

Reducing transgender internalized stigma: Development and efficacy of an online intervention

Emmie Matsuno, Tania Israel, Andrew Choi, Joshua Goodman, Yen-jui (Ray) Lin, Krishna Kary, Caitlin Merrill
University of California, Santa Barbara; University of San Francisco



Abstract

Given the degree of hostility towards transgender people and the pervasiveness of societal messages regarding gender roles, transgender individuals may internalize negative attitudes and beliefs about being transgender in the form of internalized stigma (IS). This study evaluated an online intervention aimed at reducing internalized stigma in transgender individuals. Participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk) were randomly assigned to receive the IS intervention or a control intervention based on stress management. Internalized stigma was measured through two subscales of the Transgender Identity Survey (TIS; Bockting et al., 2013): shame and pride. Participants who received the IS intervention had significantly lower levels of shame and higher levels of pride $p < .001$. The intervention had a small to medium effect for reducing shame (Cohen's $d = .36$) and increasing pride (Cohen's $d = .38$). Internalized stigma may be the underlying mechanism associated with many different mental health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, and substance use. Therefore, reducing IS through an accessible online intervention may have a widespread impact on transgender mental health.

Introduction

- Transgender people are exposed to significant levels of discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Grant et al., 2011; Stotzer, 2008). These are associated with increased negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality, depression, anxiety, and drug abuse (Bockting et al., 2013).
- Transgender people may internalize negative messages about being transgender or societal messages regarding gender roles
- IS has been associated with a variety of negative mental health outcomes in LGB people (Silenzio, Pena, Duberstein, Cerel, & Knox, 2007; Wagner, Brondolo, & Rabkin, 1996) and is likely to have a similar impact on transgender people.
- The goal of this project was to evaluate the efficacy of an online intervention targeted to reduce internalized stigma in a sample of transgender-identified individuals.

Participants

633 participants total:

- 291 - Experimental condition (focusing on IS reduction)
- 342 - Control condition (focusing on stress)

Gender:

- Transgender (31.9%)
- Woman (27%)
- Gender questioning (26.2%)
- Man (23.7%)
- Genderqueer (19.4%)
- Agender (13.3%)
- Bigender (10.7%)
- FTM (10.7%)
- MTF (9.2%)
- Something else (2.7%)

Ethnicity:

- European American (73.8%)
- Asian (11.5%)
- Latinx/Chicanx (10.3%)
- African American/ Black (9.5%)
- Native American (2.5%)
- Middle-Eastern (2.4%)

Sexual Orientation:

- Pansexual (18%)
- Gay (15.6%)
- Bisexual (15.2%)
- Lesbian (12.8%)
- Queer (10.3%)
- Asexual (6.6%)
- Unlabeled (6.2%)
- Heterosexual (4.3%)

Age: Mean= 28.7 (Range = 18 – 70)

Education: 51.2% of participants had not completed a degree beyond High School.

SES: 3.98 (scale from 1 – 9)

Procedure

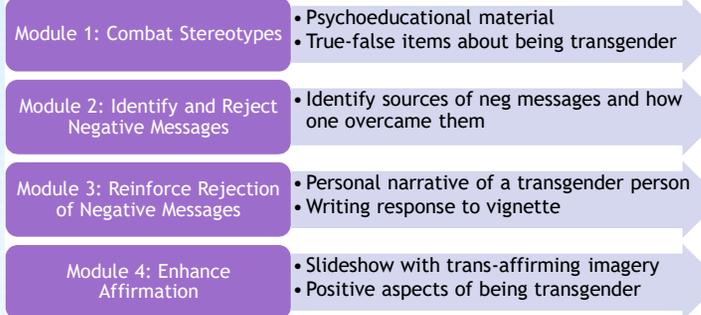


Figure 1. Four modules of IS intervention.

- Participants accessed the online survey and completed a brief demographic survey to identify individuals who were appropriate for the transgender intervention.
- Participants randomly assigned to either the IS intervention or the control condition.
- The control condition was adapted from Lin and Israel (2012) and was designed purposefully to resemble the structure of the experimental condition, but with content focused on general stress reduction instead of IS reduction.
- The IS intervention consisted of four modules, adapted from Lin and Israel (2012) (See figure 1).
- Participants were paid \$1.50 upon completion of the post measures and entered into a lottery (\$50 and \$100).

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide demographic information including, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, education level etc.

Self esteem. Participants' self esteem was measured using a short form of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSE is comprised of 10-items that measure the degree of the participant's self-worth and self-acceptance.

Identity concealment. The Nebraska Outness Scale-Concealment (NOS-C; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014) is a 5 item self-report measure designed to assess active concealment of one's sexual orientation and was adapted to assess concealment of transgender identity.

Internalized stigma. The degree to which participants held negative messages about transgender people was measured using two subscales from the Transgender Identity Survey (TIS; Bockting et al., 2013): shame and pride. Both scales included 8 items rated on a 7-point scale and showed strong internal consistency reliability (shame: $\alpha = .92$; pride: $\alpha = .86$). An example of an item from the shame subscale is "I sometimes feel that being transgender is embarrassing." An example of an item from the pride subscale is "Being perceived as transgender by others is okay for me."

Positive and negative affect. The degree to which participants held positive or negative emotions at the end of the study were measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS is a 20-item scale that measures participants' emotions in the present moment.

Results

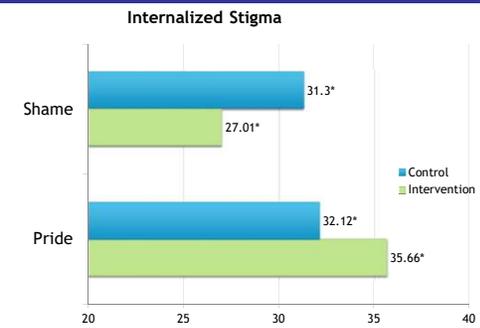


Figure 2. Levels of IS between control group and intervention group. * = $p < .001$

- Participants who received the IS intervention had significantly lower levels of shame and higher levels of pride $p < .001$ than participants in the control group, while controlling for self esteem and levels of identity concealment. The intervention had a small to medium effect for reducing shame (Cohen's $d = .37$) and increasing pride (Cohen's $d = .38$). (See Figure 2)
- Participants who completed the IS intervention had similar levels of negative emotions ($p = .08$) and significantly higher levels of positive emotions ($p < .05$) compared to participants who completed the control intervention following the intervention.
- The average age that the IS intervention would be most useful to participants was 16.55.
- On a scale from 1-5 participants rated the likability of each module between 3.56 and 3.71.

Discussion

- This brief online intervention was effective in reducing shame about being transgender and increasing transgender pride. Given the significant mental health risks that transgender people face, this intervention could have a large impact on improving transgender mental health and well-being.
- The IS intervention did not distress participants and increased their positive mood following the intervention. Furthermore the participants liked each of the four modules showing promise for each component of the intervention.
- Future research can adapt this online intervention towards youth and evaluate the efficacy and acceptability.
- Future research can evaluate whether this online intervention pairs well with face-to-face therapy and/or whether the strategies from the online intervention can be translated into an in person therapy intervention.