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Non-Binary Gender Identity Development: A Qualitative Study

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NON-BINARY GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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Abstract

Gender identity development models in psychology for transgender individuals have typically combined the experiences of binary transgender and non-binary transgender people into the same group. However, differences may exist between the two communities. Therefore, the present study sought to explore the lived experiences of non-binary adults and their gender identity development process. Through the lens of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 non-binary participants to collect rich data on their gender identity development process. Transcriptions were coded and reviewed to develop themes and categories. The themes included: Connection and relationships, intersectionality and culture, gender in childhood and adolescence, gender in emerging adulthood, and gender actualization and liberation. A dynamic gender identity development model was created to illustrate the themes and categories developed from the data provided by participants. The themes from the non-binary participants share some commonalities with binary transgender individuals; however, some findings were unique to the non-binary community, indicating binary and non-binary transgender individuals may not be regarded as the same community.

Introduction

Psychological literature has utilized identity development models as a tool to illustrate the developmental experiences of individuals who hold specific identities. Among these models are identity development models related to gender identity. For many transgender identity development models, binary and non-binary transgender individuals are viewed as the same community. However, these models have often been created using data collected from samples of primarily binary transgender participants. Without the inclusion or focus on the experiences of non-binary individuals, data from these models may not be generalizable to the gender identity development process for non-binary people.

Due to the lack of focus on non-binary individuals, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of non-binary individuals to better understand the gender development process. Qualitative data may be utilized to create a gender identity development model that is specific to the non-binary community and can highlight the unique developmental experiences of non-binary individuals.

Literature Review

Non-binary, gender nonconforming, and genderqueer individuals are people whose gender identity does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth (APA, 2015). The term sex is utilized to describe the biological differences that males and females exhibit (Short, Yang, & Jenkins, 2013). Biological sex typically refers to reproductive organs associated with the sex type. Additionally, sex may also refer to the chromosomes that represent a male genome or female genome, such as two X chromosomes or one X and one Y chromosome (Short, Yang, & Jenkins, 2013). Unfortunately, common vernacular has often used sex and gender interchangeably to describe the same construct.

The construct of gender is separate from the construct of sex, as gender stems from society and culture. Bem (1981) hypothesized that children are assimilated into a gendered culture that teaches what boys are meant to do and what girls should do. Children quickly begin to associate particular tasks, hobbies, interests, objects, and concepts with gender as taught by individuals in their environment. Parental figures and caregivers are often primary teachers of gender in a child's early years of development (Spivey, Huebner, & Diamond, 2018). Caregivers who strongly adhere to traditional gender norms may be quick to intervene when a child engages in gender nonconforming behaviors (Spivey, Huebner, & Diamond, 2018).

In the past decade, the United States has begun to recognize the validity and existence of gender identities that are not within a binary notion of gender. This is particularly relevant in the psychological research as authors have begun to explore the experiences of non-binary and genderqueer people (Keller, 2019; Bradford et al., 2019; Mcquire et al., 2018). Gender has been recognized as a social construct that is different from biological sex (APA, 2015). The American Psychological Association defined the term genderqueer as:

> A term to describe a person whose gender identity does not align with a binary understanding of gender (i.e., a person who does not identify fully as either a man or a woman). People who identify as genderqueer may redefine gender or decline to define themselves as gendered altogether. For example, people who identify as genderqueer may think of themselves as both man and woman (bigender, pangender, androgyne); neither man nor woman (genderless, gender neutral, neutrois, agender), moving between genders (genderfluid); or embodying a third gender (APA, 2016).

Older gender theories recognize the socially constructed nature of gender. However, the early theories fail to recognize gender exists outside of a binary. The gender binary refers to only two genders, male or female, masculine or feminine. Masculinity has been synonymous with male identities, just as femininity has been paired with female identities. Gender norms may be suitable for individuals who identify as cisgender. People who are born with an assigned gender that matches their gender identity are referred to as cisgender (APA, 2016). But the concept of a gender binary does not accurately represent the lived experiences for some individuals (Harrison, Grant, Herman, 2012; Bradford et al., 2018). Some individuals are assigned a gender identity at birth, but as development occurs, the individual recognizes their true gender identity does not align with the gender assigned to them (APA, 2016).

Movement Away from a Binary Notion of Gender

The previous beliefs that gender is fused with biological sex have begun to wither away in psychological literature. With the shift in the conceptualization of gender, studies have begun to examine biological factors that may be related to gender identity.

Sexual dimorphism posits the brain, or a system can only take one of two forms, such as male or female. Additionally, sexual dimorphism states the type of brain, male or female, affects the outcome of other systems in the body, such as gender identity. Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate, and van Anders (2019) reviewed several studies that refute the concept of sexual dimorphism. Other work has found that brains are less dimorphic than presumed, and instead have a great deal of overlap between the brains of biologically cisgender men and women (Lenroot & Giedd, 2010; Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate, & van Anders, 2019). Another study noted the presence of both estrogen and testosterone in male and female bodies, which have been conceptualized as "male and female hormones."

Gender and Identity development

Identity development has been extensively reviewed within psychological research on various aspects of lived experiences. For example, Black identity development (Cross, 1971) and Feminist identity development (Downing & Roush, 1985) have been seminal articles in the field of identity development. These models phenomenologically describe the stages of development that occur in relation to the specific identity the individual holds. Identity development models typically revolve around the concept of recognition, reflection, and acceptance or love of one's identity (Cross, 1971).

The identity development of transgender individuals has been investigated in previous research (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Bockting, 2014). Participants who engaged in a qualitative interview reported societal pressures as hindering their identity development (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Cultures and societies create gendered expectations for individuals who present as male or female, which leads transgender children feeling confused and conflicted. With strong influence from caregivers, children and adolescents are more likely to hide their transgender identities in an attempt to conform to societal expectations (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Spivey, Huebner, & Diamond, 2018). Fear of discrimination, oppression, and violence is another barrier that impact transgender identity development and psychological well-being. Participants in Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) study, for example, noted that gender nonconformity led to discrimination through both homophobic and transphobic comments. The hateful comments may cause transgender individuals to feel misunderstood and rejected by peers.

Another concern mentioned by transgender individuals during their development was the worry of being viewed as sexual objects or fetishized by others (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Additionally, transgender individuals may face daily microaggressions, such as being

misgendered, stared at, or invalidated in their trans identity (Nordmarken, 2014). Experiencing discrimination for living authentically may dissuade individuals from coming out as transgender during early stages of development.

When an individual comes to accept their transgender identity, the discovery of affirming communities and allies can be highly beneficial for the well-being of transgender individuals (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Finding others who hold transgender identities can provide support and assist with identity development. A sense of mentorship can develop from friendships formed through the LGBTQ+ community, which may ultimately lead to self-acceptance and a more positive self-image. Along with finding allies or mentors, identification of pronouns helps to further define their identity (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

The final stages of development are specifically related to living authentically to one's transgender identity (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Previous research has stated transgender individuals regard their transitioning process as rewarding and necessary processes (Schimmel-Bristow et al. 2018). Living authentically is balanced with experiencing discrimination and microaggressions. However, the majority of participants in qualitative studies note the importance of authenticity, as it improves self-image and self-love (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

Within Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) research, the authors note the multiple identities that exist within the umbrella of transgender (gender not being aligned with gender assigned at birth) have not been fully explored in identity development models. Most research has focused on transgender identities that involve a binary transition (male-to-female and female-to-male). Thus, the lived experiences of non-binary individuals has not been extensively reviewed and researched in psychological literature.

Gender Development in Childhood & Adolescence

Childhood and adolescent years are significant times for developmental milestones. Developmental theorists such as Erikson (1968) posit that milestones exist throughout the developmental process, from childhood all the way through late adulthood. As part of the developmental theories, identity formation becomes a central focus, particularly during the childhood and adolescent years. According to Erikson's theory (1968), children take on the attributes and characteristics of caregivers and significant figures in their lives. The child is able to recognize their existence as a unique individual but look to the environment for identity traits to adopt for their own personality and characteristics. Erikson hypothesized identity formation during adolescence brings rise to the question "Who am I?" as it relates to the individual and as a member of a society or culture (Sokol, 2009). In his theory, Erikson commented on the role of social factors that influence identity development. Adolescents question what their role in society is meant to be and how they will contribute in a social sense. This may lead to seeking out external resources to assist in the self-identification process, such as peer, parental, and media influence. Thus, the individual's identity is shaped by their own beliefs and societal factors.

Vygotsky (1978; 1980) believed that a child's environment and upbringing played a substantial role in identity development. Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural development hypothesized that social interactions are the primary factor impacting cognitive development. A child's early interactions with caregivers and other individuals in their environment will provide them with knowledge about the world and society. This relates to the manner in which gender is taught to children. According to Vygotsky (1978), children and individuals are always existing in a culturally bound context. The individual cannot be separated from their culture, which influences how the individual creates their world view and integrates new information into their cognitive structures. Previous research has recognized the cultural differences exist amongst

cultures, especially for differences in gendered expectations (Kashima et al. 1995). Gender

expression may differ depending on the cultural upbringing of the individual.

Research has examined the process of gender development for young children. Trautner

et al. (2003) explored how children typically begin to integrate the construct of gender into their

cognitions. According to Trautner et al (2003), children advance through three phases. The first

phase begins during the toddler years. Children become aware of characteristics associated with

particular gender identities, most often stereotypical characteristics. The second phase occurs

between the ages of 5 and 7 during which a child's understanding of gender becomes rather

rigid. Lastly, the third phase is from 8 years old or older and the researchers found an increase in

cognitive flexibility related to gender.

Children are also cognizant of gender norms and expectations when considering hobbies

or interests (Martin & Ruble, 2004; Miller, Trautner, & Ruble, 2006). When given toys that are

stereotypically gender-related, children are able to identify which sex would be more interested

in a toy or activity. Moreover, children in these studies would often focus more on pursuing play

with toys that were associated with their own sex. Research has found evidence that children are

integrating gender-related data into their cognitions as early as age 2 (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

In addition to engagement with stereotypical toys or activities associated with one's own

sex, children also react to gender norm violations (Martin & Ruble, 2009). Bullying and pressure

occur in early elementary years when children engage with an activity that is considered cross-

gender (Kowalski, 2007; Martin & Ruble, 2009). This data is in accordance with the concept of

cognitive rigidity and gender related activities, as acting outside of the norm is not met with

cognitive flexibility. When faced with a gender norm violation, research has suggested children

will try to change their peer's behavior, mock their peer, or question the individual's gender

identity (Kowalski, 2007). During adolescence, individuals experience "gender intensification" (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Gender intensification is conceptualized as an increase in pressure to conform to gender norms associated with their assigned gender and sex. Additionally, adolescents experience significant physiological changes, such as increase in hormone production and maturation of the reproductive systems (Steensma et al., 2013).

Adolescent years can be challenging for non-binary individuals as gender identity development becomes a point of focus in the self-exploration process. Peer pressure may prevent individuals from pursuing the activities or interests, as peers may shame individuals who transgress gender norms (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). The pressure to conform does not just negatively impact non-binary individuals, but it also impacts the self-esteem and self-image of cisgender individuals. For example, men are expected to be stoic and seek help for mental health concerns. The internalization of mental health concerns may be detrimental and occur due to gender norm expectations (Perry & Pauletti, 2011).

Peer pressure and societal pressures play a significant role in a child or adolescent's gender identity development. External factors may greatly impede development or prevent authenticity to one's gender expression. For example, Tatangelo, Connaughton, McCage, and Mellor (2018) found that peer pressure played a much larger role in a preadolescent boy's desire to change their body type in comparison to internal motivators. Children in this study were asked to complete questionnaires that focused on adherence to male gender norms and desire to attain a stereotypically masculine physique (muscular and toned). Prior to adolescence, the participants in this study were invested in societal ideals and values related to athleticism and strength (Tatangelo, Connaughton, McCage, & Mellor, 2018). Personal beliefs appear to be strongly

influenced by external pressures, which may inhibit an individual from feeling safe to live authentically without fear of repercussion.

Gender in Emerging Adulthood

The developmental experience from adolescence into adulthood has been reconceptualized to include emerging adulthood as a developmental period between adolescence and adulthood (Arrnett, 2000). Individuals between the ages of 18 to 29 are considered emerging adults in this conceptualization of the developmental process. Arrnett (2000) argues emerging adults are engaging in ongoing identity formation and development. Emerging adults may be focusing on three areas during this time: work, love, and worldview.

What is not suggested in Arrnett's (2000) perspective of identity formation is the role of social support. Fuente, Parra, Sanchez-Queija, and Lizaso (2019) conducted research with emerging adults to examine the factors that contribute to an individual "flourishing." Flourishing in this circumstance is used to describe a high degree of well-being and feeling as though one's life is progressing without difficulty (Keyes, 2002; Hone et al., 2014; Fuente, Parra, Sanchez-Queija, & Lizaso, 2019). Participants in the study who indicated they were flourishing placed a high level of importance on social support, such as family, friend, and partner support. Ongoing development in emerging adulthood continues to consider the role of social support regardless of gender.

