

# DEFINING RESILIENCY AS A TRANS AND NONBINARY PERSON IN PUERTO RICO: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH\*

## DEFINIENDO LA RESILIENCIA COMO PERSONA TRANS Y NO BINARIE EN PUERTO RICO: UN ENFOQUE DE TEORÍA FUNDAMENTADA

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### ABSTRACT

Scientific evidence supports that gender-diverse minorities face higher stress levels than the general population; however, studies on resiliency to cope with this detrimental scenario are scarce. The objectives of this study were to describe the meaning of trans and non-binary (TEnby) resiliency among a group of participants; to construct a definition of TEnby resiliency sensible to the context of Puerto Rico through participants' voices; and, to explore internal and external resources that enhance TEnby resiliency, as presented in participants' understanding of the concept. To do this, we conducted a cross-sectional exploratory qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with three TEnby residents of Puerto Rico who were recruited by availability. We used content analysis from a grounded theory framework, along with investigator triangulation and category saturation. Preliminary results were divided into four categories: Coping with adversity (aim 1); Survival (aim 2); Internal Resources (aim 3) and Context (aim 3). We discussed how participants' understanding of TEnby resiliency and their definition appear to be a stress buffer (aims 1-2) and described resources that affect how they or others cope with adversity and survive (aim 3). Resistance to using the word "resiliency" is also discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Trans, Non-binary, Puerto Rico, Resiliency, Survival.

### RESUMEN

Según la literatura las minorías género-diversas enfrentan niveles más altos de estrés que la población general, pero los estudios sobre resiliencia para afrontar este escenario perjudicial son escasos. Los objetivos de este estudio fueron: a) describir el significado de resiliencia entre participantes trans y personas no binarias (TEnby), b) construir una definición de resiliencia TEnby sensible al contexto de Puerto Rico a través de sus voces y c) explorar recursos internos y externos que mejoran la resiliencia de personas TEnby en función de su entendimiento del concepto. Llevamos a cabo un estudio exploratorio transversal cualitativo usando entrevistas semiestructuradas a tres personas TEnby residentes de Puerto Rico que fueron reclutadas por disponibilidad. Utilizamos el análisis de discurso desde un marco de teoría fundamentada, junto con triangulación por quienes investigaron y saturación por categoría. Los resultados preliminares se dividieron en: Sobrellevar adversidad (objetivo 1), Sobrevivir (objetivo 2), Recursos internos (objetivo 3) y Contexto (objetivo 3). Discutimos cómo lo que entendían como resiliencia TEnby parece ser un amortiguador de estrés (objetivos 1-2), y describimos los recursos identificados que afectan la forma en que estas personas y otras enfrentan la adversidad y sobreviven (objetivo 3). También, discutimos la resistencia al uso del concepto "resiliencia".

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Trans, No binarie, Puerto Rico, Resiliencia, Sobrevivir.

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Trans<sup>1</sup> and non-binary<sup>2</sup> communities (TEby) have been rejected, targeted, discriminated and, on occasions, even cornered by societal barriers towards at-risk behaviors as a source of survival all around the world (Clarke, 2019; Reisner et al., 2016). Similar findings have been observed in the trans community in Puerto Rico (P.R.) (Avilés, 2016; Francia-Martínez et al., 2017; Malavé Lebrón & González Rivera, 2009; Padilla et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Madera et al., 2016). Most academic literature has focused on the adverse conditions TEby communities live and face due to stigma and unequal treatments. Certain advancements in public policy and health interventions have derived from that work (Rodríguez-Madera et al., 2016). However, overly emphasizing these aspects has only shed light on a fraction of what it is to be TEby, unheeding their potential to thrive despite adversity (Budge et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Madera et al., 2016). Research on factors associated with resiliency among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) communities is limited (Kwon, 2013; Meyer, 2015), particularly if we consider TEby identities (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Understanding and addressing vulnerable populations' strengths is invaluable for health interventions, research, and public policy.

Current literature does not provide a consensual definition of resilience. Different conceptualizations (i.e., as a character trait, a process, as an outcome, as something you have or do not have, environmentally influenced, biologically influenced, as a multifactorial or multisystemic concept) have promoted empirical and theoretical debates (Smeeth et al., 2021; Southwick et al., 2014; Tabibnia & Radecki, 2018). Acknowledging these divergences is crucial because it may seem like we are reaching contradictory results when these may be due to conceptual or measurement inconsistencies. Thus, to

explore protective factors in TEby communities and comprehend how they emerge and promote resiliency, we need to define it through their eyes first.

#### TEby Resiliency

Most available resilience research among TEby consist of qualitative studies that have highlighted similarities in resilience experiences between members of this group. Singh et al. (2011) conducted a study where trans participants conceptualized the construct as learned behaviors that shaped their ability to cope with adversity. This extended to a broader community that aided their process and helped them recognize their strengths. These findings suggest an integrated definition of resiliency as a process that is achieved by potentially learnable skills while acknowledging that it is subject to a person's individual and contextual reality. Other studies have found comparable results, with the added element of intersectionality, that change the ways people might express resiliency (Singh & McKleroy, 2011; Singh et al., 2014).

