



# EXPLORING THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF NON-BINARY GENDER(S) IN YOUNG PEOPLE.

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# CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS

Developmental research on gender identity typically focuses on children's understandings of...

- Categorical sex differences (Ruble et al., 2007)
- Self-awareness and constancy of biological sex (Kohlberg, 1966)
- Gender congruent role behaviours (Bem, 1983)

Non-binary people typically pose “a fundamental dilemma to our attempts to develop broad-based models of transgender identity development” (Schwartz, 2011).

# ASSUMPTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

There is a conflict for transgender people between gender and 'biological sex'.

That a 'healthy endpoint' for identity development is a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female.

And that this is often through some physical changes.

Dichotomous models of gender fail to accommodate for the complexity and diversity of trans experiences – and make non-binary experiences invisible.

# NON-BINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Non-binary people challenge these assumptions, as they do not identify within the binary and adopt complex constellations of identification/presentation (Bilodeau, 2005; Lev, 2004).

Rejection of 'trapped/born in the wrong body' discourse for non-binary people, as they do not transition/move from one binary to another.

Non-binary people need specific identification within transgender narratives/theories/models of identity development.

Need for "broader, more flexible models of gender identity development among transgender individuals which can accommodate the fact that for some of these individuals, identity development will have a linear trajectory leading to a singular outcome, whereas for others, identity development may be a recursive process that accommodates multiple and shifting identity states over time." (Schwartz, 2011)

# SOME KEY DEVELOPMENTAL MODELS

## Kohlberg (1966)

- Centers on children learning to label themselves and others.
- Understanding that this part of the self is persistent over time and across situations.
- Concept of gender constancy - no, or little gender identity variation after 5-7 years old.

## Gender Schema Theory - Martin and Halverson's (1981)

- Children labelling themselves as either a boy or girl.
- Gender labelling allows development of schemas that motivates them to do activities associated with their gender.
- To attain cognitive consistency, children are motivated to behave in ways compatible with gender stereotypes.

## Devor (2004)

- Outlines progression from early confusion to gradual self-acceptance.
- Specific to transsexualism – rather than capturing the diversity of trans experiences.
- Final stage is complete sex reassignment – only then can the individual experience self-acceptance.

# IPA FOCUS GROUPS METHODOLOGY

4 white, young people, aged 16-18, from a local youth group.

IPA to capture the experience of being non-binary.

Primary reason for focus groups was for accessibility of the young people and the group.

Participants generally allowed each other space to talk, so there are chunks of speech from individuals, allowing for that idiographic focus that IPA requires.

# IPA FOCUS GROUPS METHODOLOGY

Palmer et al. (2010) – allow for multiple voices to be heard, naturally occurring group (the youth group), as a group, from an experiential perspective, may elicit more experiential reflection than a one-to-one interview.

Flowers et al. (2001) suggest rather than diluting accounts of personal experience, the group dynamics added something extra to their analysis, that would otherwise been missed.

However, multiple voices, complexity of individual and shared stories can make it difficult to infer/develop personal, phenomenological accounts, because any experiential claims, reflections, narratives are likely to be nested within a complex set of social and contextual relationships. **But isn't this also true for non-group settings – we are relational people.**

Smith (2004) notes that successful use of focus groups require recognition of the difficulties involved in applying experiential analysis to more complex social activities. This is likely to involve approaching the analysis twice, once for group patterns and dynamics and subsequently for idiographic accounts. This helps develop a meaningful analysis of patterns in the participants' lived experiences while acknowledging **the wider socio-cultural factors involved in accessing their stories in this way.**

# ANALYSIS — CONTEXT(S) OF CONSTRUCTION

*“... I was a bit sick of **my family** assuming I was a lesbian and waiting for me to come out.” (Kristian: 561-562)*

- Assumptions about sexuality. Doesn't usually happen for cisgender young people “I'm a girl...”

*“I was talking to **my mum's friend** about like how I felt like a genderfluid erm bisexual person and like she got confusing she thought she's confusing her sexuality she's gay and I was like that's not what it is at all.” (C: 563-566)*

- Confusion/conflation of gender and sexuality.

*“... but it's nice in a way because a lot of people being the first non-binary person they've met you get to like explain it to them because a lot of times if you go up if you tell someone you're trans they think they know what trans means.” (Kristian: 271-272)*

- Space to explain my identity.

# RELATIONALITY OF NON-BINARY GENDERS

*“... like the more I learnt about it I was like that’s me and then sort of I came out through other people coming out and learning about it through that.” (Ariel, 163-165)*

- Relational support through other non-binary people.

*“... one of my best friends at college erm when I tried to explain it to her I was really worried but she was like oh great tell me about that because I don’t know anything about it. And that was really positive.” (Leo, 453-456)*

- Being heard and accepted fostering a positive experience.