Ongoing research for emerging adulthood has suggested additional identity domains to be added to Arrnett's (2000) original conceptualization of emerging adulthood. Additional identities emerging adults may be developing include political identity, religious orientation, gender and sexuality, and ethnicity (Schwartz et al., 2013; Schroggs, Miller, & Stanfield, 2018' Mah, Matsuba, & Pratt, 2020). For LGBTQIA+ individuals, previous research suggests individuals

may be able to explore their sexual orientation or gender identity, feelings of attraction, and behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2013). This may be related to emerging adults being exposed to new environments, such as higher education, where some distance between the individual and their family exists (Epstein & Ward, 2011). Emerging adults in the Epstein and Ward (2011) study recognized the messages they received from their parents about gender expectations and gender norms, such as the need to be "tough" and avoid femininity if the adult's gender was assigned male at birth. The gender norms learned in childhood and adolescence are maintained in emerging adulthood, however, individuals may be exposed to new gender expressions or gender norms (Kuper, Wright, & Mustanki, 2018).

Individuals who have grown up questioning their gender identity may be able to explore gender during emerging adulthood. Previous research has reported the importance of exposure to different gender presentations and language for gender identity or expression for non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals (Kuper, Wright, & Mustanki, 2018). Learning that being a gender that is not one's gender assigned at birth is a possibility opens up the potential for ongoing gender exploration. However, transitioning (both medically and socially) can be impacted by interpersonal relationships, such as parents and peers (Kuper, Wright, & Mustanki, 2018). Lack of support or living in a setting that is not affirming of gender exploration can act as a barrier for gender exploration for emerging adults (Kuper, Wright, & Mustanki, 2018; Fiani & Han, 2019). However, individuals who reported support from family, friends, or partners felt safer to explore their gender identity (Fiani & Han, 2019; Dowers, White, Cook, & Kingsley, 2020).

Non-binary literature

The prevalence of individuals who identify within the non-binary umbrella of gender identity represents a small percentage of the population. Kuyper and Wijsen (2014) found that about 3-5% of people in a Dutch population identified as having a gender identity that did not match with their assigned gender identity at birth. While non-binary individuals represent a small portion of the population, it is valuable to explore their lived experiences and interactions with gender in a developmental context.

Non-binary individuals have existed throughout time and amongst many cultures. Indigenous populations have recognized the existence of two-spirit identities, which means the person is both masculine and feminine, or between the binary (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Other examples of non-binary examples across cultures include the Chuckchi in Siberia, Hijra in India, and Quariwarmi in Peru (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). The concept of non-binary identities is not novel in many societies; however, it has been largely overlooked within literature.

Richards et al. (2016) examined the prevalence of non-binary literature that exists in the PubMed database. Literature focusing on non-binary individuals represented 59 articles out of approximately 280,000 articles available. Thus, the non-binary community has largely been excluded from medical and psychological literature. With the limited amount of non-binary literature available, this provides substantial reasons for conducting research in the areas of non-binary identity development and concerns.

A model for transgender identity development has been previously created (Pardo & Devor, 2017), however there are several issues related to the information shared within this development model. Firstly, the article uses outdated language naming the model "Transexual identity development," a term that is not currently used by the majority of the transgender

community. Second, the model insinuates that the experiences of non-binary transgender people are the same as binary transgender people.

Qualitative Research about Non-binary Experiences

While there is a growing amount of research on transgender identities and transgender individuals, the unique experiences of non-binary people are not necessarily included in those dialogues. A recent study by Keller (2018) qualitatively interviewed genderqueer and non-binary individuals to explore their identity development and lived experiences. Participants found a great deal of empowerment through being able to authentically label their identity and be authentic. The participants also spoke extensively about discrimination, oppression, and prejudice, both in society and in health care settings. The interviews identified the pressure that participants felt to conform to society. This is in line with previous research on gender norm conforming (Tatangelo, Connaughton, McCabe, & Mellor, 2018; Conry-Murray, 2015). Participants stressed the importance of proper pronoun use when seeking out services (Keller, 2018). With the lack of non-binary literature, it is incredibly valuable to expand upon the literature to improve our understanding of non-binary identities.

Scales have been recently developed that focuses on genderqueer and non-binary identities in comparison to transgender and cisgender identities (Catalpa et al., 2019). The genderqueer identity scale (GQI) has collected data to support its ability to identify genderqueer and non-binary individuals from transgender and cisgender individuals. This is a small step in a direction that acknowledges the legitimacy of non-binary identities and providing awareness for the psychological community to additional gender identities outside of the binary.

Clinical relevance

Identity development models and research conducted for the non-binary community is valuable for improved care in both physical and mental health contexts. Models of identity development can be utilized by clinicians and medical providers who do not hold gender minority statuses to improve their own awareness. As suggested by the American Psychological Association (2016), clinicians must be competent in multicultural concerns, which includes trans-affirming care. Individuals who experienced positive gender-affirming medical interventions were more likely to seek out further health services (Tomita, Testa, & Balsam, 2018). Additionally, transgender individuals who had positive experiences in medical settings also had a decrease in the severity of their mental health symptoms, such as depression and anxiety. This supports the value of raising awareness of transgender and non-binary concerns and lived experiences as it will promote appropriate gender affirming care.

A key concern that acts as a significant barrier for non-binary individuals seeking out medical care is being misgendered and misunderstood in their gender identity (Gridley et al., 2015). Participants in the study noted negative experiences in health care services in which they were referred to by their "dead" name in the waiting room. Individuals who are "outed" while waiting for medical services immediately have a reaction of concern and worry as others in the waiting room may stare in curiosity or in a more negative glare (Gridley et al., 2015).

Improper use of pronouns can also be highly impactful on an individual's desire to seek out medical services (Gridley et al., 2015). Participants reported a lack of interest in returning to medical services due to dismissive medical staff who did not honor the patient's pronouns. In contrast, when an individual encountered medical staff who used the proper pronouns, it was met with feelings of comfortability and happiness. Acknowledgement and respect for one's pronouns

and gender identity is highly valuable for individuals who identify as transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary. Therefore, contributions to the literature regarding non-binary identity development will be beneficial to both patients as well as clinicians.

Grounded Theory

In accordance with previous research in the area of non-binary identities and identity development, the current study will focus on a qualitative approach to collect rich data (Taylor, Zalewska, Gates, & Millon, 2018; Bradford et al. 2018). The voices of non-binary individuals can be adequately referenced and expressed in research through means of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). The qualitative methodology of grounded theory has been utilized in the past to preserve the words of participants to create a theory of identity development (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

Grounded theory's application has been seen in previous identity development model research (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). The purpose of grounded theory is to construct a theory based upon the data that is collected from qualitative interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory has been chosen for the current study as the voices of non-binary individuals will be maintained in the creation of the developmental model for non-binary identities.

Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the gender identity development of individuals who identify as non-binary. In order to create a representative identity development model, data was collected in a manner that allows for a great deal of depth in content. More specifically, following a Grounded Theory research methodology (Charmaz, 2014), semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to explore gender identity-related topics, including topics that may not have been considered by the researchers during the development of this

study. Additionally, the data collected was coalesced to create a gender expansive identity

development model, with the goal of assisting community members, clinicians and researchers to

better understand gender identities that are outside of a binary notion of gender. The following

questions were addressed in this study:

1.   What is the impact of living a binary centric society on individuals who identify as non-

        binary?

2.   How do early messages of gender impact gender identity development for non-binary

        individuals?

3.   What are significant milestones in the gender identity development process?

Methods

Participants

The participants in the present study consisted of 10 individuals who identified within the

spectrum of non-binary identities (non-binary, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, agender,

gender fluid, etc.). Nine participants specifically identified as non-binary, and one participant

identified as genderqueer. Additionally, of ten participants, two participants identified as both

non-binary and gender fluid. The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian (8), one

participant identified as Latinx, and one participant identified as Multiracial. The average age of

participants was 29, with the youngest participant being 27 and the oldest participant being 31.

All interviews were conducted using Zoom due to participants residing in various areas of the

country and the COVID-19 pandemic occurring in tandem with the data collection period.

Geographically, all participants are currently living in the United States. Four participants reside

in the Northeast, three live in the South, two live on the west coast, and one is from the Midwest.

The study was advertised through List Servs (APA Division 44, APA Division 35, university List Servs), LGBTQ+ Facebook groups, and word of mouth (see Appendix B for advertisement). Participants were provided with the principal researcher's email address to contact for additional information about the study. If a participant was interested, the participant was contacted via email to address potential questions, a website URL to provide and receive informed consent, and any details about the study. Participants were also provided with an alias in order to be de-identified within the study to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Data was linked to the alias, but the alias cannot offer personal information that could be directly related to the participant's private information. Participants received ten dollars was given to individuals as compensation for their participation in the study. Compensation was provided in the form of an Amazon gift card.

Figure 1: Participant Demographics

ID#	Age	Race	Non-binary Identity
1	29	White	Non-binary
2	28	White	Non-binary
3	29	White	Transmasculine/Non-binary
4	29	Multiracial	Non-binary & Gender Fluid
5	28	White	Non-binary & Gender Fluid
6	29	White	Non-binary
7	29	Latinx	Non-binary
8	28	White	Genderqueer Masculine-Presenting
9	27	White	Non-binary
10	28	White	Non-binary & Genderqueer

Research Team

The research team consisted of one principal investigator (PI) and two inquiry auditors. The PI identifies as a White, 28-year-old, queer, agender, individual working as a graduate student in a Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program. The PI has previous clinical experience working with transgender and non-binary individuals in community mental health and university counseling center settings. The first auditor identifies as a cisgender, White woman working as an associate professor in a counseling psychology department of a midwestern university. The second auditor identifies as a cisgender, White woman who is a psychologist in training at a veteran's association and received previous educational experiences in a midwestern counseling psychology program. The third auditor identifies as a Latinx, cisgender man who is a professor in a counseling psychology department of a midwestern university.

The PI and members of the research team are all from a Midwest university and counseling psychology doctoral program that values social justice. Consideration of multiculturalism and intersectionality is incorporated into the methodology, which can be found in the interview questions and demographics questionnaire. Prior to the study, expectations of the data were reflected upon, taking into account the general experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Some anticipated experiences included: experiences of discrimination and harassment, feeling as though one does not fit in or belong, a sense of discomfort associated with binary gender conformity, and the importance of affirming and validating people or environments. We also expected participants to discuss interpersonal relationships and the way in which support or invalidation may impact the gender development process.

Instruments/Measures

Participants completed a demographics questionnaire that will be coded with an alias to preserve the privacy and identity of the participants. Due to the small sample pool in qualitative studies, identities should not be directly linked to demographics, thus participants will be asked about a name or number to associate with their demographics.

The primary instrument used for this study was a semi-structured interview. The interview consisted of questions that focus on early experiences with gender, messages received regarding gender and gender norms, when individuals recognized their genderqueer or non-binary identity, and the process of identity development that occurred from early childhood through adulthood (See Appendix A). A pilot interview was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the interview questions and the structure of the interview. The structure of the interview was altered after completion of the pilot interview to allow for rapport to be built before asking more personal questions. The semi-structured interview format allowed for follow up questions during the interview to collect a richer data set. Additionally, new interview questions were formulated during the interview process as many participants shared common themes to explore.

Procedures

Individuals who consented to participate in the study first completed the informed consent documentation and received an electronic copy of the informed consent documentation via email. Afterwards, participants completed a demographics questionnaire (see Appendix B). Once the demographics questionnaire was completed, the principal researcher contacted the participants about scheduling a qualitative, semi-structured interview. The participants were given details about the interviews, such as the duration, the need for a quiet location, and the best means to communicate. All participants chose to complete the interview process through Zoom

to allow for audio and video to be recorded. Participants were also informed of the interview

being recorded using Zoom's recording function and transcription capabilities. All recordings

were saved in a secure location on the PI's computer and were password protected.

During the interview, the participant and principal investigator discussed the content of

the informed consent form to address potential risks or any questions the participant may have

had. Participants were reminded that they are able to decline participation as well as drop out of

the study at any time. As part of the informed consent process, participants were reminded that

the interview is audio recorded. All recordings were saved in a secure, password protected

location, and destroyed once the data and recordings are no longer needed. The data was de-

identified to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy. If participants agreed to continue

with the study, the audio recording was initiated. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to

90 minutes depending on the depth provided by participants when answering questions.

Data Analysis

After interviews were conducted, the audio recordings were fully transcribed for the

purpose of coding and analysis from the Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2014).

Transcriptions are password protected and stored on a secure, and private location to ensure

confidentiality. Transcriptions were de-identified during the transcribing process to protect the

participant's privacy.

After the recordings were transcribed, the interviews were coded using the guidelines

provided by Charmaz (2014). The coding process involved a thorough examination of the

transcription in order to identify themes and simplify the data for continuous analysis. The

coding process began with initial coding as described by Charmaz (2014) to consolidate the

information from interviews in the form of short phrases that highlight meanings, actions, and

experiences. The words and ideas provided by participants were preserved by creating codes that

maintain the idea and language shared in the interview process. The codes hold the subjective

information and meaning from participants to prevent bias from potentially skewing the data.

When additional interviews were transcribed and initially coded, the data analysis would shift to

focused coding to compare and contrast the information within multiple interviews (Charmaz,

2014). Written memos were referred to as well to assist with the comparison of initial codes

across interviews. Focused codes were organized into categories to indicate codes that are

associated with a particular experience shared by participants. Categories were reviewed to

determine if overarching themes could be created that would encompass specific categories. The

PI consulted with three reviewers to determine if codes, categories, and themes were appropriate

and grounded in the data. Edits were made to codes, categories, and themes after receiving

feedback from reviewers.

