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Non-Binary Identities: How Non-Binary People Move Through A Gendered World

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NON-BINARY IDENTITIES: HOW NON-BINARY PEOPLE MOVE
THROUGH A GENDERED WORLD

By

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University of Central Florida, 2021

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Abstract

The following study examines the experiences of non-binary people living in a society that emphasizes a gender binary, along with how being non-binary affects participants' views of the world and themselves. The study also looked to establish a working definition of "non-binary." I interviewed 17 participants who self-identified as non-binary regarding their lived experiences as non-binary people. Narratives were used to establish codes and themes. Adopting a narrative approach to the data, the study puts forth working definitions of non-binary and related terms, such as gender non-conforming, androgyny, and genderfluid. The study found that most participants saw themselves as breaking the norms by being non-binary and in other ways, including their sexuality and religion. Participants placed an emphasis on visibility, asserting that by being visible as non-binary they help society move away from strict binary constructs. Participants also described many adverse experiences associated with being non-binary, including being misgendered and safety concerns, which can impact non-binary people's mental health. This study forms a basis for further research into non-binary experiences, both in relation to lived day-to-day experiences and in terms of associated mental health outcomes.

Key terms: non-binary, genderfluid, androgyny, gender non-conforming

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Introduction

While there has been a growing amount of research regarding people who are homosexual, and there is a budding field of research on transgender individuals, there is a dearth of research on those who identify as queer and others who do not fit into a binary understanding of gender and sexuality. As gay and lesbian people gradually gain greater acceptance and rights, it appears that people with less recognized sexual orientations and gender identities have begun to feel freer to express their true sense of self. As personal and popular knowledge of bisexuality (attraction to two or more genders), pansexuality (attraction regardless of gender), non-binary genders, and other identities grow, formal research is needed to help produce equivalent social scientific knowledge. Classes where studies on the differences between men and women were once taught with surety are now often interrupted by questions like “What about non-binary people?” and “What about transgender people?” These inquiries are often met with silence, or a stuttering explanation that the research has not been done. Questions on inclusivity can be difficult to respond to, as the reasons for the current lack of research is multidimensional, including that widespread knowledge of queer identities is too new, contemporary research is not published yet, and/or that the population can be difficult to reach, or a sample size is not large enough for traditional statistical measures. Even so, the bottom line is that there is a noticeable gap across fields, even in realms like sociology and social psychology that include a focus on diversity and aim to explore cultural and individual experiences. This issue is slowly being rectified, as demonstrated by a growing number of studies, but we will not truly understand people until we understand all types of people.

While our society is rife with heteronormativity, research on the LGBTQ+ community arguably has a different problem — it is rife with “homonormativity” and a focus on binary,

often times dichotomous categories. Bates (2020) repeatedly brings this to attention, pointing out that our research and our statistics fail to “accurately capture the various sexual and gender identities individuals now project in contemporary society.” Similarly, Nicholas (2019) points out that while social psychology has begun to research transphobia and attitudes toward binary transgender people, attitudes toward non-binary people have not been researched (at least not substantively). The proposed study aims to take a step toward rectifying this situation through an interdisciplinary lens, adding to the general knowledge of gender orientations outside of the binary from sociological and psychological perspectives.

In binary terms, gender is a set of roles, behaviors, and norms that are associated with being a man or a woman. As pointed out by Oleski and colleagues (2020), the definition of gender needs to be expanded. There are several terms that are used to describe gender identities outside of the established binary, such as non-binary, agender (having no gender), and genderfluid (having a gender that changes or moves around on the spectrum). The definition of non-binary gender identity is self-reflective — a gender not in the binary, breaking out of those gender norms and redefining gender. However, what falls under that label and how do people who are non-binary define the term? For instance, are non-binary people also genderfluid? What about agender? Research seems to suggest that what non-binary entails depends on the person adopting the label (Corwin, 2009).

The current study focuses on individuals who self-identify as non-binary, seeking to learn more about what the term “non-binary” entails, how being non-binary affects their daily life, and the ways in which it affects how individuals view themselves and the world. The following literature review will first cover research on identity development, and then delve more specifically into gender identity, non-binary identities, and narratives. Following the literature

review will be an explanation of the research process and discussion of the findings. The thesis then ends with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Socialization

Sex role socialization refers to how a child is treated based on their sex, and thus the way that they learn how members of their sex are expected to behave. From day one, infants are treated differently based on their sex—and, arguably more importantly, the associated gender. This is more important because we form assumptions about people's sex based on their performance of gender and interact with them based on those assumptions. Honig (1983) summed up several studies that found participants treated infants differently based on the gender they believed the infant to be. This difference occurred with caregivers, teachers, and strangers. From birth, we are socialized to behave a certain way based on our sex. Socialization based on sex appears to affect everything from personal agency to measured intelligence (Honig, 1983).