In our literature review of resiliency with TEby samples, we identified several themes that repeated themselves in findings or that were related, such as: (a) active coping (i.e., confrontation, exploring and accepting identity), (b) self-efficacy (i.e., role modeling, financial independence), (c) social connectedness and support (i.e., support from family or chosen family, TEby peers, mediators, healthcare comfort), and (d) emotional regulation (i.e., cognitive reframing, optimism). Research in Latin and Caribbean countries has found recurring themes related to social support and connectedness when exploring this population's resiliency, coping, or overall well-being (Logie et al., 2016; Lozano-Beltrán, 2018; Pérez-Brumer et al., 2017). TEby qualitative literature focusing on

1. A person whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth. Some view it as an umbrella term that includes non-binary identities as well. For the purposes of this study, it will be associated with trans men and trans women.

2. A person whose gender identity does not exclusively fall under binary categories of "male" or "female." For the purposes of this study, it will be used as an umbrella term associated with non-binary, gender non-conforming, agender, bigender, gender fluid, and genderqueer identities.

coping processes suggests similar themes regarding facilitative and adaptive coping (Budge et al., 2017; Budge et al., 2013; Mizock & Mueser, 2014). Researchers in neuroscience have linked these four themes, among others, to behavioral and cognitive pathways that can change the brain and cultivate resiliency (Tabibnia & Radecki, 2018). All of this suggests resiliency is multifactorial and complex in that it is subjected to biopsychosocial factors that interlope and interchange. Under specific contexts, it is malleable through changes in the environment, learning, and accessibility. Accordingly, we should aspire to contextualize its understanding to approach inquiry responsibly.

Resiliency has also been conceptualized as a stress buffer. Ilan Meyer revolutionized how we viewed homosexual oppression in 1995 by proposing that LGBTQ+ people face higher amounts of stress in comparison to the general population and that, in turn, this affects their physical and mental health (Bockting et al., 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015; Scandurra et al., 2017; Testa et al., 2015). Meyer proposed both individual and community-based resiliency as stress buffers (Meyer, 2015). The concept of community-based resiliency is fundamental because, as Meyer (2015) explains, we ought to be careful in focusing only on individual resiliency, for we might shift our interventions towards the victims and how they can become resilient in coping with the environment. Instead, we should address the correction of the sociocultural scaffolding that maintains and perpetuates prejudice and oppression.

#### TEnby Resiliency and Puerto Rico

In P.R., Vázquez-Rivera et al. (2021) reference how resiliency studies with LGBTQ+ samples are limited on the island,

especially about the TEnby community. To our knowledge, most studies that attempt to measure resiliency in P.R. have been made using the Escala de Factores Internos de Resiliencia (EFIR; García & Sayers, as cited in García Robles & Sayers Montalvo, 2018). The development of this scale and its approach to viewing resiliency within its context is a cornerstone in Puerto Rican resiliency research. However, we were unable to find studies that use this scale with a TEnby sample.

In terms of exploring TEnby resiliency in P.R., Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera (2021) derive from Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics to argue how trans bodies are systematically excluded and "designed to die"; thus, highlighting resilient responses some might disregard. Padilla et al. (2016) argued that when describing the experiences of Puerto Rican trans women, the lens by which we approach at-risk behaviors should be revised and suggested that informal medical procedures as means of self-preservation were highly resilient social responses to discrimination. Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera (2021) also mention social systems and networks, such as the Ball and House community<sup>3</sup> in San Juan, as examples of how trans women respond in a resilient way. It is fair to ask ourselves what are adequate standards for TEnby resiliency, what are we calling "the norm," and who gets to define it?

We also identified some studies that related to resiliency. Ramos-Pibernus et al. (2022) identified that their TEnby sample used coping strategies to resist and address the COVID-19 pandemic. Explaining that "some of them engaged in entertainment activities, disconnected from the news, or engaged in alternative supporting networks and activities such as Reiki and religion" (Ramos-Pibernus et al., 2022, p. 6). A study by Meléndez-Sáez et al. (2015) revealed a statistically significant

3. Kubiek et al. (2012) state that House and Ball communities appear in various areas of United States and involve sexual and gender diverse people; predominantly, African American men who have sex with men and trans women. They define Houses as "different groups of individuals that compete against each other during Balls", and

define Balls as "underground events that reward individuals who win competitions focused on dance, athletics, and gender expression" (Kubiek et al., 2013no, p.1525). Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera (2021) find Marlon Bailey's (2013) ethnographic work on house ball culture to be applicable to P.R.

difference in social support between trans participants adherent to antiretroviral treatment and participants who were not. Vázquez-Rivera et al. (2022) found a statistically significant reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression when evaluating trans men who participated in a support group program. However, in the last two studies, the small sample size was a limitation. In terms of youth, a recent survey report (Giga et al., 2017), identified that school-based support positively affected students' educational experiences, reaffirming literature linking social support and connectedness to resiliency.