Interviews and data collection continued until the data was considered "saturated,"

defined as when interviews are no longer provided new information and data appear to be

consistent amongst participants (Charmaz, 2014). Saturation was determined by reviewing and

comparing all of the transcriptions and identifying common themes that exist amongst the

transcriptions and seeking feedback from the three reviewers involved with data analysis. Codes

previously created were combined to create between four and six core themes (Charmaz, 2014).

Themes created remain true to the answers provided by participants and have exemplar quotes

that capture the essence of a theme.

In alignment with the protocol of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), notes and memos

were created through the interviewing and coding process. The purpose of note taking was to

organize potential themes or commonalities among interviews. As more interviews were

conducted, additional information was added into the notes which led to new questions being added to the interview process.

Trustworthiness

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the trustworthiness of data and adequacy of interpretation were considered before settling on themes as more data or analysis may have been necessary (Morrow, 2005). Therefore, to monitor trustworthiness, the following methods were utilized to assess the themes, data, and conclusions formed during the analytical process:

1. Throughout the interviews, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their answers without concern of being too detailed or explaining too much. Additionally, at the end of the interview, participants were asked if there were any questions not addressed that should have been discussed. Participants were also informed they could contact the interviewer with follow-up information if they had more thoughts to share.

2. In alignment with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), the study had three reviewers who had different identities from the principal investigator. These reviewers also did not take part in the qualitative interviews. Reviewers were asked to review transcriptions, and themes generated from the data to determine if possible themes were overlooked or data was overinterpreted (Connelly, 2016). Feedback was provided by the reviewers to further improve the accuracy of themes and incorporate items that were potentially missing from the coding process.

3. Participants were provided with their deidentified transcriptions after the interview process for them to review (Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). An email was sent to each of the participants with a summary of the themes and categories generated along with a message asking for feedback from participants about their transcriptions and the

themes. If any direct quotes were being used from a participant's interview, the

participant would also be sent the quote used in the paper to ask for their approval or

disapproval. If a participant did not approve of the quotation in the paper, the quotation

would be taken out to promote participant autonomy and privacy. Of the 10 participants,

4 participants responded to the principal investigator with comments related to the paper.

For example, one participant shared feedback about fixing up the wording of some of

their quotes for ease of reading, and another reiterated the importance of community

support.

Results

Information gathered from the interviews was examined to reveal several themes across

the developmental process of gender identity formation. In line with Charmaz (2014), themes

and subcategories of themes were generated using the information collected from the interviews

with participants, and in describing these themes, the researchers attempted to preserve the

language utilized by the participants. The six main themes that were identified from the data

were: Connection and Relationships, the Role of Culture and Intersectionality of Identities,

Gender in Childhood and Adolescence, Gender in Emerging Adulthood, and Gender

Actualization and Liberation. Developmental processes were a particularly important part of the

participants' comments, and overall participants indicated that gender differences were

recognized in childhood and adolescence, that these gender differences were explored in

emerging adulthood, and that there was sense of gender liberation and actualization that occurred

in adulthood.

As part of the analysis process, an identity development model was also created in order

to offer a visualization of the gender developmental process as described by these participants.

The model in this case took the form of the tree, with each basic element of the tree representing

a different aspect of the gender development process. Additionally, the tree model was a useful

metaphor for communicating that the basic elements (themes and subthemes) built off of each

other and represent growth over the lifespan—or at least (in the case of these participants) into

young adulthood. Additionally, the metaphor of the tree carries with it the notion that the base of

the tree—the soil and the roots-- impact all other elements of the tree. And likewise, the tree

trunk impacts the branches and tree canopy. Therefore, the results section is organized around

this image of tree, starting with the soil (Connection and Relationships), which effects all other

concepts; the roots (Intersectionality and Culture), the tree base (Gender in Childhood and

Adolescence), the branches (Emerging Adulthood), and the tree canopy (Gender Actualization

and Liberation).

Theme	Categories
Connection and Relationships – The Soil	*Partner Support* *Friend Support* *Family Support* *Academic Support* *Professional Support* *Healthcare Support*
Intersectionality and Culture – The Roots	*Family Culture* *Geographical-Political Culture* *Identity Factors*
Gender in Childhood and Adolescence – The Growing Base	*Experiences of Gender Nonconformity* *Experiences of Gender-based Discrimination* *Gender-based Conformity* *Lack of Representation* *Lack of Gender Diversity Vocabulary* *Disentangling Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity*
Gender in Emerging Adulthood – Branching out	*Higher Education as a Time of Exploration* *Testing Identifiers and Pronouns* *Workplace Challenges*

	Name and Pronouns Misgendering
	Creative Outlets to Explore Gender
	Non-binary Representation
Gender Actualization and	*Safety in Relationships*
Liberation - The Canopy	*Ongoing Exploration*
	Navigating Gender Exclusive Environments
	Gender Liberation and Gender Actualization
	"Not Queer Enough"

Connection and Relationships – The Soil

As trees require proper soil and nutrition to begin growing in a healthy manner, so too do individuals need connections with others in their identity development process, inclusive of their gender identity development. Consequently, connection and relationships are presented first not because they are necessarily linearly first, but because the impact of connections and relationships is seen throughout the entirety of the gender development process. At the core of every interview was a theme related to the importance of connections generally and of specific relationships. These connections included connections to family, to friends, to significant others, to media, to culture, and to the self.

Participants shared the ongoing impact of connections throughout their developmental process. Some of these connections were important to participants at different times (i.e., partners were not important until late adolescents or emerging adulthood). However, as a subset of connections, the factor of personal relationships, both affirming and unaccepting, impacted every aspect of the developmental journey described by participants. This theme is intertwined into each subsequent theme, as each theme was somehow affected by the role of connections and relationships.

For the participants of this study, connections, and relational support from a variety of perspectives played a crucial role in the realm of identity development. Support came in the form

of peer support, workplace/program support, family support, partner(s) support, and healthcare

support. In these dynamics, receiving support or lack thereof impacted the gender development

journey of each participant, and make up the soil the tree is anchored in.

  Family Support. Families were often the earliest influence on participants and their

understanding of gender. Participants learned of gender norms through their families and either

received support or disapproval for their exploration of gender. Participants spoke of the value of

parental and sibling support throughout the gender development process. For example, some

participants spoke about growing up as a "tomboy" and receiving support from their parents.

Some participants spoke about unconditional support from their families and the comfort

associated with acceptance from the family. While many participants shared narratives in which

their family did not "completely understand" what it meant to be non-binary, some participants

indicated their families are accepting and "try their best." One participant shared a narrative of

unconditional support from their father:

> My dad got it from like a very early age, even when I was very feminine. And when I cut
>
> my hair, he pulled me aside… he was like, "Hey, I just want you to know, I love you as
>
> my son. Like, just so you know." And I hadn't said anything, I just cut my hair. And I
>
> was like, "no, I don't think that's me. Like, I'm, I'm a girl. Like I think I'm okay. I just
>
> have short hair." But he was like "look, I just love you. I just love my kid. And it doesn't
>
> matter to me whether you're my son or my daughter or my kid. I don't care. I just love
>
> you. (Participant 3).

While the Participant's father was not aware of non-binary identities at the time, the participant

spoke about their parents' attempts to use they/them pronouns and the importance of validation

in their non-binary identity.

Not all participants received support from their parents, however, and experienced rejection or disapproval from their parents. Lack of support from parents was described as parents not using or respecting they/them pronouns, using a person's dead name, and negative comments made about the individual for not conforming to gender norms. Some participants spoke about the decision to distance themselves from family for their personal well-being and instead developed a chosen family or a support system of friends and/or partners.

Gender affirming siblings played a valuable role in the connection participants felt with their families. Some siblings of participants were able to remind their parents of pronoun use when referring to participants. Many participants spoke about challenges that can exist within the family system. For example, ongoing conversations about pronoun use and asking their parents to change their use of pronouns were often avoided. One participant shared the following sentiment regarding their family:

> And then the thought of like, trying to explain to my family, I mean, like they did not react great when I came out as, but the thought of having to explain trans identities broadly and then like non-binary, and like they, them pronouns and changing my name and having surgeries, like none of that appealed in any way, shape or form having to have those conversations and the, like, I wasn't worried at that point that they would like to disown me or anything like that, but I was worried that it would just be this like really awkward, uncomfortable process and that they wouldn't accept it, like, and they, and they still don't like, they still call me by my dead name and they use she, her pronouns, not maliciously, but I think just out of like, they truly don't understand any of this. (Participant 1).

Friend Support. Along with partners, participants spoke about their friend groups being queer affirming and adapting to the shift in pronoun use or minimizing gendered language in order to be more inclusive. Having friends who identify as LGBTQIA+ has consistently been a positive factor in the development of non-binary identities. A few participants spoke about having binary transgender friends who offered participants a space to speak about gender. For example:

> I had like a close trans friend, like a very, like, like a best friend. And then we could start talking like openly about gender identity. And I think that would in itself was like a milestone of like being able to just have a forum to talk about all these things, somebody like I trusted and cared about (Participant 4).

Partner Support. Some participants indicated they learned of non-binary identity labels from their partners and have been provided with support in their gender identity journey from their partners. By partners providing unconditional support and care, participants were able to test different forms of presentation, pronouns, and names. During instances of being misgendered by others, participants were able to lean on their partner or partners for emotional support. Participants emphasized the importance of a partner who is gender affirming.

Academic Support. On the educational side, academic support was described as receiving assistance from teachers and school systems to to use their chosen name and pronouns. Individuals who were in higher education spoke about the importance of a faculty member or adviser who was gender affirming and would assist participants in navigating professional or academic concerns as they pertained to gender. For example:

I have great colleagues and an amazing cohort and amazing friends, but our professors

are like terrible. My advisor is amazing and I'm super grateful for her. Like if I didn't

have her, I would leave. But everyone else in the department is really transphobic. And so

it's been really hard navigating… am I integrating using he/they pronouns because I'll get,

mis-gendered less with a binary pronoun? (Participant 3)

Being misgendered was a frequent problem participants faced throughout their education.

However, participants mostly spoke about higher education as a place of support and assistance

in their gender development process. Participants cited psychology courses or feminist-based

courses as sources of information for the construct of gender. Participants also shared the value

of being around more people who were usually liberally minded and aware of non-binary

identities. Many participants indicated they learned of the term non-binary from someone they

met while in a higher education environment. No participant spoke explicitly about academic

support for their gender development process in high school, junior high, or elementary (though

they did speak of barriers in these same environments).

Workplace Support. Support in the workplace existed in the form of respecting pronouns,

chosen names, and norms regarding professional dress. Participants spoke about workplaces that

allowed them to express their gender in a way that felt authentic to them, such as their clothes,

make-up or no make-up, and different hairstyles. Some workplaces were described as affirming

for participants, specifically the supervisors or bosses of participants who assisted in the process

of coming out.

I did my name transition when I was at my former workplace. And I told my boss and I

was like, so petrified. I was like, I want to change my name. Like I'm, non-binary like,

you know, it was like, it was a thing. And he was very supportive and helped me

brainstorm the best way to do it (Participant 5).

Other participants expressed frustration with their workplaces, specifically those that

would not respect the pronouns of participants. One Participant stated "I've had coworkers flat

out refuse to use my pronouns" (Participant 10). This was an experience shared by most

participants, along with having their "dead name" on their badge or door. Participants spoke

about the challenges related to finding "professional" clothes that also align with their gender

expression due to many articles of clothing being tailored a specific body type. Finally,

participants spoke about times in which they would be considered a "gender expert" due to being

non-binary. Workplaces can simultaneously be a source of stress and pride for participants. As

one participant described:

> I was first stopping to wear makeup. So I hadn't like cut my hair off or anything yet, but I
>
> was like, I'm not doing the makeup thing anymore. And I was really worried that that
>
> would be viewed as being too stressed out or somehow being run down because like, it
>
> wasn't looking as good or things like that. Um, but actually now I think it's mostly viewed
>
> as a strength at work. Um, because like, you know, I'm, I'm the resident gender expert,
>
> um, you know, can, can feel crappy, but at the same time, it's like, "Hey, at least like
>
> people want to learn and they want to know." And like, um, you know, so that's, that's
>
> good. Um, it's annoying at work that like, you know, the name on my badge doesn't
>
> match what I'm actually asking (Participant 1).

There are positive and negative aspects of being a non-binary person in the workplace, as

described by Participant One. Being openly non-binary offered the participant the opportunity to

make changes in their workplace, such as educating others on gender. At the same time, this

could also be a stressor as the participant would be expected to be an expert on all things gender-related.

Healthcare Support. This area was not discussed as consistently or explicitly in most of the interviews. However, some participants who were engaging with hormone replacement therapy or gender affirming surgeries spoke about the process of navigating medical systems as a non-binary person. One participant noted they have dealt with chronic health concerns throughout their adult life and often opted to not correct a physician or medical professional when they would misgender the participant (Participant 10). On the mental health side of healthcare, one participant discussed the impact their openly transgender therapist had on their life (Participant 2). They shared how valuable it was to see an openly transgender person within the field of mental health and felt a sense of safety exploring their gender identity in that space. This participant also spoke about the relief they experienced in medical settings related to transitioning:

> …but I'm able to go to a trans specific, pro [trans] program within kind of a major hospital system in *******. My primary care doctor is also trans, she's great. Um, because trans people are great. I asked if I could go on hormones, and she was like, "Absolutely. When do you want to, when do you want to start?" (Participant 2).

