

Non-binary Experiences in the Context of Gender Dichotomization: A framework for theory, research, and practice by CJ Parker, M.S. and Shelly P. Harrell, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This systematic review is a comprehensive thematic synthesis of existing literature regarding the identity and interpersonal experiences of transgender nonconforming persons who exist in a binarily set world. The review aims to answer three questions: (1) What are the identity-related experiences of non-binary individuals? (2) What are the interpersonal and social experiences of non-binary individuals? (3) What are the psychotherapy experiences of non-binary individuals? The author aims to offer valuable insights for therapists and others interested in learning about the lived experience of non-binary persons.





Background and Development

- Transgender and Non-conforming (TGNC) identities may exist within or outside of the gender binary continuum, which can include no gender, multiple genders, or gender as a fluid and dynamic aspect of identity (Conlin, et al., 2019; Goldberg, et al., 2018).
- Levitt (2019) expanded on the definition of gender as a constellation of personal qualities fitting in the context of physiological sex and the given culture. He also noted current cultural limitations due to stigma, traditional gender role norms, and limited language when communicating the complexity of one's gender sense.
- Minority Stress Theory argues that prejudice directed at gender minorities brings about a multitude of stressors leading to adverse effects on mental and physical health (Meyer, 2003a; Meyer, 2020). According to the U.S. Trans Survey in 2015, 48% of all respondents reported being verbally harassed and/or physically attacked in the past year due to their identity. These lived experiences inherently impact how TGNC persons navigate and experience their identity.
- Weinhardt and colleagues' (2019) findings suggest an association between relational support and well-being. Specifically, those who had social support affirming their gender identity endorsed an increase quality of life (QOL). Conversely, those who had non-affirming others experienced a decrease in QOL and increased mental health issues, such as increased suicidal ideation.

Rationale for Systematic Review

This systematic review, guided by an intersectional framework, will include a comprehensive summary and thematic synthesis of existing literature on the identity and interpersonal experiences of TGNC persons who exist in the current context of a binarily set world.

There are three primary questions:

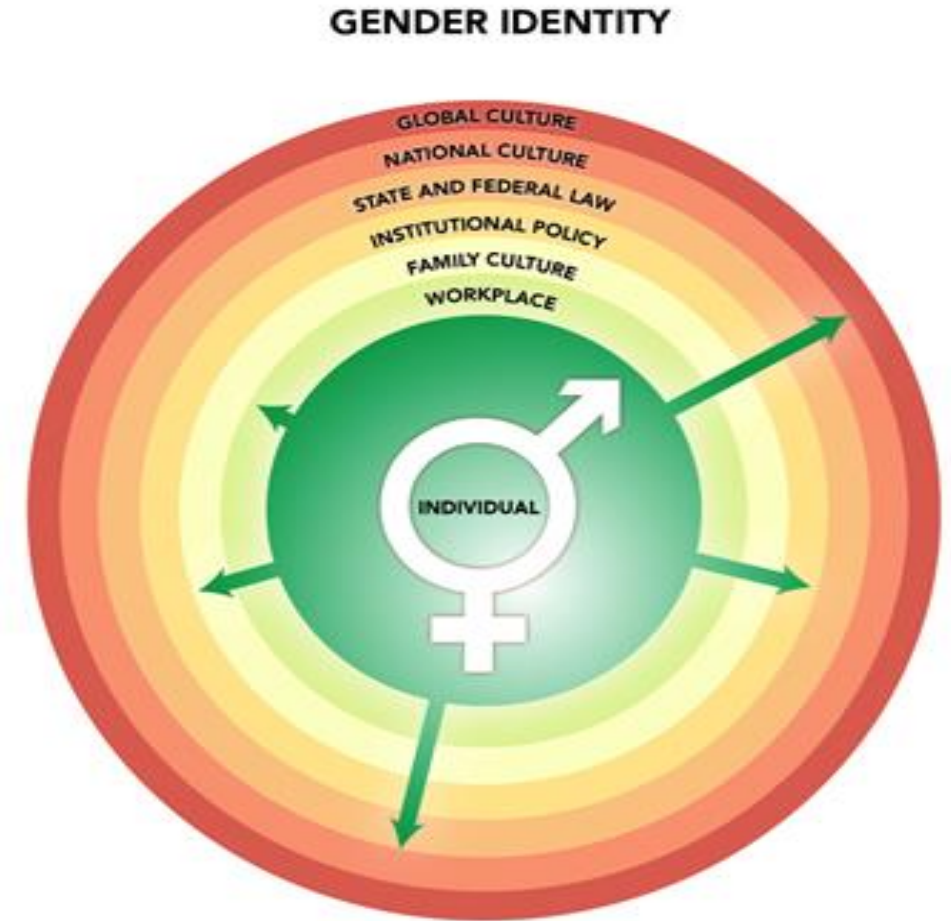
- (1) What are the identity-related experiences of non-binary individuals?
- (2) What are the social and relational experiences of non-binary individuals?
- (3) What are the psychotherapy and counseling-related experiences of non-binary individuals?