In the same way, intersectionality has a role in TEnby resiliency. For example, black Puerto Ricans, members of underrepresented nationalities (e.g., Dominicans), or ethnic groups (e.g., Asians) face additional forms of oppression. Recognizing these differences is invaluable in achieving a deeper understanding of the phenomena. Another example of intersectionality is age. In P.R., people are considered minors until they turn 21. This means that a 20-year-old needs a legal guardian's permission to receive all sorts of medical services (i.e., hormone therapy) in contrast to the United States of America, where the required age is usually 18.

To deepen our understanding of TEnby resiliency in P.R., we went directly to the source as a first step. The objectives of this study were: a) to describe the meaning of trans and non-binary (TEnby) resiliency among a group of participants, b) to construct a definition of TEnby resiliency sensible to the context of P.R. through participants' voices and c) to explore internal and external resources that enhance TEnby resiliency, as relates to participants' understanding of the concept.

## METHOD

We carried out a cross-sectional exploratory qualitative study to answer the research questions. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with three TEnby residents of P. R. who were recruited by availability.

Recruiting participants was a limitation of this study, which is further discussed in the procedures section.

## Participants

The final sample consisted of a non-binary person, a transman, and a transwoman. One described their gender expression as "feminine," the other as "fluid," and the other as "fem-butch." They met the following criteria: (1) in terms of gender, they identified as a transman, transwoman, or a non-binary person; (2) had resided in P.R. for the past 12 months; (3) consented to participate in the study and to audio record their responses for purposes of data collection and analysis; (4) had access to a technological device with a microphone and internet; and (5) owned an email account. They currently lived in urban areas in the metropolitan region, did not practice a religion, had a bachelor's degree, and their annual income ranged from \$3K-\$40K. Two considered themselves spiritual, and two were currently studying.

## Procedure

This study was approved by Albizu University's Institutional Research Board (Spring 20-23). LGBTQ+-affirming organizations, groups, social media pages, and community liaisons collaborated with recruitment. Originally, the proposed design included in-person data collection in collaboration with LGBTQ+-affirming health centers. We had expected to recruit close to 30 participants. Recruitment strategies had to be modified amid the COVID-19 pandemic due to new institutional guidelines. LGBTQ+-affirming organizations ended up collaborating by sharing the study online; however, this type of recruitment by itself was ineffective. Thus, community liaisons were added to the online efforts to recruit potential participants.

Research assistants were recruited to remain observant and take notes during interviews and assist in analysis. An expert trained the research team in quantitative and qualitative research before the interview and

transcription processes started. Consent forms to participate in the study and be audio-recorded were sent via email using DocuSign. Interviews were carried out virtually, given the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The principal investigator (DER) coordinated dates between research assistants and participants for the virtual interviews. A different link for a Microsoft Teams reunion was created and sent to each participant individually. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted approximately one hour. One research assistant participated each time. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the research assistants and principal investigator. All audio recordings from the interviews were stored until transcripts were completed. At the end of each interview, a \$20 Amazon gift card was sent to participants via email.

#### Measures and Data Collection

We used two instruments written in Spanish in this study. (1) Sociodemographic Form: Participants answered each form orally, and notes were taken by the principal investigator. It included information related to sex, gender, sexual orientation, residency, employment, income, level of education, religion, spirituality, support, access, and modality preferences. (2) Semi-structured questions guide. It gathered information about what participants understood by “resiliency” and TEnby resiliency, how they would define TEnby resiliency in the context of P.R. and what internal or external factors, if any, enhanced what they understood of the concept. The original guide included 16 questions and 8 follow-up questions, and the final version added 4 follow-up questions. One of the additional follow-up questions was meant to aid the process of constructing and clarifying the last version of the definition of TEnby resiliency. After the first interview, the following two participants were asked to react to previous participants’ definitions towards the end of their interviews.

#### Data Analysis

Sociodemographic data were analyzed in frequency tables. As for the data gathered from the semi-structured in-depth interviews, qualitative analysis was guided by a grounded theory framework. Investigator triangulation was incorporated to enhance validity along with category saturation. The analysis reflected consensus between researchers and categories reached saturation. Each transcription was coded separately by three different researchers with an open code book. Then the team would meet to agree on themes, variants, patterns, and definitions. During this time, they also made continuous decisions related to the semi-structured questions guide relevant to the emerging data. Ultimately, all transcriptions were coded using a final version of the codebook. Once this was concluded, joint decisions were made to select verbalizations that more clearly represented each category, subcategory, and variant theme.