*“... my parents err think I identify as a binary boy completely because if I tried to explain that I was non-binary they’d be like you’re lying, you just want to be a girl and I’m like no that’s the opposite.” (Leo, 501-503)*

- Lack of support and awareness - relational impact on Leo ‘regressing’ to a binary trans identity...

# NON-LINEAR IDENTITIES

*“I came out first as gender fluid and then non-binary and then trans-male now I’m just like non-binary again.” (Kristian, 14-16)*

*“I’m 16 so like I still feel like I’ve got time left to decide who I am and figure myself out like a couple of years ago I identified as gender fluid now I identify as non-binary like it can change because we’ve still got that time to change so it’s just part of growing up really.” (C 597-600)*

- Being young allows time to ‘figure out’. Still got that time, but until when...?

*“I feel like identity is very fluid so even though I feel like static and comfortable in the way I am at the moment like in the past I’ve identified different I don’t think that I was wrong about that I just think that was the label that best fit me at the time.” (Kristian, 424-427)*

*“Non-binary isn’t a stable thing because you’re changing like because your gender like how you represent yourself how you feel like it’s always changing...” (C 203-205)*

# SOME CONCLUSIONS...

Cisnormative – transgender identities positioned as ‘other’, particularly non-binary.

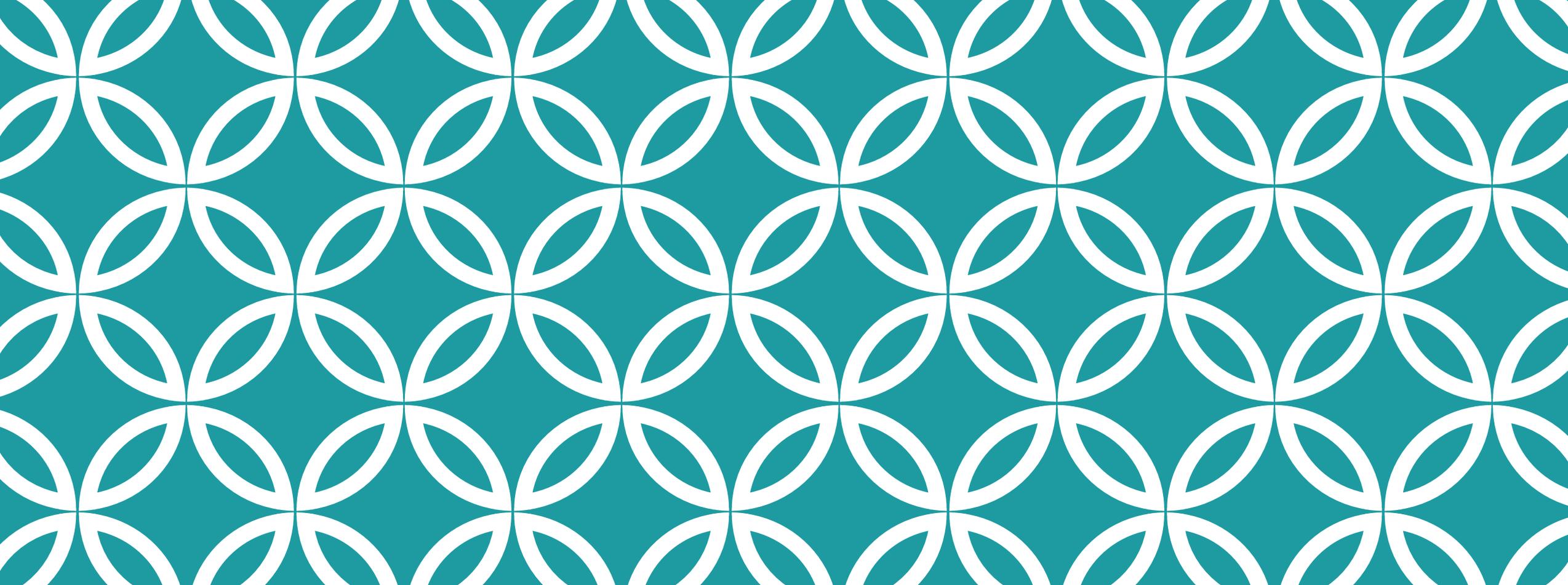
Largely, only binary genders are considered.

Lack of acknowledgement around relationality of gender.

Linear assumptions – Expectations that young people will ‘find themselves’ and ‘settle’ on a stable and enduring (binary) gender identity.

Young people negotiating power dynamics and constructing identities with adults/people in positions of power – you’re too young, unsure, non-binary doesn’t exist.

- Often hidden identities.
- Trans – accepted, whilst non-binary = not accepted/misunderstood.



**THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.  
HAPPY TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS.**

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