Summary. Each of the categories within the theme of Connections and Supportive Relationships impact the subsequent themes, and continuing with the metaphor of the three, the tree continuously to receives nutrients and support from the soil which then helps the tree grow. The gender development experience is similar as the support from others are present throughout the lifespan of each participant. With the soil present, the tree forms roots to be influenced by the soil and absorb the nutrients (or lack thereof) from the ground. Therefore, aspects of culture are

strongly influenced by the connections and relationships that exist within an individual's life, and are considered next

Intersectionality and Culture – The Roots

Roots make use of the soil (connections and relationships) to allow the tree to grow, and in the continuation of our current tree metaphor as applied to gender exploration, it is the cultural messages about what gender is, and how it's "supposed" to be, that form the roots of the gender exploration process. The various cultural components related to gender identity were apparent across the ten interviews, and they were also tied in with the connections participants had with their families, geographical-political culture, their own beliefs, and their other identity factors (beyond gender). Cultural contexts at times offered participants freedom to explore their gender, but at other times limited what participants felt was possible due to the norms associated with their gender assigned at birth. As time progressed, the root system of the participants may have access to different soil nutrients (supportive or unsupportive connections), especially when new nutrients (connections) could be introduced to the environment. Sometimes this change opened up avenues of gender exploration and affirmation, and other times it hindered this same process. Therefore, the role of the roots (intersectionality and culture) continued to affect the gender development process throughout the lifespan.

The participants in our sample held many different intersectional identities, including identities related to race/ethnicity, geographical location, ability status, sexual orientation, religious and/or spiritual identity, relationship status, and education level. Participants often explained how their other identities often intertwined with their gender identity, which ultimately impacted the developmental process. The various identities of participants affected the developmental process throughout their lifespans rather than at specific moments in time.

Therefore, the role of intersecting identities and culture in which the individual matured must be considered when understanding the developmental process of a non-binary individual. Components of this theme exist within the other themes described in this study, similarly to the theme of connection and relationships.

Family Culture. Family culture specific to gender values and norms is one aspect that continually impacted the gender developmental process for participants. As with the connection categories, participants suggested a sense of value and importance to the role of their family approving or invalidating their gender identity throughout the life span. While validation or invalidation looked different depending on the age of the participant, all participants spoke about the impact their family culture had on their experiences with gender. Some participants discussed how their family did not enforce gender norms, while others had strict expectations related to gender (what to wear, how to present oneself, what to be interested in). Early experiences with family culture and sociocultural factors played a significant role in how participants were taught gender, specifically if the participant engaged in something that was gender nonconforming.

Many of the participants who were AFAB children indicated their families and communities had less restrictive female gender norms, and these participants were more likely to find a sense of freedom in their gender exploration within the family structure. However, other AFAB participants grew up in homes that were more restrictive with gender norms, and consequently parents or family members may have quickly intervened when the participant as a child engaged in something outside of the gender norm. AMAB (Assigned Male at Birth) participants, on the other hand, did not speak about a sense of freedom to explore feminine activities or interests within their family culture.

For participants who came from families with more relaxed ideas of gender, they were able to explore facets of gender outside of the norms associated with their gender assigned at birth. One AFAB participant shared how their parents held an ideology that "I feel like within my family, there was this kind of attitude of like, girls can do anything. Like you can be whatever you want to be" (Participant 2) and provided the participant with space to explore their interests and presentations that felt congruent with their gender. Several participants discussed the label of "Tomboy" and how they would rarely encounter negative feedback about their interests or behaviors.

Geographical-Political Culture. Participants shared how the culture of their geographical location also played a role in their identity development. For individuals who are currently in or previously resided in more politically conservative locations, they may have felt unsafe exploring their gender identity and presenting in a manner that pushed gendered expectations. Some participants indicated they may change how they look if they know they have to travel through specific regions or areas in order to "pass" as a cisgender, heterosexual person and be physically safe. Additionally, some participants stated they purposely choose to live in more liberal areas or locations where college campuses are due to the increased likelihood of acceptance and safety in those areas. For example:

> So, I know that there's parts of (redacted), that when I visited, I haven't felt super comfortable. Um, I live close to a city on purpose, but I don't live in a city because I don't like living in an urban area. Um, but I definitely stay close to a place that I know is connected (Participant 6).

The culture associated with geographical location was a continuous factor in identity development as some participants recognized the repercussions of gender nonconformity.

It's like this little blue pocket in the middle of (redacted), but if I have to leave the

triangle for anything, there are definite places where I will not stop. I frequently drive up

to (redacted) and pretty much once you get outside of (redacted) on the way to (redacted),

you're in the backwoods. And I'm always like terrified if my car were to break down.

That would be bad. I definitely don't leave the area much (Participant 1).

Identity Factors. While the sample did not have enough subgroupings of participants to

develop substantive theories based on any one intersecting identities, the experiences of

participants who held other marginalized identities aside from gender identity are noteworthy.

One participant who identified as Latinx spoke at lengths about how their Latinx culture affected

their identity development process. More specifically, they indicated that gender norms and

values within their Latinx family were often different from a Westernized, White family. The

participant discussed the way in which they were socialized as a Latinx, AFAB person and the

expectations that exist within their family values specific to their Latinx culture, such as how one

should appear or what goals someone should have. This participant also highlighted how non-

binary representation often comes through the lens of lean, androgynous, White individuals,

while BIPOC individuals have less representation within the non-binary community.

Other participants shared their spiritual or religious identities and how those identities

played a role in their gender identity. One participant who identified as Buddhist shared the

importance of connection with others and themselves through their faith and spiritual gatherings.

I feel like what has been important for me in my like, support with my gender is, religion

and spirituality actually, which I'm not sure like how common that is as a, like trans

experience, but yeah, I have been like a, kind of like a leftist, like a Christian for a very

long time and also like more recently become a Buddhist… I think with Buddhism, it's a

lot of, I think the emphasis on compassion has been really helpful, so like doing, loving

kindness or compassion meditations for ourself and for our community and also for you

kind of can like expand it out to even people who are practicing compassion, even for

people who are like harming you or really negative (Participant 10).

Another participant explained their identity as someone who is Wiccan, and the lack of

approval they have received from their non-wiccan, religious family, which then led to the

participant pondering if they should share their gender identity with their religious family:

I came out to him this weekend and that was another big deal. Cause he's a good Irish

Catholic boy. Um, and so I'm just like, at this point, I'm like, how many more times do I

want to test the waters here? (Participant 5)

Overall, the religious and spiritual identities of participants were often positive factors in their

gender development. However, the religious identities of family members or others they

interacted with were often a barrier that prevented a sense of safety or connection.

Ability status was also highly relevant to the experience of one participant who shared

how their gender identity is closely intertwined with their neurodiversity. That participant

indicated the importance of recognizing that "there's not one way that your body has to be," and

held uniqueness as a value. The Participant expressed their identity development process as a

person with a disability was similar to "queering" their identity and the gender development

process. To further illustrate the importance of the intersection of their identities, the participant

stated:

And I think I keep coming back to neuro-diversity because that's just like such a huge

part of who I am and disability too. And it's also what I study, so it's just my frame of

reference. But I think that in terms of like how homophobia and or like heterocis,

heterosexism and how that interplays with ableism is like definitely very intertwined.

And, and like being and, and how, especially like a femme, how you're supposed to look

and act (Participant 9).

Summary. Cultural and individual identity factors remain in an individual's life at all

times; therefore the categories of this theme continue to facilitate the gender development

process throughout the model. In terms of the tree metaphor, the roots provide ongoing support

for the developmental process of a tree, and they will impact the wellbeing of the base, branches,

and treetop. The most direct effect of the roots are on the early formative years of gender identity

experiences, which is explored next.

Gender in Childhood and Adolescence – The Growing Base

With the soil and roots in place, the tree can begin growing upward and developing with

ongoing influence from the roots and soil. All participants shared their experiences with gender

throughout childhood and adolescence as their earliest interactions with the construct of gender

identity, and with experiences of feeling different. Some participants experienced environments

in which they could freely express their gender, whereas others may have been more constricted.

Common categories across the participant interviews existed within the theme of childhood and

adolescence. Categories included: Early experiences of gender nonconformity, gender-based

discrimination, gender-based conformity, a lack of non-binary representation and gender

diversity vocabulary, and the disentangling of gender and sexual orientation.

Early Childhood—Experiences of Gender Nonconformity. The majority of the

participants reported significant experiences in their early childhood, usually between the ages of

four and six, in which they recognized the existence of gender and a lack of connection to gender

norms associated with their gender assigned at birth. Most participants stated they experienced a

negative reaction to someone requesting they conform to their gender assigned at birth. One

participant described their experience at an early age:

> I remember being in my first-grade class and we were asked to sign up for like lunch
>
> reading groups and what it was, it was like the teacher said, you know, all the girls are
>
> going to be reading this book. All the boys are going to be reading this book. Um, and
>
> from what I can remember is I remember putting up a fit cause I was like, I don't want to
>
> read the princess book or whatever, whatever it was, the girls, but I had no interest in it.
>
> Absolutely not. And I was like, but I want to read the boy's book. Like that seems cool.
>
> Um, and I remember talking to my teacher about it or maybe my parents, I can't
>
> remember there was a conversation held because I didn't want to be a part of the girls
>
> group screw that. Um, and the teacher said no. Um, and so I just had this very emotional,
>
> like memory of sitting in the lunchroom all alone, because what would happen is she
>
> would take the girls first. Um, and so I would eat lunch with the boys and then all the
>
> boys would leave and then all the girls will come back. And so, there was like, I don't
>
> know how long it always feels super long when you're a kid and you don't have a
>
> recognition of time and memory, but I just remember sitting in the lunchroom absolutely
>
> alone, absolutely alienated because I didn't fit in. (Participant 5)

Stories told by other participants shared similar themes to the aforementioned experience.

The common thread that binds the stories together is a moment of engaging in a behavior that did

not align with gender norms aligned with their gender assigned at birth. Additionally,

participants indicated they did not fully understand why they experienced repercussions for

expressing interest in something outside of gendered expectations. The individual who would

often intervene in these stories was a parent or a teacher who would express a lack of approval

for the actions or interests of the participant. In these circumstances, participants learned about

the rigid roles of a binary world of gender and began to understand the need to conform.

Adolescents—Experiences of Gender-based Discrimination. Participants indicated

adolescence was a particularly challenging time in their identity development due to experiences

of discrimination, bullying, and a general lack of knowledge related to gender identities.

Participants shared experiences of bullying that involved homophobic slurs, transphobic slurs,

and other hurtful statements made by others if the participants did not conform to gender norms.

Participants also shared stories that involved seeking safety experiences of bullying and

discrimination by peers throughout their middle and high school years. Feeling unsafe included

experiences with physical violence, relational isolation, and shaming at the hands of both peers

and adults. Cruel statements and threats of violence (or actual violence) made by other students

reinforced the need to conform to preserve one's safety and mental well-being. One participant

described the following:

> I remember there was this one particular student in my, like, who I knew since
>
> elementary school who is all picked on for being feminine, always like nonstop. Like it
>
> was a social pariah… He identifies as cisgender male, but just as feminine, you know,
>
> like that made me fearful that I would become that come to think of it… There was like a
>
> news clip in which he's being interviewed for how much he was, this was in high school
>
> for how much he was harassed for his identity and in the middle of the interview,
>
> somebody drives by and throws a bottle, and he hits him in the head with it. Yeah. In the

middle of the interview and, he's just like, this literally happens all the time (Participant 4).

While most of the comments shared by participants involved homophobic slurs, the participants recognized how the discriminatory comments affected their development and led to conformity out of necessity. The idea of conforming to avoid interpersonal relational and physical violence is explored as its own category.

Adolescents—Experiences of Gender-based Conformity. Most individuals spoke about the need to survive (physically and emotionally) during their teenage years, and consequently chose to conform to gender norms. Discrimination and bullying were primary factors in the decision to conform to gender norms, as participants directly experienced discrimination or witnessed others being harassed for gender nonconformity.

> I guess I would categorize adolescence as like a sort of reverting and like conforming, um, like I sort of leaned in and was just super like fem, and just very cis-gender presenting, and binary presenting. Like there was not, not really anything I was expressing or even like acknowledging to myself at that point of like, yeah, there's something like not female going on here (Participant 1).