#### RESULTS

Due to the small sample size, these findings represent exploratory and preliminary results. The quotes retrieved from the transcripts were translated for the purposes of this article. The four main categories that emerged from our interviews are: (1) Coping with adversity (CA), which corresponds to aim 1; (2) Survival (SU), which corresponds to aim 2; (3) Internal Resources (IR) and (4) Context (CN), both corresponding to aim 3 (See Table 1). The latter was then subdivided into (4a) Social Support (SS) and (4b) Access (AC). Figure 1 represents how these categories relate and are influenced by each other in a dynamic way. Categories are symbolized by bigger circles than subcategories.

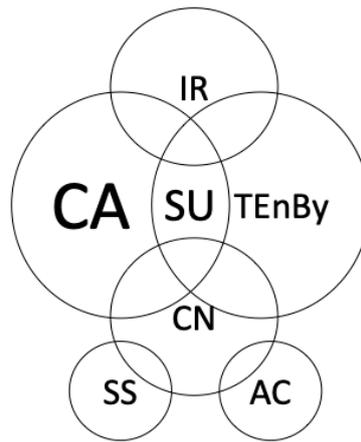


FIGURE 1.  
Dynamic Description of How Emerging Categories and Subcategories Related to One Another and to TEnBy Participants.

TABLE 1.  
An Overview of the Main Categories and Subcategories.

Category Subcategory	Definition	Example quotes
Coping with Adversity	Facing adverse events in a healthy manner.	“(La resiliencia) es un concepto que básicamente va dirigido a esta idea de que una persona a pesar de sus circunstancias complicadas en la vida o vicisitudes puede sobresalir de ellas y mantenerse o sostenerse viva o sobrevivir (...) para poder seguir hacia adelante. [(Resilience) is a concept that basically addresses this idea that a person, despite their complicated circumstances in life or vicissitudes, can endure them and maintain or sustain themselves alive or surviving (...) to continue.]”
Survival	“The act or fact of living or continuing longer than another person or thing” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)	“Yo digo que las personas trans son más fuertes o más resilientes o más resistentes que soldados incluso. [I say that trans people are stronger or more resilient or more resistant than even soldiers.]
Internal Resources	Emotional disposition and skills that promote resilience.	“Lo que tu sientas y lo que tú tienes aquí [presiona su cabeza] es más fuerte que todo tu entorno.. [What you feel and what you have here [presses their head] is stronger than everything around you...]”
Context	Environmental factors that impact the capacity to be resilient.	“...para tu poder tener tu mente clara, sentirte feliz con, con contigo tienes que tener dentro de tu entorno muchas cosas que lamentablemente aquí en Puerto Rico las personas de experiencia trans todavía nos falta (.) [...for you to be able to have a clear mind, feel happy with, with yourself, you must have many things in your environment that, unfortunately, here in Puerto Rico, people with a trans experience still lack (.)]”
Social Support	Support net that includes but is not limited to family, friends, community, and health providers.	“El apoyo de la comunidad, de organizaciones, el apoyo de compañeros, de personas que están al lado mío. [The support of the community, of organizations, the support of colleagues, of people who are by my side.]
Access	Having access to decent and equitable resources to meet different needs.	“Ayudas monetarias (...) Empleo para personas trans pero que sean sensibles que sean dignos (...) espacio de ocio sin alcohol sin drogas (...) eventos médicos, eventos de diversión, cosas así que sean orientados para nosotros. [Monetary aid (...) Employment for trans people but that are sensible and dignified (...) a leisure space without alcohol and without drugs (...) medical events, fun events, things like that oriented for us.]”

## Coping with Adversity (CA)

We aimed to describe the meaning of TEnby resiliency among a group of participants (Aim 1). Overall, they understood resiliency as coping with adversity. Through further questioning, there seemed to be a consensus that there are correct and incorrect ways to cope. Thus, this category was defined as facing adverse events in a healthy way (See Table 1). However, they were careful to give context to what we interpret as healthy. An example of this was when P2 expressed:

“de qué hay una forma adecuada, sí, pero creo que eso va a depender de la capacidad que tenga cada individuo (...) Creo que es por esa razón, la psicoterapia es una herramienta esencial... [...there is an appropriate way, yes, but I think that will depend on the capacity of each individual (...)] I think that is why psychotherapy is an essential tool...”

While P1 indicated:

“Eso para mí puede ser relativo (...) pienso que la manera correcta es no haciéndole daño a nadie, no haciéndole daño a si mismo y siempre intentando (...) (ser) lo más ético posible. [That for me can be relative (...) I think that the correct way is not hurting anyone, not hurting oneself and always trying (...) (to be) as ethical as possible.]”

Some showed resistance toward the word resiliency. For example, P2 described how the term “resiliency” felt overused since Hurricane Maria:<sup>4</sup>

“(Para el huracán María habían) varias campañas dónde se utilizaba ese término, verdad, coloquial y en vez de tomar acción sobre lo que había que tomar acción, para que el pueblo no tuviera que pasar por esas

necesidades, verdad, pues, eh, simplemente sé, se aplaudió “Eh, mira saliste de ahí” (...) Prefiero cambiar el sistema. [(When Hurricane María happened there were) several campaigns where that term was used, right, colloquially, and instead of taking action on what had to be addressed, so that people did not have to go through needs, right, well, uh, they simply, they applauded “Eh, look you got out of there!” (...) I prefer to change the system.]”

