



Citation for published version:

Cooper, K 2022, *The experience of gender dysphoria in autistic adults: Written accessible summary..*

Publication date:
2022

[Link to publication](#)

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The experience of gender dysphoria in autistic adults

This is a summary of a research project where we interviewed 21 autistic adults about their experiences of gender dysphoria. Below are the key themes and subthemes summarising their experiences. There are two main sections with subthemes:

1. Making sense of distress and finding my identities

1. a) Body distress

1. b) Making sense of who I am

1. c) Intersecting and competing needs

2. Mismatch between needs as an autistic trans person and society

2. a) Gender as social behaviour

2. b) Struggle of being different

2. c) Battle for support

Section 1. Making sense of distress and finding my identities

1. a) Body distress

Participants had negative feelings because their bodies did not match their gender identities. Feelings included depression, anxiety, anger and disgust. One participant said:

“I am forever stuck in a body that I am not going to like and there’s no way I can go back to how I was before puberty”

Participants spoke about puberty being a particularly distressing time as their bodies changed in unwanted ways.

“I kind of almost grew up like a boy, really, and then puberty happened and it was very distressing, like almost in my brain I wasn’t expecting it to happen”

Some participants struggled to describe their distress.

“It’s just... it’s hard to explain. It’s really hard to explain. I find it hard identifying which emotion I’m feeling. Everything just feels like stress – everything”

1. b) Making sense of who I am

Participants were uncomfortable when they did not understand their identities and spent a lot of time trying to understand themselves. Participants had to make sense of their autism identity, as well as gender identity. Participants often found this process frustrating.

“My identity is something that I’ve had to figure out and it was really difficult.”

Once participants reached a sense of self-understanding, they felt relieved and more accepting of themselves.

“It’s been such a relief to accept that there is something different about me and just try and do things in different a way that work for me”.

1. c) Intersecting and competing needs

Most participants had multiple different needs, which interacted with one another. Aside from autism and gender dysphoria, many participants had experienced mental health difficulties or had survived traumatic experiences. One participant who had mental health needs said:

“I was just completely lost really....there was the gender stuff going on, but there was an awful lot else going on as well...I was really depressed, anxious, isolated, struggling massively socially and I had OCD”

Many participants described a clash between their needs as an autistic individual, and their gender related needs. For example, participants experienced *sensory dysphoria* which were experiences of distress in their bodies associated with sensory sensitivities. For example, in trans men, periods were distressing due to triggering gender dysphoria, as well as triggering autism-related sensory sensitivities.

Participants also described how undertaking both social and physical gender transition involved change, which was challenging due to being autistic and preferring things to stay the same.

“I think because of the fear of changes happening – I really wanted to be in control as much as I could and I asked to have [testosterone] gel instead of injections because...I could.. [choose to] not apply it”

Some non-binary participants said that thinking styles linked to autism could make it hard for them to accept their non-binary identities and bodies, for example a non-binary participant said:

“I don’t really want a body at all because it would never be exactly in between.”

Other participants felt autism helped them to understand their gender, saying autistic people see the world differently, and so are more in tune with their gender identities.

Section 2. Mismatch between needs as an autistic trans person and society

2. a) Gender as social behaviour

Gender identity is partly affirmed by how others see you. This social dimension of gender was complicated for autistic people who had social differences and did not always know what others were thinking.

“Gender was just another one of those things where it seemed like everybody else had a bunch of ideas about how the world was meant to work, it didn’t really seem to make a lot of sense to me”

For some participants, autism helped them to be free in their gender expression:

“I have never tried to fit in with people, or very rarely. So whilst now my gender presentation is very stereotypically male, there are some things that I do are intentionally more feminine, but I don’t care”

Some participants felt negatively impacted by gender stereotypes linked to autism, since the traits of autism are stereotypically seen as male:

“people who see me as female may not necessarily pick up on my autistic traits as much”

2. b) Struggle of being different

Autistic and transgender participants reported social challenges, and many were bullied and felt different to other people due to both their gender and autism identities.

“It’s only when you kind of get to secondary school and like the social expectations changed and then I really realised how different I was.”

This sometimes led to feelings of shame, and worry about other people’s opinions:

“it’s like the feeling that people are watching me and judging my every move that I make”

2. c) Battle for support

Participants had to fight to get the help they needed linked to gender dysphoria, autism, and mental health needs. Participants wanted their autism and gender identities to be affirmed and understood by clinicians.

“every service I’d ever had contact with had misunderstood me, and there was actually a fear that maybe the gender clinic will be the same”

Some participants felt they had to mask their autism when attending gender clinics in order to get the treatment that they wanted.

This summary is based on findings from: Cooper, Mandy, Butler & Russell (2021) DOI: 10.1177/13623613211039113