One participant who identified as Latinx shared this statement about their perceived importance of conformity:

> I asked my cousins to turn me into a woman. And gosh, I even remember that night, my cousins took tweezers to my eyebrows. I was like crying. I was just like; I don't want this. And they're like, no, you're going to like it. And they taught me how to use a curling iron. And they taught me how to put my makeup on. And they would say things like we knew

you would be so much prettier like this. And so, it really got to me., I even remember

even throughout high school, just thinking this doesn't feel right, this isn't okay, this is

wrong for me. And still just denying and suppressing, um, parts of my identity. And I

remember there was one time I got really frustrated. There were a couple of times

actually really frustrated and just decided to chop all my hair off. (Participant 7)

This experience was shared by other participants as they recognized their conformity to

gender norms felt incongruent with their internal experience. The Participant 7 spoke about the

challenges of being raised in a Mexican American family with strong cultural values associated

with masculinity and femininity. Acting outside of gender norms was quickly met with judgment

and repercussions from their family. Therefore, the participant felt pressured to conform to their

family's idea of femininity and change their presentation accordingly.

Adolescents --Lack of Representation. A major sentiment shared by all participants, and

that impacted their gender identity development, was the lack of gender-nonconforming

representation and how that lack prevented them from exploring their identities earlier in life.

More specifically, participants indicated they were completely unaware of gender existing on a

spectrum and outside of a binary while navigating childhood and adolescence. During their

childhood and adolescents, media depicted notions of gender from a rigid, binary notion of

gender roles. Additionally, school systems, clothing stores, and other cultural systems split

activities into male or female only. Because of the constant reinforcement of binary ideas of

gender, participants were unaware of the concept of gender as a spectrum and felt they had to

pick one side or the other. Few participants shared experiences in which they knew a binary

transgender person, whether it be a friend or family member, but rarely saw non-binary people in

the media. For one participant, the individual "Max" from the television show "The L Word"

was their first exposure to transmasculine gender. The participant shared they felt naturally

connected to that character but did not explicitly feel their gender was a transgender man. They

felt their gender was similar, but not exactly the same. However, the singular instance of

representation was meaningful in that participant's identity development.

     Adolescents --Lack of Gender Diversity Vocabulary. Along with a lack of representation

was a lack of information and vocabulary. As noted previously, participants did not know there

were options outside of male and female in relation to their gender. The term "Butch" was a

common term used by participants, but the term was more so associated with sexual orientation

(butch lesbian). There were also very few conversations surrounding gender outside of the binary

as illustrated by the quote:

> I'd heard about and gay and et cetera, like probably as early as like, like elementary
>
> school, like third, fourth grade, but I just didn't know that there was like gender spectrum
>
> and I didn't know, like a transgender person personally until high school until high
>
> school. So like, I just didn't like, I just hadn't had the time to process or the information to
>
> allow that furthering of processing (Participant 4).

Without language for non-binary identities, participants indicated their gender development

journey may have taken more time to find a descriptor for their gender experience. For example:

> I can't recall as a teenager when a lot of like those identities begin to click into place, um,
>
> even having the word for non-binary. Like I remember like having that friend who came
>
> out as trans and I was like, that's cool. Like I understand what that is. Um, but that really
>
> was my first clue that I wasn't trans because I couldn't connect. I was fluctuating and
>
> nonbinary outer space. Um, and because I didn't know what was up there. I was just like,

I guess I'm a woman. Yay. Um, so the, like the normalization of the conversation has

definitely been, uh, an impact of like what limited mean because there was no language

for it. And when you don't have the language for something, it just takes doubly as long

to figure out that one, you don't fit what you were being told you were before (Participant

3).

There are ongoing challenges associated with a lack of gender diversity vocabulary, such as

labels outside of aunt and uncle. Participant 3 shared:

one of my fiancé's brothers had a kid not recently, but recently enough that I was like

navigating, coming out. We were trying to figure out what does he call me and how does

that work? (Participant 3).

As participants grew older and gained access to queer media, higher education, and

changes in geographical locations, they began to learn of the diversity in gender. Participants

were exposed to gender identity labels that were not binary (non-binary, genderqueer, gender

diverse, gender fluid, agender, gender nonconforming, etc.) and recognized their gender more so

aligned with those labels. A sense of "liberation" was expressed by many participants as they

were able to engage with LGBTQIA+ media and learn of other people with similar experiences

with gender.

Adolescents--Disentangling Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. An additional factor

that complicated gender identity development was sexual orientation identity development.

Some participants indicated that during adolescents they were unaware that gender identity may

exist outside of the binary, therefore their experiences with dysphoria were associated with their

sexual orientation rather than their gender identity. For example, one AMAB participant who

identified as gay also expressed gender in stereotypically feminine ways. For both the

participants and their peers and community, the expression of femininity was attributed to their

sexual orientation rather than their gender identity, as the expectation was that the participant

was cisgender male and gay, not nonbinary or trans.

> I guess another like semi adjacent milestone it's probably related would be like coming
>
> out as queer like, which was also like 18ish, 17, 18. Um, because like, at that time I was
>
> still trying to disentangle like sexual orientation from gender identity and like who one
>
> was attracted to. So, it was kind of like, they were still kind of meshed at that time in my
>
> life. And so when I came out as queer, I was like, does that like call into question my
>
> gender identity to people (Participant 4).

Summary. For this particular cohort of participants, childhood and adolescence contained

challenging and tumultuous experiences that may have led to conformity and hiding their non-

binary identity for safety reasons. In terms of the tree metaphor, the base of a tree often stays one

shape as it continues to grow upward rather than branching out, and in this case the lack of

branches represents a need to conform with the way in which other trees may develop. Once

participants were able to leave environments that were more oppressive and discriminatory, they

experienced opportunities to branch out and explore their non-binary identity.

Gender in Emerging Adulthood – Branching out

Participants indicated emerging adulthood was the primary time that they engaged in

exploring their gender identities. Importantly, every participant in this sample attended some

form of undergraduate education at a university or college, and that experience was profound for

their gender identity development. At this point in the gender development process, participants

were able to branch out and explore their gender in multiple ways. Several specific themes emerged in this process of exploration. These included higher education spaces, finding pronouns and potentially a chosen name that felt appropriate for their gender, navigating the workplace as a non-binary person, and engaging with LGBTQIA+ media that included non-binary identities.

Emerging Adulthood - Higher Education as a time of exploration. During their time at college, participants noted they were exposed to psychology courses, clubs, organizations, and other environments that included many LGBTQIA+ members or content related to the queer community. Participants were able to meet other queer identified people and be exposed to language such as "non-binary" and "genderqueer." Having access to vocabulary related to gender identity allowed participants to engage in further research and reflection regarding their personal identities. Participants stated psychology courses introduced ideas of gender being a spectrum and gender consisting of more than the binary ideology of gender. For many participants, college also offered them an opportunity to move to a new geographical location and exist within a more liberal setting, settings that were often associated with more gender queer affirming environments. One participant stated they will likely remain in larger cities near college campuses as those locations are often "safer" for queer people than more rural areas.

> I think in some ways I was lucky because by the time I actually heard about trans identities, it was within like academic land, which I think tends to be more affirming and like understanding and not playing into like negative stereotypes (Participant 1).

Emerging Adulthood--*Testing Identifiers and Pronouns:* Participants shared that during this time of exploration, they may have tried using different gender identity labels, pronouns, and gender presentations to determine what felt "authentic" to their internal experience with gender.

"I had another name that I was using before (redacted), that I piloted for a year, and it didn't

work for me" (Participant 6). Gender expression and the ability to test various presentations was

a common theme across the sample. Participants discussed the value in shopping for clothes in

sections that did not align with their sex assigned at birth. The process of shopping for new

clothes and makeup was often described as a "liberating" process. For example:

> …like somewhere in the middle of 26, 25 going out, I started going out to the mall and
>
> like putting on makeup and like buying like more femme clothes. Um, and that was like
>
> just really nice and like pleasant and then seeing the results of that, like in terms of my
>
> like mood. And that was also, I guess, a milestone (Participant 4).

Ongoing exploration and testing of pronouns was also particularly relevant for a few participants.

One participant shared how the process has been fluid for them, but also reliant on a safe

environment to explore:

> Like, I feel pretty good about like trans masculine as a label. I feel like that
>
> conceptualizes it, but I wanted, I want more data. I want more data on a not transphobic
>
> environment before. I'm like, maybe I should just use he him. Or maybe I should like use
>
> he/they or like, you know, whatever, just kind of switching it (Participant 3).

Participants may have also witnessed other people exploring their gender identity and recognized

the fluidity of the process. People may test out pronouns that do not work for them and may find

comfort in using he/him or she/her pronouns. For example:

> Even there now I've known people who like went by, they them pronouns exclusively for
>
> months and months, and then were like, you know, I tried that out and I think I actually
>
> prefer she her and like, there are no consequences. That's totally fine (Participant 2).

Emerging Adulthood--Workplace Challenges. One aspect participants found could either be a barrier or a facilitator of their gender identity development in adulthood was workplace experiences. More specifically participants recounted challenging experiences in the workplace that often invalidated their experience as a non-binary person. Some examples of invalidating workplace factors included: Gendered professional dress expectations, binary systems of gender within computer personnel programs, binary pronouns for name tags and binary restrooms. The majority of participants described a sense of frustration with workplace environments due to transphobic comments, a lack of respect for one's pronouns, and companies creating boundaries to have names changed to their chosen name. An example of a lack of professional support was offered by participant 2:

> our HR is not trans-affirming and in some ways they're like actively transphobic. Um,
> like we just don't have the structure in place to support trans staff, um, and had some like
> big arguments with my supervisor about, um, what his role should be, or like what the
> agency's role should be in supporting me and other trans staff and also trans clients.

Emerging Adulthood - Name and Pronoun Misgendering. Navigating name changes and pronoun use is an ongoing factor that impacts participants, particularly due to the lack of normalization in pronoun use outside of binary pronouns (he/him/his and she/her/hers). Going into public spaces may involve interaction with someone who may use the wrong pronouns or name for the trans-identified individual. Participants expressed frustration associated with workplaces not allowing them to change documentation or even name tags to use their chosen name rather than name assigned at birth.

> we went to a restaurant the other day, cause we were both vaccinated and we got, Hey
> ladies, how y'all doing today. I had forgotten that and not that I had like cognitively

forgotten it, but I had forgotten to be on guard for it and prep for it. And I think ***** my

fiancée, I think she saw my face and she was after the waitress left, she was like, "Hey,

like you all right, you good?" I'm like, "Yeah, I just forgot that happened. Yup. Definitely

forgot about that." And it was just like, Hmm. Okay. Like, no matter what, I will always

just be seen as like, as a woman by society (Participant 3.)

Emerging Adulthood - Creative Outlets to Explore Gender. Several participants spoke

about the importance of counterculture, media and art as a conduit to explore their gender within.

For example, some participants spoke about games such as Dungeons and Dragons, games that

include role playing and playing as another person or character. Through a role-playing game,

participants were able to create characters that may have better represented their internal gender

experience, and even offer them an opportunity to be congruent and authentic in their gender

identity during that time. Along with roleplaying games, forms of art such as cosplay (dressing in

a way to resemble a character from media, anime, comics, manga, video games, etc.), or wearing

makeup offered participants an opportunity to physically view themselves with a different gender

presentation. One participant shared how cosplay allowed them to feel a sense of "gender

euphoria" when someone referred to them using different pronouns and assumed their gender to

be different than their gender assigned at birth. Participants shared a sense of "liberation"

associated with role playing games or art as they were able to freely express their gender without

societal constraints.

Emerging Adulthood - Non-binary Representation. LGBTQIA+ oriented media and

representation was described as a valuable factor in identity development. As this particular

cohort of participants moved in adulthood (who were remarkably and unexpectedly similar in

age), there was much more non-binary representation in the media. As noted earlier, many

participants spoke about the lack of gender queer-oriented media while they were growing up,

but as they aged and gained access to the internet and queer spaces that discussed sexual

orientation, romantic attraction, and gender identity, they were able to see and hear gender-queer

identified people. Access to media sources such as Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and several other

social media sites, along with television programming that is queer focused (Queer Eye,

RuPaul's Drag Race, Dragula, Billions, Pose) positively impacted participants as they were able

to see something that more closely represented their experience. This in turn allowed them to

more richly explore their own gender identities. For example:

> I found on social media sentence femmes can be them was something that I had stumbled
>
> upon. And just like, this feels so good. And they know that I exist. And also noticing, you
>
> know, who well, who are they following? And like, just like branch after branch, after
>
> branch, after branch, I'm finding so many different bodies, so many different voices, so
>
> many different ways of thinking and expressing. Um, I think one of my favorite persons
>
> right now is Alok. I can't remember their last name, but they're there. I like their stance
>
> because, um, their gender expression, uh, tends to be a little bit more traditionally
>
> feminine. They don't see it that way, but they are also someone who is very expressive
>
> with their body hair and talks about like that dynamic in society that like hair and deeper
>
> skin tones and more masculine presenting bodies, can't possibly embody like feminine
>
> expression (Participant 7).

Summary. As noted by Participant 7, emerging adulthood allowed for ongoing

exploration and branching out to learn more about non-binary identities and LGBTQIA+ culture

to affirm the participant's non-binary identity. Participants found environments, such as school

or workplaces, as well as friend groups that offered safe spaces to live authentically as a non-

binary person or continue exploring their identity.

Gender Actualization and Liberation - The Canopy

As participants were able to further explore their gender, find support from others, and

find a connection with their authentic gender identity, participants described a sense of

actualization with their gender and a feeling of gender liberation. Participants shared a sense of

comfort and euphoria associated with their gender identity, but they also recognized the process

of ongoing disclosure and the role of relationships, culture, and connections throughout their life.