P1 stated the concept fell short:

“siento que es un concepto que se ha utilizado mucho para romantizar las situaciones y yo he vivido tantas cosas horribles en esta vida que llamarme resiliente no es suficiente. [...I feel that it is a concept that has been used a lot to romanticize situations, and I have lived through so many horrible things in this life that calling myself resilient is not enough.]”

On the other hand, P3's indicated that they used the word “resilient” for themselves and, simultaneously, conceptualized it as survival. All of this was later reflected in the definition of TEnby resiliency some proposed, and others agreed with.

## Survival (SU)

We aimed to construct a definition of TEnby resiliency sensible to the context of P.R. through participants' voices (Aim 2). The final version of this constructed definition was the strength that we have had so that our community survives, and that we are still working on to stabilize. Participants gave their own definitions and reacted to how previous participants had defined it as well. P1 defined it as:

“La fuerza que hemos tenido para mantener viva nuestra comunidad y

<sup>4</sup> Category 5 hurricane that impacted P.R. in September 2017.

que todavía estamos trabajando para que sea estable.” [The strength that we have had to maintain our community alive and that we are still working on to stabilize.]”

P2 decided to describe it as hindered by a greater societal system:

“No la puedo definir como inexistente, pero la puedo definir cómo obstaculizada (...) son demasiadas cosas con las que uno tiene que lidiar para uno simplemente poder salir de la casa de uno (...) Creo que ya hay muchos casos, ahí hay un sistema que ya está prescrito y uno tiene que pasar por ese proceso. [I cannot define it as non-existent, but I can define it as hindered.(...) there are too many things that one has to deal with for one to simply be able to leave one's house (...) I think that there are already many cases, there is a system that is already prescribed, and one has to go through that process.]”

When P2 was asked to react to P1's definition, they agreed with the stated definition but preferred for it to blatantly say “survive” rather than maintained alive. P2 expressed:

“Creo que aún estamos en ese proceso donde estamos sobreviviendo. Y(...) no soy solamente yo, muchas amistades trans mías tampoco se atreven a salir a la calle en la tarde o en el día a veces. So, creo que todavía estamos sobreviviendo. No hemos aprendido a vivir porque no hemos tenido ese ambiente. [I think we are still in that process where we are surviving. And (...) it's not just me, many of my trans friends don't dare to go out sometimes in the afternoon or during the day either. So, I think we're still surviving. We haven't learned to live because we haven't had that environment.]”

P3 defined it as “resistir y existir [resist and exist];” and, when asked to react to P1's definition and P2's adaptation, they seemed to agree: “Como te dije horita que es es, (ser resiliente como persona TEnby es) sobrevivir y existir. [As I told you a little while ago, (resiliency as TEnby person) is, to survive and exist.]”

The ways in which they approached resilience's definition, made survival emerge as a category to address both the resistance to the word resiliency and to depict a more accurate representation of what they were describing (See Table 1). Survival was defined as “the act or fact of living or continuing longer than another person or thing” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Congruently, participants conceptualized the juxtaposition of resiliency as inactivity, by describing the opposite as “rendirse [to surrender]” [P1], “la inacción [inaction]” [P2], and “falta de interés [(...) lack of interest]” [P3].

Survival seemed to represent not only specific circumstances but their everyday life, from finding trans-affirming health services to achieving a sense of security. P3 explained it as:

“Todo lo que implica ser una persona de experiencia trans. Y cuando te digo todo es todo (énfasis en todo). Desde lo más elemental cuando me levanto ese día y me miro en el espejo (pausa) hasta lo más (.) te diría yo esencial que es la educación y llegar a (.) a buscar un servicio de salud.” [All that it means to be a person of trans experience. And when I tell you everything is everything (emphasis on everything). From the most basic when I get up that day and look at myself in the mirror (pause) to the most (.) essential, which is education and reaching (.) to seek a health service.]”

Similarly, P2 told us:

“Ahora mismo Alexa<sup>5</sup>, todavía están ofreciendo una recompensa de \$25,000 para que encuentren al asesino. Eh, eh, claramente estamos en un sistema que no hace justicia.” “...desde lo de Alexa yo decido no salir de noche.” [Right now Alexa, they’re still offering a \$25,000 reward to find the killer. Uh, uh, clearly, we are in a system that does not do justice. ...since Alexa I have decided not to go out at night.]”

