusion. Systemic exclusion manifested in institutional policies and practices that failed to recognize or accommodate gender diversity, such as gender-segregated residences and bathrooms, non-inclusive healthcare services, and untrained counselling staff. Systemic inclusion, on the other hand, involved a superficial acknowledgement of transgender identities without substantive changes to heteronormative institutional cultures. This was evident in LGBTQI+ awareness events that did not translate into tangible support for transgender students, as well as a general silence around issues of heteronormativity and cisnormativity in classroom discussions.

These findings align with previous research documenting the marginalization of transgender students in South African higher education (Msibi, 2013; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). However, our study extends this literature by highlighting the specific institutional mechanisms through which exclusion operates, as well as the agentive strategies transgender students employ to resist and navigate these oppressive structures. Participants' narratives revealed creative practices of resilience and self-affirmation, such as avoiding exclusionary spaces, seeking out supportive peers and staff, and educating others about gender diversity. These insights challenge dominant discourses that position transgender students solely as victims of oppression, pointing to the ways in which they actively negotiate and transform their institutional environments).

At the same time, our findings underscore the urgent need for systemic transformation in South African universities to create truly inclusive and affirming spaces for transgender students. While individual acts of resistance are valuable, they cannot substitute for institutional accountability and proactive change. As Matthyse (2017) argues, challenging the heteronormative status quo in higher education requires a multi-pronged approach,

including policy reforms, curricular interventions, staff training, and shifts in institutional culture. Our study suggests specific areas for intervention, such as the provision of gender-neutral facilities, access to transgender-competent healthcare and counselling services, and the integration of gender diversity issues across academic disciplines. Moreover, our research highlights the importance of centering transgender students' own voices and experiences in efforts to promote inclusion. Too often, diversity and transformation initiatives in South African higher education have adopted a top-down, tokenistic approach that fails to engage meaningfully with marginalized student populations (Msibi, 2013). By contrast, our arts-based methodology sought to amplify transgender students' embodied knowledges and creative self-representations. This participatory approach offers a model for how university leaders and practitioners can collaborate with transgender students as partners in institutional change, rather than simply as passive recipients of support services.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of literature on the experiences of transgender students in South African higher education. While confirming the pervasive reality of structural exclusion, our findings also highlight the resilience, agency, and creativity of transgender students in resisting oppressive institutional norms. We argue that attending to these narratives of resistance is crucial for envisioning and enacting transgender-inclusive transformation in university spaces. This requires a fundamental shift away from deficit-based discourses of transgender vulnerability, towards an affirmative recognition of transgender students' capacity to challenge and reimagine exclusionary structures. At the same time, we emphasize the imperative for proactive, systemic change to dismantle the heteronormative and cisnormative logics that continue to marginalise transgender students. Only by combining bottom-up resistance with top-down reform can South African universities truly fulfil their promise of inclusive, equitable, and socially just education for all.

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