The canopy leaves of the tree begin to fill in on the branches as participants were able to

experience a sense of authenticity with their gender and feel liberated through expression and

openness in their gender.

Safety in Relationships. Authenticity in one's non-binary identity also extended to the

connections and relationships participants formed with others at this point in their gender

development journey. Participants reinforced the importance of finding people who support and

validate their identities, specifically as a non-binary person. This could exist in the form of

romantic relationships with one or more partners, with affirming family members, with gender

inclusive workplaces, and with friend groups. Affirming actions such as pronoun use, use of

chosen name, and avoiding gendered language were all elements participants stated as beneficial

to their gender development and their positive connections to others. An example of the value of

relationships is illustrated in the quote:

> [on of my partner's families] have been really, really, really helpful and supportive. Um,
>
> and his parents also have been incredibly helpful and supportive, his parents and his

sister. When I defended my dissertation… I was living at his house at the time, his mom

and I went out shopping afterwards and she got me two shirts that look exactly like this.

Um, yeah, I defended my dissertation in a suit and a tie and his family, he had bought

those things with me. He taught me how to tie the tie, things like that. So they've all been

a really strong source of support for me. And they all like, even when they mess up, they

do it in ways that are very well-meaning (Participant 6).

Ongoing Exploration: All participants indicated that gender is an ongoing process of

exploration, and although they may have a label that fits for the present time, that label may

change if they discover vocabulary that feels more accurate for their gender experience. For

example, one participant noted they originally identified as non-binary and used she/they

pronouns, but as ongoing identity exploration occurred, they found the descriptor "Trans-

masculine non-binary" and the pronouns they/them were more accurate. Many participants

indicated that some gender labels are not "perfect" in describing their experience with gender,

and as more vocabulary arises, they (and other non-binary people) may find a new label is more

fitting for their lived experience. As noted previously, the vocabulary related to gender identities

is consistently expanding, and this expansion may provide more labels that may better describe

an individual's gender identity.

Navigating Gender Exclusive Environments. An area of ongoing challenge for many

participants involves pronoun use being rigid within various settings, such as schools,

workplaces, and media. Participants shared experiences in which they were the singular

individual in a space who used pronouns that are not he/him/his or she/her/hers. Documentation

within health care settings, workspaces, and schools also tends to focus on a binary notion of

gender which further promotes a lack of gender inclusivity in those spaces. For example, a

Participant shared the challenges of working with doctors who consistently misgendered them:

> I was pretty chronically ill for the number of years… I think like seeing a bunch of
>
> different doctors and like that being a scary time already because of my health and then
>
> trying to get up the courage to tell every single doctor, "No, actually I'm not a woman,
>
> please don't refer to me that way. These are my pronouns" … sometimes I felt like I
>
> could not share that part of myself with them (Participant 10).

Gender Liberation and Gender Actualization. Liberating and liberation were words that

were used consistently throughout the interviews as participants were able to express their

gender as a non-binary person. Participants spoke about the ways in which they felt constricted

through conformity and binary gender norms, and felt liberated when freed from them. For

example:

> I was messing with wearing more fem clothes, and if I want to change up my hairstyle
>
> how I'd like, I can now. And if I want to wear makeup to work, I can if I want to. If I
>
> want to change it up every day, cause I'm feeling more masculine. I can. That's just again,
>
> liberating (Participant 4).

As well as:

> I used to work at the Renaissance faire and um, wearing like the corset and like that was
>
> an empowering moment for me, but wearing like just a little dress to work and sitting at a
>
> desk all day, completely disempowering (Participant 5).

The opportunity to choose what feels empowering and self-decided (rather than what societal

norms have dictated someone must wear) offered participants the ability to express themselves

authentically in their gender identity. In addition to the freedom to express themselves,

participants also spoke about feeling "comfortable" by living authentically as a non-binary

person. As noted previously, conforming to gender norms was done to preserve safety, but as

participants were able to find safe and affirming communities, participants were able to live

authentically and conform less. Lastly, participants spoke about the sense of respect they felt

when others gendered them correctly by using their pronouns or chosen name. This provided

participants with an external experience of validation along with internal validation of their non-

binary identity.

"Not Queer Enough." Throughout the interview process, all participants mentioned the

concept, without direct prompting, of not feeling "queer enough." Not feeling queer enough was

experienced when other people did not accurately "read" participants' gender identity, or other

people actively invalidated participants non-binary gender identities, especially other trans

community members or allies. The levels at which participants experienced this feeling differed

depending on the individual; however, all participants discussed experiences that invalidated

their gender identity and led to them questioning if they should change something to be "more

queer."

Essentially, participants reported experiences of being misgendered (wrong pronouns

used, being referred to as "ma'am" or "sir" in restaurants or assumed to be male or female rather

than non-binary), which created a momentary desire to change their presentation. Changes could

include mannerisms, dressing differently, binding their chests if the individual was assigned

female at birth, wearing makeup for assigned male at birth participants, or modifying their hair.

Some participants noted there was an internal need to be perceived as "more non-binary" to

avoid being misgendered, or to feel valid in their gender identity when others would ask

invalidating questions related to gender. For example, one participant noted an experience in which a colleague asked if they were "really non-binary" and if the participant was "doing it for attention."

Participants shared ideas of what is considered "queer enough," most of which revolved around appearance. What they seemed to describe was a new set of stereotypes and a more rigid idea about what it means to be non-binary in their presentation to others. More specifically, participants indicated that their seems to be unwritten rules about how non-binary people present, and that this "box" (or limited definition of non-binary) is inherently problematic due to the implied diversity of being non-binary. To be non-binary, according to participants, was to be free from gendered expectations and gender norms. However, by creating definitions and archetypes for being "non-binary enough" or "queer enough," communities were creating norms and expectations to abide by. Participants indicated this is a factor that may lead to gender distress between and within members of the nonbinary community, as well as the general public. One participant shared an experience in which they began to question what to do differently:

> I've had professors from my program, tell me to my face that they can only see me as a woman, and they don't understand the whole trans thing. And so that really makes me feel like maybe it's my fault. I'm not taking T if, if only I was doing something else, right. If only I was taking T which like at this point…. I'm read as visibly queer, right? Like people look at me and they see a Butch lesbian. Nice, cool. Like I am accepted into the community in that venue, but that's incorrect, you know what I mean? And so, I definitely feel like my whole work, my whole body of work, my whole professional reputation revolves around the trans community, and I don't feel trans enough. And there

is a part of me that is just like, is this just always going to be a thing? Or is this, you

know, is this, is this my fault? (Participant 3).

This participant continued to speak about additional instances in which the validity of their

gender identity was questioned. What is illustrated in this story and other stories is a process of

internalization and feeling at fault for not doing more or presenting in a manner that people may

more closely associate with being gender queer or non-binary.

Due to feeling not queer enough, some participants mentioned a pressure to avoid

anything that was associated with their gender assigned at birth. For some participants who were

assigned female at birth (AFAB), they felt external and internal pressure to present in a more

androgynous manner by having short hair, avoiding makeup, and wearing button up clothes.

Presenting in such a way was an experience that felt authentic to their gender identity, while for

others it felt inauthentic. For example, one participant experienced invalidation due to their more

feminine presentation as an AFAB person. However, the participant spoke of the importance of a

quote they found that stated "Femmes can be them"—a quote that illustrates the range of gender

expression that is encapsulated within the non-binary community. Another AFAB participant

shared the same experience:

And so like, it's also been within the community that I've, I've had some issues because

gender, but like sometimes I look really girly and like, or like don't dress androgynously

or as queer so I think like discrimination within and outside of the community has been
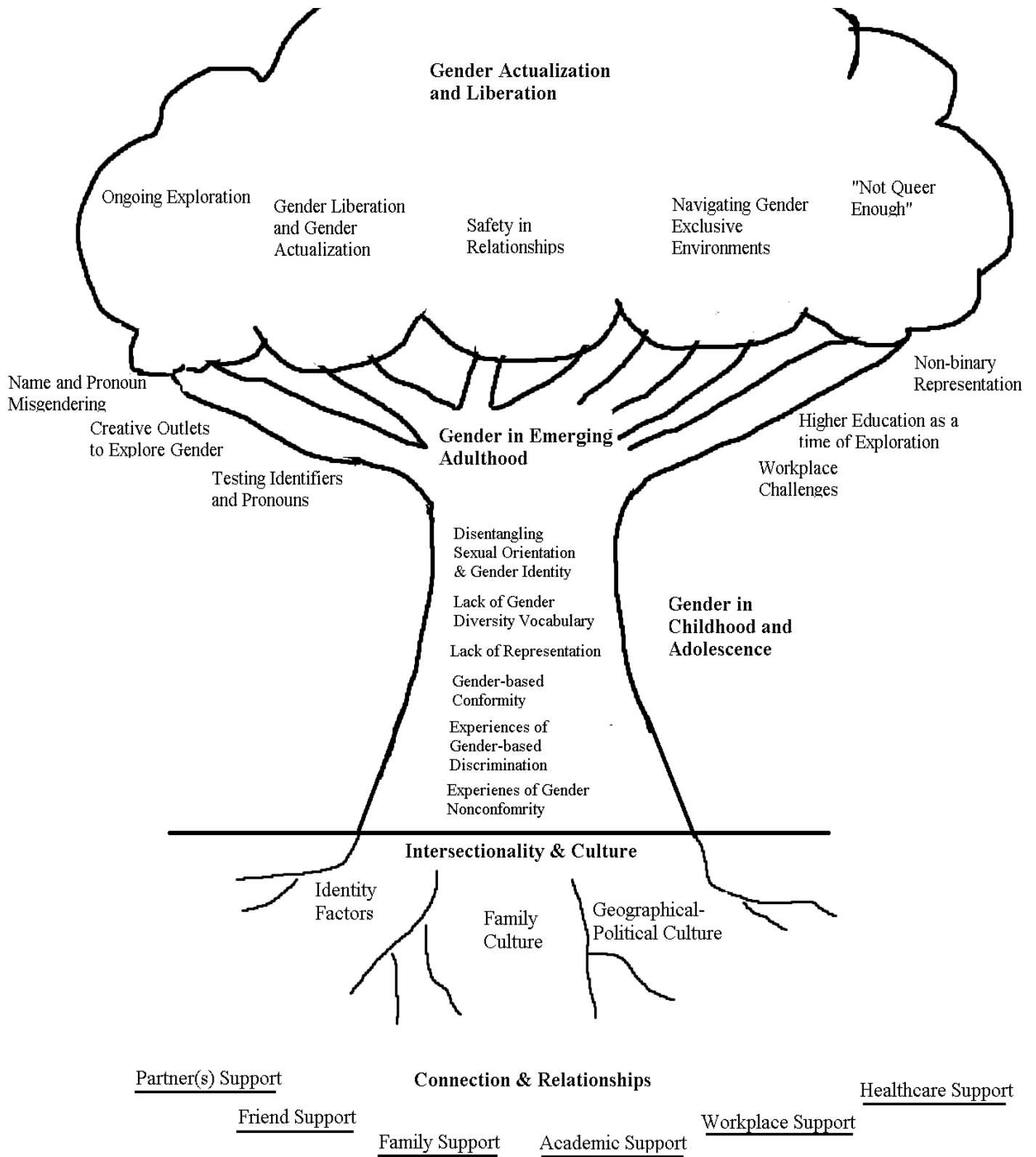
there. (Participant 9)

This same idea was also seen for some participants who were assigned male at birth (AMAB).

One AMAB participant spoke of the gender euphoria they experienced by dressing in more

feminine clothes and getting electrolysis of their facial hairs, while yet another AMAB

participant indicated facial hair was not a problem for their gender expression. In short, non-binary presentations vary depending on the individual, rather than one specific appearance or gender expression style. One participant described it this way:

> For example, today it's weird even that was just kind of like an internal process of like, oh no, what do I have to present as, what do I have to do this as this? Like, I mean, this is honestly, I think the second, non-binary gender, study that I've like participated in. And with both of them, it's sad to say with both of them. I was just like, oh man, I should make sure I dress and present in such a way… cisgender men and women would be like, oh, I'm just going to wear what I'm wearing. I just got back from a run. And then I also had to participate in a meeting right before this. And then I was just like. Like I never got the opportunity to like, get into a change of clothes that more like, maybe be seen as more queer or more non-binary. And then I'm like, am I trying to put myself into that box? Why am I trying to appease other people when honestly, like me wearing like short shorts and this like fluffy, like green top with a hat on, like, this is very much me. (Participant 8)

Summary. Despite these themes representing the metaphorical top of the tree, the analogy does not end there. Participants indicated that exploration and safety lead to gender liberation and gender actualization, but that they were not done growing or adapting as seasons eb and flow or new experiences/nutrients are added to the soil and roots. In fact, participants unanimously spoke about ongoing exploration and continuing to discuss gender as it relates to their experiences. Participants are continuing to interact with their environments, cultures, and families which have an ongoing impact on the developmental process. Additionally, these participants are relatively young adults, and there was recognition of adult experiences yet to come.