#### Internal Resources (IR)

We aimed to describe what participants identified as internal resources that enhance TEnby resiliency, if any, in function of their understanding of the concept (Aim 3). This category was defined as the emotional disposition and emotional skills that participants identified that promoted resilience (See Table 1). P1 told us:

“cuán fuerte la persona puede ser en cuanto a sus sentimientos y emociones y cuánto ha trabajado con ello y cuántas ganas tiene para trabajar con ello. Y también pienso que como comunidad somos personas que ya de por sí el hecho de que queramos hacer una transición ya nos expone a un grado de vulnerabilidad que no todo el mundo es capaz de tener.(...) hace que seamos más fuertes en ese sentido que muchas otras personas en la comu- en la sociedad. [...how strong a person can be in terms of their feelings and emotions and how much they have worked on it and how willing they are to work on it. And I also think that as a community we are people who, by itself, the fact that we want to make a transition already exposes us to a degree of vulnerability that not everyone is capable of handling. (...) it makes us stronger in that sense than many other people in society].”

5 Alexa was one of the multiple murder victims that lost their lives during a rise in killings of trans people in Puerto Rico during 2020 (Roberts, 2020).

Similarly, P3 expressed:

“Tú vas contra el mundo. Y te lo digo porque en aquel momento no tenía ninguna herramienta. Era el deseo de ser yo o no era nada. Y predominó el deseo de ser yo... [You go against the world. And I’m telling you this because at that time I didn’t have any tools. It was the desire to be me, or I was nothing. And the desire to be me prevailed...]”

While P2 expressed:

“...si no no tienes paciencia no vas a poder pasar el proceso (...) aparte de la paciencia pues considero qué volvemos a lo mismo a la perseverancia... [...if you do not have patience, you will not be able to go through the process (...) besides patience, I consider again perseverance...]”

#### Context (CN)

We aimed to describe what participants identified as external resources that enhance TEnby resiliency, if any, in function of their understanding of the concept (Aim 3). We discovered that participants found that environmental factors (i.e. socialization, social support, or accessibility) influence the ability to act resiliently; thus, the context category emerged (See Table 1). P1 believed that “...es un proceso complejo de socialización para el que uno aprende a ser resiliente o uno busca maneras de serlo. [...it is a complex process of socialization for which one learns to be resilient, or one looks for ways to be.]”

Some talked about how things related to the context, in which TEnby people live in P.R., has changed. For example, P3 expressed how there are more services available for TEnby people now:

“En el pasado no era así. Y eso yo creo que es que- muchas personas lo ven como poquito y a veces yo escucho y digo: wow ¿de verdad? Si en mi tiempo no había nada, yo no podía ni alzar el teléfono, no podía meterme a la computadora y buscar nada para yo empoderarme. [In the past it was not like that. And I think that- many people see it as little, and sometimes I listen and say: wow, really? In my time, there was nothing, I could not even pick up the phone, I could not go to the computer and look for anything to empower myself...]”

P1 talked about sociopolitical and environmental situations that TEnby people, who live in Puerto Rico, have experienced:

“ya de por si vivimos en una isla donde hemos tenido que pasar por muchas cosas porque pues vivimos en una colonia.(...) hemos tenido que aprender a buscar maneras de hacer las cosas diferentes, de poder sobrevivir de la manera que sea. Así que la gran mayoría de nosotres hemos tenido que aprender de alguna manera u otra a sobrellevar lo que está ocurriendo... [...we already live on an island where we have had to go through many things because we live in a colony<sup>6</sup>. (...) we have had to learn to find ways to do things differently to be able to survive in any way. So, the vast majority of us have had to learn in one way or another to cope with what is happening<sup>7</sup>...]”

### Social Support (SS)

Social support was a reoccurring theme in participants' verbalizations and constituted an external resource (See Table 1). They gave various accounts of how social support helped them in the processes of coping with adversity

and survival. For example, P2 told us, “si yo no hubiera tenido a mi esposa viviendo conmigo, yo no, no iba a poder pasar ese proceso. [...if I had not had my wife living with me, I would not be able to go through that process.]” Similarly, P3 explained:

“Ahora yo tengo a quien llamar, a quien me fortalezca emocional y mentalmente, a quien buscar, donde buscar información para empoderarme [Now I have someone to call, someone to strengthen me emotionally and mentally, someone to look for, where to look for information to empower myself...]”

### Access (AC)

Access was a reoccurring theme in participants' verbalizations and constituted an external resource (See Table 1). Participants all talked about the importance of having decent and equitable access to different needs. They mentioned areas such as education, employment, security, health, economic resources, legal protection, and leisure, among others. Some were also specific in their answers to distinguish between types of professionals. For example, P1 expressed:

“Dependiendo de quienes vengan herramientas y de cómo vengan.(...) No como lo que ocurrió hace dos meses atrás que llevaron a unos hombres trans a un campamento y esa tipa utilizando unas herramientas bien violentas hacia ellos con un positivismo tóxico y capitalista les echaba la culpa a ellos por no querer disque seguir hacia delante o por llamarle changuites o sensibles. [Depending on who the tools come from and how they come. (...) Not like what happened two months ago when they took some trans men to a camp, and a woman using some very violent tools towards them, with a toxic

6 While official documentation refers to Puerto Rico as a commonwealth, many consider it a colony (Lloréns & Stanchich, 2019; Malavet, 2000).

