

As queer advocacy matures, people are coming to realize that, united, they can exercise more power. But sometimes well-meaning social service organizations inadvertently do things that show their lack of consideration for trans people, making these clients feel unwelcome.

Reid Vanderburgh, a female-to-male holistic psychotherapist, explains. "Trans people have a hyper-vigilance, in terms of social service agencies, to very little things that most people don't think about—like the intake form has 'male' or 'female' without any other choices, the kinds of things that show they don't get it."

In order to start the ball rolling toward acknowledging and addressing the unique needs of the trans community, he teamed up with Andrew Forshée, a gay instructor at Clark Community College and doctoral student at Walden University's School of Health & Human Services, to write an academic paper about trans youth.

Like Vanderburgh, Forshée is concerned about the lack of services for trans youth, believing strongly that more funding is needed to study them and to serve their needs. "Funding for GLB programs is limited. And so if we have limited funding for GLB, there's even less for trans. People perceive it as less important, or they don't have enough information."

The pair presented the paper, titled "Depathologizing Transgender Youth Identity: The Identity Project," at the American Public Health Association's national conference, which was held from Nov. 15 to 19 in San Francisco. The group is the oldest and largest of its kind, with membership in 50 different public health occupations.

Vanderburgh and Forshée began their collaboration after a few stimulating conversations with one another. Through his studies, Forshée had noticed a hole in the health literature when it comes to trans people. And the few studies that do mention trans people frequently have little to offer. "A lot of the research I began to look at, they were surveying LGBT people but were really focusing on sexual orientation," he says.

Confusing gender identity and sexual orientation is commonplace, even among academics and researchers. Survey researchers often ask people to check a box for gay, lesbian, bi or trans. Since people can identify as gay (or lesbian or bi) in addition to being trans, they fre-

STARTING THE BALL ROLLING

Presenting a new way of thinking about trans identity

by Michael Burdick

quently mark more than one box, invalidating their surveys. It is hard to learn anything about trans people from research that fails to even identify who is trans.

The paper starts out by trying to clear up the confusion between gender identity and sexual orientation, according to Forshée. "We haven't had the dialogues about the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Not extensively yet. For example, after we presented the paper, I had a woman come up to me and say, 'Thank you for breaking down sexual orientation and gender identity; I always thought they were the same thing.' The concept was made really much more solid for her, and then she could advocate on behalf of trans people. We're just now beginning to have the dialogue about that."

The paper goes on to address another huge problem with the health literature. "The data that is out there really looks at trans youth through a pathological lens," Forshée says. Trans people are seen from a perspective of disease and diagnosis.

In their paper, Forshée and Vanderburgh devote a lot of effort to showing the health community a new, more practical way to look at trans people. They show how trans identity fits within well-established ways of thinking about normal identity development of healthy kids.

"We relate gender identity to existing identity research. You don't have to look at gender identity as a pathological thing. You're in the realm of human development rather than psychopathology," Vanderburgh explains.

Moving from theoretical to practical, the authors use existing identity research to make a case for the importance of doing things that affirm the identity of trans youth. They tell the story of the Identity Project, which attempts to



Through his studies, Andrew Forshée noticed a hole in the health literature when it comes to trans people

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

do just that. The nearly 2-year-old program was started with a donation from longtime trans activist Lori Buckwalter, money that was matched by Michael Powell of Powell's Books.

The Identity Project has helped more than three dozen young people since it began. Vanderburgh has been with the program from the beginning, while Forshée got involved about a year ago.

Part of the unique vision of the Identity Project is to focus on validating trans people's identity. Thinking about identity is especially important for programs that try to help trans youth, according to Forshée. "Adolescence is a time of role confusion—what's my role in the context of this society?"

One way the program affirms the identity of trans youth is by helping them get their names legally changed, an option open to all Oregonians older than 18. The program also helps trans youth change their drivers license or state ID card to reflect their gender identity accurately, which requires the approval of a state-sanctioned therapist.

These are, of course, completely reversible procedures involving no risk, but they help trans youth feel more at home in their community. "First we have to say this is OK, this is healthy, this is a person unto themselves," Forshée explains.

Part of the success of the Identity Project might also arise from the fact that some of the volunteers are themselves trans. Forshée believes this gives trans youth access to healthy role models. "Lori and Reid are such great models for trans youth; they're so visible and actively interested in this project."

Besides having a solid basis in human development theory, there is good reason to think the

Identity Project's methods are having positive effects on trans youth. "The people that are coming in to see me, they've been referred by people that have already gone to the project," Vanderburgh says. "That's significant because it tells us we're doing something right."

The paper's authors hope to educate social service agencies about the importance of affirming the identity of trans youth and perhaps engage more donors to the Identity Project. Additionally, they hope to encourage better research about trans people, which will contribute to a better public understanding of trans issues and provide additional knowledge to help social service agencies do a better job of serving the community. The fundamental aim is to reduce potential harm to what is believed to be a population at high risk for problems from low self-esteem to drug abuse to suicide.

From the response of the approximately 125 people who attended Forshée and Vanderburgh's presentation, chances look good that their work will have a positive impact. "It was wonderful. Our printed materials went like hot cakes. We were very well-received in San Francisco," says Ann Hinds, who manages Outside In's risk education department, which is responsible for the Identity Project. "The public health conference is a big deal...it's a wonderful avenue, and it's good recognition for our program and our agency."

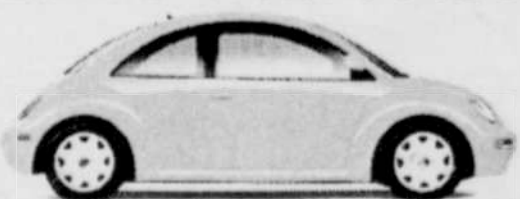
Forshée and Vanderburgh plan to submit their paper for publication in several academic journals that cover health issues to garner an even wider audience for their work. **J**

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"You don't have to look at gender identity as a pathological thing. You're in the realm of human development rather than psychopathology."

—Reid Vanderburgh

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