Figure 2 – Non-binary Gender Identity Development Model

**Gender Actualization
and Liberation**

Ongoing Exploration

Gender Liberation
and Gender
Actualization

Safety in
Relationships

Navigating Gender
Exclusive
Environments

"Not Queer
Enough"

Name and Pronoun
Misgendering

Creative Outlets
to Explore Gender

Testing Identifiers
and Pronouns

**Gender in Emerging
Adulthood**

Non-binary
Representation

Higher Education as a
time of Exploration

Workplace
Challenges

Disentangling
Sexual Orientation
& Gender Identity

Lack of Gender
Diversity Vocabulary

Lack of Representation

Gender-based
Conformity

Experiences of
Gender-based
Discrimination

Experienes of Gender
Nonconfomrity

**Gender in
Childhood and
Adolescence**

Intersectionality & Culture

Identity
Factors

Family
Culture

Geographical-
Political Culture

Partner(s) Support

Connection & Relationships

Healthcare Support

Friend Support

Workplace Support

Family Support   Academic Support

Discussion

The present study explored the identity development process for gender diverse, non-binary individuals from childhood to early/mid adulthood. Due to the general lack of representation for gender diverse populations in psychological literature, this study was conducted to better understand important developmental milestones for non-binary individuals and how they navigate life in cis-normative, binary spaces. Using a qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Charmaz, 2014), participants were asked about experiences of gender, spanning from childhood to emerging adulthood, and how they came to know their gender identity in the spectrum of non-binary identities. Additionally, participants discussed factors that were helpful in their development and that were impediments in their development, as well as other systems or forces that played a role in their overall development experience.

Model Overall—Growth Over Time and Developmental Periods

A model (Figure 2) was created to illustrate the gender development process non-binary individuals in our study experienced. This model was formed by the themes found throughout the qualitative interview and data analysis process (Charmaz, 2014). As described previously, themes and categories located at the bottom of the model continue to impact the other themes and categories in an upwards direction, beginning with the soil and ending with the tree canopy.

Other models that have been created to describe the gender identity development process for individuals who gender does not align with their gender assigned at birth often seem to be described in a linear manner (Lev, 2004; Bilodeau, 2005; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Pardo & Devor, 2017). The present model, while linear in its depiction, incorporates all previous themes and categories into the ongoing themes or stages of development for non-binary individuals. This is of importance as participants continually spoke

about the role their culture, family, friends, and environment affected them throughout the

developmental process. The specific similarities and differences per theme are explored in

following sections: Support and Relationships (The Soil), Intersectionality and Culture (The

Roots), Gender in Childhood and Adolescence (The Growing Base), Gender in Emerging

Adulthood (Branching Out), and Gender Actualization and Liberation (The Canopy).

The Role of Support and Relationships (The Soil)

     Social support. Support and relationships were a crucial, and ongoing part of the gender

development process for the non-binary participants of the present study. While the role of

support and relationships were not explicitly a theme or category spoken about in Hiestand and

Levitt's (2005) qualitative exploration of butch identity development, there were components

that suggest the role of others can impact the gender development process. Levitt and Ippolito

(2014) described the necessity for affirming communities and support for binary trans-identified

populations. Finding a sense of belonging, support, and validation was consistently described as

a positive factor in identity development. More specifically, existing in spaces which affirmed

and encouraged gender exploration was a key factor in identity development in adulthood across

both Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) binary trans-identified sample and the current non-binary-

identified sample. Seeking out spaces that are queer affirming as well as geographical locations

or cities that are more liberal were both valuable components described throughout participant

interviews.

     Prior research has found that positive social support is associated with well-being,

satisfaction with life, and also decreases psychological distress experienced by non-binary people

(Dowers, White, Cook & Kingsley, 2020). More specifically, friend and family support play a

significant role in the well-being of non-binary individuals (citation). The present study found

similar results as participants noted how family acceptance, or lack thereof, impacted their gender development process. Participants sought out support from friends and perhaps more importantly, their partner or partners, as a source of ongoing support. Participants expressed the value of being validated and accepted by their partner(s), particularly when participants may have experienced discrimination or misgendering by another person. Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) sample also spoke to the importance of having a community that is affirming and encourages individuals to explore their gender identity by using pronouns or names requested. Both samples found a sense of relief knowing that others experience gender in a way that is not binary or visible through media and representation.

Healthcare support. Healthcare support was also noted as a valuable component in the gender development process by Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) sample and the present sample. Participants shared the importance of finding trans-affirming physicians, therapists, and other health care providers. For example, in the present study one participant discussed the impact of having a trans-identified therapist and the therapeutic space acting as a safe environment to explore their gender. Both samples also spoke about the challenges associated with working with doctors who are not trans-affirming, such as dealing with experiences of misgendering or being treated like an "exotic being" (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p 1739).

Culture Norms and Rules (The Roots)

A topic that was not explored in great depth in previous transgender identity development models was culture and the impact of culture in the gender development process. As an exception to this trend, some of the themes described by Levitt and Ippolito (2014) included components that described participants avoiding the word "transgender" as it was associated with White, misogynistic, and middle-class ideologies, which did not align with some of the identities

the participants held. Some participants in the Levitt and Ippolito (2014) study also shared the challenges of living within rural areas as a transgender person. Geographical culture maintains similarities to the results of the present study, as participants shared the importance of relocating to more urban areas near universities.

Family culture. Family culture was described by Hiestand and Levitt (2005) through the lens of disapproval or approval of a child's gender non-conforming behaviors, as well as the descriptor of "tomboy" to Butch children. Several participants in the present study spoke about their childhood from the perspective of being a "tomboy" and how it may have offered them the opportunity to feel more authentic in their gender expression. Not all AFAB children who are described as tomboys are non-binary, and some cisgender women who were tomboys in their youth describe their more masculine proclivities from a sense of pride (Holland & Harpin, 2015). Some family cultures allowed AFAB children to engage in gender non-conformity, and also maintained the stance that "girls can do anything" (Participant 2). One AMAB participant in the present study spoke of an experience in which their family would not purchase a toy for them as it was considered feminine. Overall, this is similar to previous research that found parents or caregivers are more likely to intervene when witnessing gender non-conformity by an AMAB child (Spivey, Huebner, & Diamond, 2018). This perhaps speaks to cultural norms and misogyny, as masculine tasks are viewed more positively when performed by an AFAB person in comparison to feminine tasks being performed by an AMAB person.

"Queer Enough" and In-group discrimination. A finding to highlight that is associated with culture and the perception of non-binary identities was the effect of ingroup discrimination as well as being "queer enough" or "non-binary enough" in order to be considered valid as a gender identity. Participants in the present study spoke about circumstances that called their

gender identity into question and often invalidated their non-binary identity. Previous research

with binary transgender individuals has explored the concept of "passing," in which the

individual is perceived as their authentic gender rather than their gender assigned at birth, such as

a trans woman being recognized as a woman (Anderson, Irwin, Brown, & Grala, 2019). To

achieve a sense of "passing," some binary transgender individuals may engage in

hyperfeminization or hypermasculinity to display their authentic gender. Cultures and societies

tend to have strict ideas of what is masculine (jaw shape, short hair, low voice) and what is

feminine (make-up, long hair, dresses). However, non-binary identities differ due to non-binary

individuals not having gender norms to follow, and consequently there are different ideas

emerging about what it means to "pass." Binary transgender individuals may be more mindful

about passing due to ongoing discrimination mainly from cisgender individuals (Anderson,

Irwin, Brown, & Grala, 2019). For participants in the present study, the question of being "queer

enough" was associated both with being misgendered and invalidated (i.e., facing discrimination)

by both transgender and cisgender people. As there is not a specific set of rules or norms for

what a non-binary person is supposed to look like, non-binary folks may experience difficulty in

determining what it means to present as "queer enough," both for themselves and for those

around them.

One previous study by Fiani and Han (2019) did indicate that non-binary participants

often felt excluded from transgender spaces as the "T is still binary" (p. 186). This data is further

supported by Johnson et al. (2020) who found non-binary individuals are frequently invalidated

by binary transgender individuals. The present study's finding of feeling "not queer enough"

reflects the results from previous research which emphasizes discrimination both within and

outside of the LGBTQIA+ community. As participants noted, there were challenges in feeling a sense of belongingness and attempting to determine where one fits in as a non-binary person.

The challenges associated with discrimination and finding a sense of belongingness share similarities with the minority stress experienced by people who identify as multiracial (Franco & O'Brien, 2018), and bisexual (Amett, Frantell, Miles, & Fry, 2019). For example, individuals who identify as multiracial and/or biracial may experience exclusion from spaces associated with a component of their racial identity. Additionally, multiracial individuals may feel pressured to choose one racial identity to identify with in order to be embraced by that community (Franco & O'Brien, 2018). Bisexual individuals also face similar discrimination from the lesbian and gay communities, even more so if the bisexual individual is in a cross-gender relationship (Amett, Frantell, Miles, & Fry, 2019). Clearly, invalidation of one's identity impacts the identity development process and the perception of oneself, which may also affect the individual's overall well-being.

Gender Development in Childhood and Adolescence

In comparing the experiences of our sample with Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) qualitative findings regarding binary transgender identity development, and Hiestand and Levitt's (2005) sample regarding butch identity development, there are some similarities as well as some distinct differences during childhood and adolescents. To start, the participants in all three studies described a recognition from a young age of their gender being different than their gender assigned at birth. A striking similarity between the present sample and the Hiestand and Levitt (2005) sample is the recognition of gender differences around the age of 5 or 6. This was also reflected in a narrative experience of other studies (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Fiani & Han, 2019) in which participants spoke about recognizing their gender as being non-binary during

kindergarten or first grade. While participants did not have the exact language to describe their experience, participants knew they felt uncomfortable with binary gender norms. This consistency is indicative of the timing in which individuals may have feelings that their gender experience does not align with their gender assigned at birth. Every sample also described a sense of confusion as to why one must conform to specific gender norms.

Discrimination and Gender Conformity. Regarding the role of conformity to gender binary norms, all three studies spoke about the use of conformity to preserve one's safety during their adolescent years. Feelings of isolation were described by participants across the studies, as well as ongoing experiences of sexual orientation-based discrimination. Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) sample described more experiences of bullying and harassment from peers and families in comparison to the sample in the present study, though experiences of discrimination and bullying became more apparent in this study's sample during adolescence, along with the need to conform in order to be safe. The bullying and discrimination endured by participants could be conceptualized as trauma, given the long-lasting effects that harassment and victimization incurred, along with the negative self-perception towards their gender that participants internalized. A common phrase found throughout the studies (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt & Ipplito, 2014; Fiani & Han, 2019) was "not fitting in," to which participants all described times in which they felt excluded from activities or social experiences due to their transgender identity, even during times of conformity.

Conforming to gender norms, regardless of the age of the participant, was met with feelings of discomfort across all studies. For example, Hiestand and Levitt (2005) share the experience of a participant who would frequently get into arguments with their parents about how they dressed or presented. This is reflected in the data from the present study as participants

also spoke about early experiences of gender non-conformity being met with conflict by their

parents.

     Language and Disentanglement. The disentanglement of gender and sexual orientation

was a consistent topic throughout the current interviews, and a finding that is dissimilar from

other models of development (Lev, 2004; Bilodeau, 2005). For example, Bilodeau's model of

transgender identity development indicates some transgender individuals may begin to further

explore their sexual orientation after coming out to themselves and others. Levitt and Ippolito

(2014) also found similar results as participants indicated their sexual orientation may shift and

evolve as they were able to explore their gender identity. Participants in the present study

indicated they had experienced many conversations surrounding the topic of sexual orientation

while in adolescence, but rarely had conversations related to gender identity. As the participants

had noted, there was also a significant lack of gender diversity language during their adolescent

years, which prevented participants from knowing any gender identities outside of the binary.

Therefore, sexual orientation was often the focus of their adolescent years, despite recognizing

that their gender does not align with binary gender norms.

     The lack of language played an impactful role in the overall gender identity development

process in all samples (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Participant

consistently shared the importance of discovering identifiers or labels such as non-binary,

transgender, butch, and other gender diverse terms. The lack of vocabulary or at least being

exposed to language related to gender diversity prevented participants from knowing how to

fully describe their experience or find the language to share their gender. Participants described a

sense of liberation and joy in finding a gender identifier that fit for their gender. However,

participants in the present study indicated some of them are using a gender label or identifier that

feels "close enough" but may change their label when new vocabulary is created for gender

diversity. This is reflected in participants indicating gender is an ongoing process for them.

Considering that participants in the present study were all close in age range, other studies may

find cohort differences, particularly around the concept of vocabulary for gender diversity.

Current adolescents and emerging adults may have more exposure to vocabulary for gender

diversity, which may be impacting the gender development process for emerging adults and

adolescents.

Gender Exploration, Actualization and Liberation (The Branches and the Canopy)

Every model of transgender identity development (Levitt and Ippolito, 2014; Pardo &

Devor, 2017; Fiani & Han, 2019) and the butch lesbian identity development model (Hiestand &

Levitt, 2005) spoke about a stage of pride or authenticity that is experienced at some point in the

process. By finding the language to describe their gender experience, as well a sense of

community and belonging, participants were able to connect with their gender identity and find a

sense of authenticity through expression and self-reflection. Participants in the present study

spoke about the freedom and liberation experienced when they entered a space that allowed them

to freely live their gender identity. This could include changes to clothing, hair style, pronouns,

name, and their interaction with cultural factors or intersecting identities.