7 P1 referenced Hurricane María, the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating earthquakes that P.R., primarily the southern part, confronted during 2021-2022 as examples.

positivistic and capitalist view blamed them for supposedly not wanting to continue forward or calling them easily offended or sensitive.”

While P2 stated that “profesionales ya sean aliados o parte de la comunidad de identidad de género diversas e-es algo esencial... [...professionals whether they are allies or part of the gender diverse community is essential...]”

P1 explained differences in access between non-binary people, trans men, and trans women. They stated:

“Todavía siento que los hombres trans y las personas trans todavía no tienen el mismo acceso que tienen las mujeres trans. (...) las actividades para hombres trans se echan de lado y las pocas actividades que se hacen para hombres trans ocurren cosas como las que ocurrieron hace dos meses<sup>8</sup>. Y las pocas actividades que hay para personas no binarias son hechas por la misma comunidad no binaria. [I still feel that trans men and trans people still don't have the same access that trans women have. (...) activities for trans men are set aside and the few activities that are done for trans men things happen, like the one that happened two months ago. And the few activities that there are for non-binary people are done by the non-binary community itself.]”

When asked to recommend external resources to promote resiliency in P.R., as a follow up question, P1 stated the following:

“...cualquier cosa que tenga que ver con (las) vivencia(s) que viven el resto de las personas de la comunidad y que nosotros hemos tenido que evitarlo por el tipo de violencia que tenemos que vivir. [...anything that has to do with the

experience that the rest of the people in the community experience and that we have had to avoid because of the type of violence that we have to experience.]”

P2 concentrated on not only TEnby people but their support systems. They said:

“creo que no solamente tenemos que trabajar con la educación sino con la salud mental tanto de nuestras personas trans y verdad, eh, género diversas, eh, como con los recursos de apoyo que se supone que estén o que van a estar... [...I believe that we not only have to work with education but also with the mental health of both our trans people and, uhm, uh, gender diverse people, uh, as well as with the support system that is supposed to be there or is going to be there...]”

P3 emphasized access to gender-affirming care, and expressed,

“...que se diera la posibilidad (.) de que a través del plan del gobierno se pudieran, eh, llevar a cabo todos los procesos de reafirmación de género... [...that there be the possibility (.) that through the government's health care all the processes of gender reaffirmation could be carried out...]”

Even though there was no consensus over whether internal or external resources were more significant in enhancing resiliency, they all agreed that they are influenced by each other.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to describe the meaning of TEnby resiliency, construct a definition of TEnby resiliency that is sensitive to P.R. and identify potential internal and/or external resources that enhance it. We wanted

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<sup>8</sup> Referencing the previous P1 quote talking about the camp.

members of the TEnby community to answer this directly. We note that results reflect participants' verbalizations and should not be used to generalize.

Our participants believe resiliency is when people can healthily cope with adversity. However, they were careful not to define health in an inflexible way. This is congruent with criticism found in the reviewed literature (Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera, 2021; Padilla et al., 2016) and how one ought to be careful and responsible regarding the lens one uses to judge behaviors within their contexts. Moreover, some participants opposed the use of the concept to describe how TEnby people healthily cope with adversity and proposed other words closer to survival; while another used it to describe themselves and defined it as the act of resisting, existing, and surviving. It seemed like resiliency fell short for some of them.

The category of survival seems to align with Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera's (2021) stances on trans people's resilient responses against systematic oppressions that are designed to let bodies like theirs vanish. In fact, it can be perceived in the constructed TEnby resiliency definition: the strength that we have had so that our community survives, and that we are still working on to stabilize. Consistently, the words participants used to describe the opposite of resiliency were lack of interest, inaction, and to surrender. In other words, to be motionless. For this reason, we used the definition of survival as "the act of living," since their verbalizations seemed fitting in that you need action and determination to do so.

When identifying internal and external resources that enhanced TEnby resiliency, we found that emotional skills and context matter. We could speculate about why they used survival as a more accurate framework to voice their experiences by looking at the P.R. context for TEnby people. In their study, Rivera Quiñones et al. (2013) found that 44% of their sample, consisting of LGBT people,

feared for their lives in public places in P.R. In more recent years, between February 2020 and January 2021, seven (7) trans people have been killed on the island (El Nuevo Día, 2021). Moreover, the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, which included P.R. in its sample, found how TEnby people were discriminated against in areas such as education, employment, economic resources, and health, among others (Grant et al., 2011).