Navigation of Systems

Intersectionality is the framework in which we understand personal, social, and political identities layered in culture, history, privilege, and oppression (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, etc.; Collins, et al., 2021)

Recent conceptualizations of stigma includes the navigation of systems on individual, interpersonal, and structural levels that are thought to impact TGNC persons (Fabbre & Gaveras, 2020).

To understand identity developmental processes unique to the TGNC community, it is necessary to place the community in context of history, culture, systems that negate equity, and lived experiences.



Defining Work/School Experiences

This systematic review also conceptualizes work/school experiences as identity disclosure, discrimination, and acceptance/rejection with classmates, faculty, coworkers, and employers, as an attempt to better understand how TGNC persons navigate and experience work and school in the context of a binarily set world.

Defining Interpersonal Experiences

In this systematic review, interpersonal experiences are conceptualized within domains of family, romantic and relational experiences, which can be understood as experiences related to identity disclosure, microaggressions, shifts in social dynamics, and acceptance/rejection from family, partner, and/or community.



Domains of Identity Development

The fluidity and flexibility of gender exploration create unique experiences for identity developmental processes. Although theories such as Queer Theory build upon the idea that gender is a part of the essential self with the use of sexual identity development models, few models address gender identity development (Gordon, 2005). Specifically, Queer Theory challenges the binary system and questions oppressive ideologies that marginalize and silence non-binary experiences. The theory proposes that disruptions in binaries will lead to disruption in inequality. The challenging of norms allows for an expanded experience during identity developmental processes (Gordon, 2005).

For this systematic review, we are attempting to capture identity developmental processes through variables such as stages of gender identity development, and navigation, formation, and gender sense.



Domains of Therapeutic Experiences

Losty and O'Connor (2018) utilized a psychoanalytically informed qualitative research design to identify themes presented by TGNC participants. Three salient themes appeared through analysis: "(1) developing gender identity, (2) Correct and incorrect language and (3) Being seen and unseen." Of note, Losty et al (2018) analyzed narratives that demonstrated historical, political, and social harm done onto the TGNC community within the context of receiving and navigating mental health services. Participants identified feelings of fear, rejection, shame, and fatigue when engaging in needed services due to lack of affirmative and knowledgeable care.

For this systematic review, conceptualization of TGNC therapeutic experiences include the therapeutic alliance, identity disclosure, affirmative and non-affirmative treatment experiences, and the therapists' overidentification or minimization of identity and mental health.

Implications and Future Directions

TGNC narratives have been underrepresented in research and often homogenized under binary trans narratives, which does not provide the depth or breadth necessary to illustrate the diversity seen within the non-binary community. Future research would benefit from using an intersectional framework that acknowledges gender identity in the context of multiple systems and identities.

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