On their way to gender actualization, participants across studies spoke about the

importance of finding community and support as they navigated the gender exploration process

and settled into their authentic gender identity (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Fiani & Han, 2019;

Dowers, White, Cook, & Kingsley, 2020). Most important in the present study, was finding

people who are affirming of non-binary identities given the experiences of discrimination both

within and outside of the LGBTQIA+ community. While binary transgender individuals did not

face the same type of ingroup discrimination as non-binary participants, there is a commonality in which transgender individuals across studies reported difficulties with being misgendered and discriminated against for being transgender. Finding individuals to speak with about their (the participants of the current study) gender was also a crucial component to the gender identity development process in the present study as well as Dower, White, Cook, and Kingsley's (2020) research regarding the qualitative experiences of binary and non-binary transgender adults.

Due to the many studies that combine binary and non-binary individuals as the same population, it is important to recognize the key differences that were found in the present study regarding binary and non-binary gender identity development. First, medical and social transitioning looks different depending on the community in question. For example, some AFAB, non-binary individuals discussed the importance of top surgery and how their breasts were a source of dysphoria. Other AFAB, non-binary participants spoke about their presentation being more feminine and not feeling a sense of dysphoria due to having breasts. This was similar in regards to facial hair for participants who were assigned male at birth. Gender expression for non-binary individuals was found to be highly individualistic and perception for one's sex characteristics differed from participant to participant.

Second, in terms of social transitions, the current sample of non-binary individuals described the process as ongoing in relation to labels, pronouns, and sometimes names. Participants reported they are currently using the label that is most similar to their gender experience, but the label may change as new terminology is created and potentially describes their gender experience more closely. Participants in this sample also indicated they may trial pronouns or names to determine what feels the most authentic and validating of their identity. Some participants chose to change their name legally while others did not express an interest in

changing their name. These finds stand in contrast to Levitt and Ippolito (2014) and Pardo and Devor (2019) who found that participants were more certain in both their gender identity and their gender vocabulary—especially as both aligned with traditional gender norms.

The comparison of the current study with that of Levitt and Ippolito (2014), Hiestand and Levitt (2005), as well as Fiani and Han (2019) suggests that while some themes remain consistent throughout the transgender umbrella of identities, key distinctions do exist and are valuable to consider rather than assuming all transgender and non-binary individuals have the same developmental experience. With increasing access to queer related media, the processes associated with transgender identity development is also likely to evolve and shift as time continues. Both the Levitt and Ippolito (2014) sample and the current study's sample described the importance of vocabulary/terminology, learning of transgender and gender diverse identities to their developmental process. As more awareness is brought to the topic of gender diversity, trans and non-binary identity development experiences may transform as well.

Due to the present study's sample consisting of a small age range, a narrow window of the non-binary gender development process was examined. Cohort differences may exist due to the changes in culture to be more inclusive of non-binary genders (Paechter, 2020). Participants in the present study spoke about conforming in junior high and high school for safety. However, some research is examining the experiences of non-binary adolescents who are publicly identify as non-binary and their experiences of discrimination (Johnson et al., 2019). Non-binary individuals who are currently adolescents may have a different developmental process in comparison to the sample of the present sample.

In addition to differences between binary and non-binary samples, it is also likely that there will be a significant amount of in-group differences within a nonbinary sample. For

example, while themes existed across the interviews, a valuable component to recognize is the

role of individual differences in perceptions of gender and how each participant identified their

non-binary identity. There was no clear-cut definition of gender unanimously created by all

participants; instead, participants interacted with gender in their personal unique ways. Cultural

components, geographical factors, personal experiences, and individual expression were all

relevant to gender identity development and expression. While the data from this study may

assist others understand the lived experience of non-binary people, each participant had a unique

developmental process. In the same manner that not all cisgender men or cisgender women are

identical, not all non-binary people are the same in regard to self-expression, internal experiences

with gender, and ongoing gender development. Fortunately, more opportunities are arising for

non-binary individuals to learn about genders outside of binary notions of gender (Paechter,

2020).

Limitations

We sought to identify the lived experiences of a sample of individuals who identified as

non-binary. While not a limitation of our study, it is important to note that our findings are

specific to this sample, and any generalization at this point should be undergone tentatively and

with an eye for the intersecting identifies of the people that comprised this sample. For example,

most participants in this study identify as White and White non-Latinx, therefore ongoing

research would benefit from seeking to explore non-binary identity development with people of

other racial and ethnic identities. Similarly, the primary investigator of this study also identifies

as White and was trained in a Westernized research model. Therefore, the questions asked of

participants may not have included valuable aspects of the participants developmental process, as

the questions likely are influenced by the lens of a White, Midwestern, able-bodied, highly-educated, non-binary identified, sexually queer, individual.

All participants in the study were also able to attain at least a bachelor's degree and reside in university settings. As this was a beneficial factor in their development, interviewing non-binary individuals who did not attend university or have a different type of education may be valuable in determining other factors that assist or impede development. A cohort effect may also exist within this sample as participants indicated there was very little information about non-binary gender identities when they were adolescents, but now more information exists. The identity development model formed from this study may only be applicable to individuals who were born in the 80s and 90s. Further examination of non-binary individuals who were born in the late 90s or 2000's may bring about a different model. Therefore, this identity development model should be used cautiously when working with someone who is younger or older than this participant pool. Many of the participants in this study also reside in more urban, liberal locations which was reflected in the data related to factors that aided in development. Interviewing non-binary individuals who reside in more rural locations may result in a variation in data or experiences that impact their development.

Lastly, gender identity is an incredibly diverse concept, and the term "non-binary" does not include all gender diverse identities. Gender norms and gendered expectations vary depending on the culture, and community. While this data may be applicable for individuals who do not identify as a cisgender or binary transgender, it may not be applicable for gender identities from various cultures, such as Two-spirit, Mahu, and Hijra individuals (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

Implications for Practice and Research

Implications for Practice. With more recent attention to gender identities that exist outside of a binary notion of gender, psychological literature may benefit from a more in depth

understanding of the developmental process of non-binary people. Previous research has insinuated that binary transgender people and non-binary transgender people experience the same identity development process (Pardo & Devor, 2017). What is strikingly different in this investigation of identity development, however, is the lack of language to describe one's experience as a non-binary person. Binary transgender individuals have language to describe their experience as a trans-man or a trans-woman. But what makes the non-binary experience unique was the lack of terminology or vocabulary to indicate that one does not fit within a binary notion of gender. This data can be utilized by clinicians, educators, and researchers alike to recognize the hardships and the joy that can come from the identity development process.

As for the realm of counseling or clinical applied psychology, this data may be utilized by clinicians in order to better understand the lived experience of non-binary clients or clients who are grappling with their gender identity. In the therapeutic environment, it seems to us that being an ally in the process of gender identity development includes the ability to offer vocabulary from narrative examples of others who have experienced similar processes, including feelings of what has traditionally been called gender dysphoria, as well as the sense of wonderment a person may have when they experience gender actualization for the first time.

Therapists, psychologists, and counselors can also make use of this information to assist with the identity development process specifically around the adolescent years for clients. As noted by participants, adolescence was a time in which discrimination, bullying, and harassment which could be a traumatic experience in the gender developmental process. Clinicians should be mindful of the pronouns clients and patients use, along with their chosen name (Reisner et al., 2015); Lightfoot et al., 2021), and the safety issues surrounding using chosen names and pronouns in the presence of family and others. Knowing gender affirming health care providers

(physicians, psychiatrists, endocrinologists, dermatologists) would also assist clients in acquiring

holistic care and is a necessary component of being a non-binary ally. This last issue is of

particular importance due to ongoing anti-transgender legislation throughout the United States

(Harvard Law Review, 2021).

Additionally, participants spoke about the challenge with disentangling their sexual

orientation and gender. By providing clients with language related to gender and assisting with

the gender exploration process, clinicians may help to alleviate the stress associated with

disentangling sexual orientation and gender identity. Clients may experience difficult family

dynamics that may compromise their safety, specifically clients who are navigating the coming

out process (Kearns at al., 2021).

Participants spoke about the value of finding either groups of people or areas in which

they can be authentically non-binary and be validated in their non-binary identity through use of

chosen name and pronouns (Johnson & Rogers, 2019). Offering a safe environment for

participants to try names and pronouns could be beneficial for the ongoing gender development

of non-binary clients. Being aware of support groups or locations in which queer/LGBTQIA+

events occur could also assist clients in finding community, particularly those who may have

families who are unsupportive of their non-binary identity (Kearns, Kroll, O'Shea, & Neff,

2021).

Lastly, educators across all levels of education may benefit from this data when

considering what type of classroom materials should be accessible to students, using chosen

names and pronouns, and not preventing a student from engaging with an activity that is outside

the scope of gender norms. Providing a sense of freedom to explore one's interests and gender as

a child may set the path for a more positive identity development experience.

Implications for Research. Psychological research has had a tendency to offer gender demographics in a binary format (Lindqvist, Sendén, & Renström, 2020). The field of psychology could benefit from expanding their demographics questionnaires to include non-binary and transgender related identities as the experiences of each gender appear to be unique and relevant. Research spaces have often been exclusionary of gender identities outside of the binary.

The present study has only scratched the surface of non-binary experiences; therefore, a great deal of ongoing research could be conducted to provide proper representation for the non-binary community in academic literature and healthcare services. As noted by the limitations, the current study was highly limited in terms of demographics, such as race/ethnicity, ability status, educational level, and religion or spirituality. Further expansion of non-binary identifying individuals that identify as a racial or ethnic minority, who are older (or younger) than the current sample, or who have had fewer educational opportunities, would be of great benefit. In particular, every participant in the sample also identified as having engaged with higher education, and that higher education was a safe environment for them to explore their non-binary identity. Research focusing specifically on non-binary individuals who either chose to not attend higher education or did not have resources available to do so may offer another perspective on gender identity development.

A promising research direction related to non-binary identity development is the incorporation of language to include more gender-neutral words as well as non-binary identifiers or descriptors. Participants consistently spoke about the impact of not having vocabulary to describe their gender experience, therefore research for emerging adults in the next few years may bring about a different developmental process as non-binary identities are being spoken in

more public spaces. As noted previously, cohort differences may exist, specifically for cohorts who are currently adolescents and children. Future research should consider further examination of the impact of gender diversity vocabulary and representation of non-binary identities on well-being of non-binary individuals and the gender development process.

Summary

The present study sought to explore the gender development process for non-binary individuals. A semi-structured, qualitative interview was utilized to discuss the gender development process with ten non-binary participants. Participants shared several primary themes related to the gender development process which included: Connection and Relationships, the Role of Culture and Intersectionality of Identities, Gender in Childhood and Adolescence, Gender in Emerging Adulthood, and Gender Actualization and Liberation. A developmental model was developed in the image of a tree to provide a visual depiction of the developmental process. Due to a limited age range and racial/ethnic diversity, future research for non-binary gender identity development would benefit from exploring cohort effects as well as the intersection of race and gender.

While psychological literature has not included non-binary identities for several decades, recent years have brought about a shift to create more studies with non-binary individuals as the focus. Participants spoke about the challenges associated with a lack of vocabulary for gender diversity in their adolescence. However, with more attention being provided to the non-binary community, changes may occur to bring about gender inclusivity into research, clinical practice, and educational settings.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

How would you define gender?

When did you recognize you experienced gender differently that did not fit within a binary

notion of gender?

What was your experience like when you recognized your gender identity was not binary?

Tell me about your journey with gender identity throughout your life.

What have been some milestones in your gender identity over your lifetime?

Childhood?

Adolescence?

Adulthood?

What obstacles may have impeded your identity development in: Childhood? Adolescence?

Adulthood?

What factors aided in your identity development in: Childhood? Adolescence? Adulthood?

How have society and societal expectations impacted your identity development?

What was your experience with accepting your gender identity?

What was your experience like when you began expressing your gender?

What does it mean to live authentically in your gender identity?

What does it mean to be "queer enough?"

How has your gender identity played in role in: relationships, family, work/professional life,

tradition, and geographical location?

How have your ideas of gender changed and evolved as you have matured?

Appendix B

Non-Binary Identity Development

My name is Trevor Waagen (Pronouns: They/Them/Theirs) and I am collecting data for my dissertation learning more about the identity development process for individuals who identify within the non-binary umbrella.

Participation in the study consists of:

- A quick (5-10 minute) demographics survey
- A 45–60-minute interview completed using either Zoom or a phone call. The questions will focus on:
    o Important milestones in your gender identity development,
    o Cultural, societal, and family factors that may have affected your experiences as a non-binary person.
    o Misconceptions of non-binary individuals.
- A possible short follow-up interview (10-15 minutes)

 Upon completion of the interview, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card.

Information shared in this study will remain confidential. Personal identifying factors will be protected, and your personal information will not be included in any future publications or utilization of the data.

If you, or anyone you know may be interested in participating, please pass this along!

To be eligible to participate you must:

- Identify within the non-binary/genderqueer umbrella.
- Be over the age of 18.
- Have access to a computer and internet.

It is hoped the current study can provide more information about non-binary individuals and offer representation in academic literature for the community.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please email me at *.

IRB Project Number: IRB0003134

Thank you!

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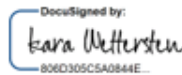| Signer Events	Signature	Timestamp

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