Like Meyer (2015), some participants perceived resiliency as a buffer but also appeared to be worried about the romanticization of individual resiliency and community organization without keeping in check the scaffolding that maintains and perpetuates systematic oppression. A metaphor could be as follows. Resiliency could be visualized as going from port A to port B, swimming against the current for a finite amount of time. In contrast, survival seemed like swimming indefinitely against the current with no apparent port B in sight; assuming port B means achieving equitable societal treatment regarding human rights. When P1 says, "yo he vivido tantas cosas horribles en esta vida que llamarme resiliente no es suficiente [I have lived through so many horrible things in this life that calling myself resilient is not enough]," and P2 says that "claramente estamos en un sistema que no hace justicia [clearly we are in a system that does not do justice]," and P3 equates resiliency to resisting, existing and surviving; we need to question the way we have approached resiliency in academia and how the public is also relating to that concept. Authors like Robinson and Schmitz (2021) argue that resiliency research with gender minorities, although well-intentioned, often promotes dominant relations in society.

When asked to explain why someone is not resilient, the answers varied from lack of privileges, resources, isolation, and self-limitations. Even though there was no consensus over whether internal or external resources were more significant in enhancing resiliency, they all agreed that they are influenced by each other. This was also

reflected in the emerging categories of internal resources (defined as emotional regulation/emotional skills) and context (which included social support and access as external resources). Understanding how these categories interact is essential to comprehend the reality they face. On the one hand, relying solely on individual resources might be expected heroism in a context such as P.R., where health services, social support, and equal opportunity are usually hindered for TEnby people (Grant et al., 2011; Padilla et al., 2016). On the other hand, external resources do not exist or access to them is limited or hindered (Meyer, 2015).

In P.R., community resources are limited and concentrated in a small island section. For example, to the PI's knowledge, the first trans male support group was founded as recently as November 2015 and, per usual, in the capital city. Most of the organization's participants could name that served their community were located mainly in the capital city. They specifically mentioned: Centro Ararat, Clínica TransSalud, TransTanamá, Trueself Foundation, Coordinadora Paz para la Mujer, Centro Comunitario LGBTT, and PRConcra. What should residents of faraway towns do? Thus, we recommend the integration of trans-affirming care. Similarly, we recommend educating all health professionals, as well as the public, on subjects related to gender identity.

Furthermore, one participant argued that most of the mentioned services mainly focused on trans women's needs. Overall, LGBTQ+ studies in P.R. have grown in recent years. The first LGBTQ+-related article published in a Puerto Rican Journal of Psychology was in 2003, and for the next couple of years, articles mainly focused on HIV (Esteban et al., 2022; Martínez-Taboas et al., 2018). Esteban et al. (2022) referenced how trans men and non-binary people have not had the same visibility as trans women which may be due to early research mainly focusing on HIV incidence in trans women or certain "at-risk behaviors" like silicone injections (Ramos-

Pibernus, 2016; Ramos-Pibernus et al., 2016; Ramos-Pibernus et al., 2020). Acknowledging other underrepresented gender identities and their specific needs, as well as continuing to expand on research themes, is essential for public policy, funding, health interventions, and community outreach.

Participants' recommendations on external resources that could promote resiliency in P.R. focused on individual and collective education, access to economic resources, access to gender-affirming health services (e.g., health insurance that covers trans-affirming surgeries), mental health services for the individual and their support system, employment with trans-affirming policies and practices, safe and diverse options for leisure. In other words, they ask for the tools they need to survive daily as a TEnby person in P.R. This is not a matter of conceptual academic debate. It is an issue of human rights and dignity.

#### Conclusion

The objectives of this study were met and represented the voices of participants in this study. However, these findings are exploratory and preliminary in nature due to the small sample size, which is this study's primary limitation. We speculate that the change in study design due to the COVID-19 pandemic from a face-to-face modality to a virtual one might have affected recruitment. This may have been limiting because potential participants needed access to technological devices, a connection to the internet, and an email to participate.

We were able to describe the meaning of TEnby resiliency, construct a definition of TEnby Resiliency from participants' voices, and identify internal and external factors that enhance it. Categories such as coping with adversity, internal resources (defined as emotional regulation/emotional skills), and context (which included social support and access as external resources) were consistent with the common themes we

described in the literature review, such as emotional regulation and social connectedness and support.

An important distinction is that some participants opposed using “resiliency” for themselves and instead proposed words closer to survival or, at the very least, another used it for themselves but described TEnby resiliency as resisting, existing, and survival. This can have important implications for research because potential TEnby participants could decide not to engage in research because they do not identify with the word or concept. Although different from resiliency, some studies suggest the usage of “resistance” as a descriptor of pushback against oppression (Chan & Mak, 2021; Hillier et al., 2019). Our study proposes survival as a promising descriptor that needs further evaluation. Future studies with more ample sample sizes should aim for a deeper understanding of the language TEnby people use to describe how they navigate adversity.

#### Research Ethical Standards

**Funding:** The Center for Institutional Scientific Research (CIIC) awarded \$600 to support the recruitment of participants.

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**Approval from the Institutional Review Board for Human Research:** The Institutional Review Board at Albizu University, San Juan Campus approved the study (# protocol: Spring 20-23). Research ethical standards were followed.

**Informed Consent/Assent:** Consent for participation was obtained online.

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