One major critique of the theoretical approach of sex role socialization is its view of gender as static — something individuals firmly develop between five and seven years old and then never change (Lorber, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This critique also applies to Kohlberg's (1966) cognitive-developmental theory of gender, in which gender identity is developed around age two, gender stability is developed around age four, and gender constancy is developed around age six (Olezeski et al., 2020). Kohlberg posited that gender identity is fully developed and stable by age seven. The meaning of "fully developed," in this case, includes: (a) recognizing what gender is and that everyone has one, (b) that gender is stable and will not change at any point in life, and (c) that gender is constant and does not change due to material or physical changes, such as a woman wearing pants or a man wearing a dress (Olezeski et al., 2020). This theory has been widely accepted in psychological research and supported by various

studies, yet it does not account for the instances in which people come to adopt non-binary labels and the widely varied ages at which people “come out” as a gender other than one that aligns with their assigned gender at birth. For instance, in Fast and Olsen’s (2019) study of cisgender and gender-diverse children, they found that children did not think their gender would change as they grew but had the ability to recognize others’ genders may not be static. The recognition that others’ genders may not remain the same was more prevalent among the gender-diverse children in the study. Such findings suggest that additional research and perspectives are needed to understand the influences on a broader process of identity development.

Of course, it could be argued that if the term sex were used rather than gender, this theory would perhaps remain relevant. However, the existence of genderfluid people — individuals whose gender identity is never static — also challenges this approach. The view of gender identity as unchanging after age seven is called into question, especially by those adopting a postmodernist approach. For example, Judith Lorber (1994) recounted a longitudinal study in which sixteen out of nineteen pseudohermaphrodites (people who are biologically male but whose genitalia is ambiguous) raised as girls eventually transitioned into identifying as men. Lorber (1994) argued this finding remonstrated the view of gender as established and stable after childhood, as well as the theory that how we are raised is how we will identify. Relatedly, studies have found that identity develops in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Bates et al., 2020). Tatum et al. (2020) found many non-binary and transgender individuals realize their gender identity around the ages of fifteen to seventeen and come out as non-binary or transgender between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine. This is more in keeping with Erik Erikson’s (1968) psychosocial stages of development, in which identity crises occur across adolescence and emerging adulthood that cause individuals to explicitly focus on the formation of their identities.

Today, it is increasingly acknowledged that people of all ages can and do change the label on their gender identity, coming out at various points in their lives, and sometimes changing labels more than once; this offers further support that gender is not static, as pointed out by West and Zimmerman (1987) and Judith Lorber (1994). However, it is possible that individuals will change their gender identities later in life as they become aware of the options other than their assigned label, as exemplified in Tatum and colleagues' (2020) study on transition ages among transgender individuals. As it is extremely rare for individuals to be taught about gender diversity early in life, few people grow up with an ability to express feelings of existing outside the gender binary. They are not socialized with the concepts of non-binary, transgender, etc.; may have misunderstandings of the implications; or may not feel safe to adopt the terms. These early restraints could prevent people from being able to explore and use terms that match how they feel and may even influence the adoption of the labels later in life. When those who come to label themselves as gender diverse are exposed to these concepts later, they may feel as if their identity or their feelings finally make sense. If children were aware of options outside of "boy" or "girl" earlier in life, would those who come out as non-binary identify as such sooner? There is support that this may be true, as participants in Losty and O'Connor's (2018) study reported a direct relationship between discovering the category of non-binary and applying the label to themselves. Participants in Losty and O'Connor's (2018) study reported identifying their sexual orientation first, and that being a part of the LGBTQ community opened them up to knowledge of gender diversity, enabling them to discover labels that more accurately reflected their feelings. As more caregivers raise their children outside of gender stereotypes, we may be able to determine the strength of the relationship between socialization and gender variance more clearly.

Tatum and colleagues (2020) found that gender queer and non-binary identifying individuals tended to identify and transition later in life than binary transgender individuals, which they posit may be attributed to even less nonbinary representation in media than the already underwhelming amount seen by binary transgender individuals. This theory is echoed by Losty and O'Connor (2018). It is hard to empirically determine if gender identity develops later than Kohlberg's (1966) theory suggests or if the delay in assuming gender identity for non-binary and transgender people can be attributed to lack of gender-diverse socialization in childhood — or, possibly, a combination of the two. The effects of socialization on gendered behavior are now more commonly known, but more research is needed to see how gender identity statistics change as more parents raise their children in a gender-neutral environment.

Another flaw in approaches to socialization is its treatment of children as passive blank slates, reflecting only what they are taught (Bem, 1983; McLean et al., 2020). Liben's (2017) constructivist-ecological model took this aspect of social learning theory and expanded on it, theorizing that not only is the child shaped by their environment, but the environment is also shaped by the child. This is supported by alternative narratives, narratives which call into question the ideas we are socialized to believe. Through alternative narratives, children (and those no longer children) take control of their environment and their identity, questioning and even rejecting gender stereotypes (Rogers, 2020). Similar to the constructivist-ecological model is Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, in which society affects individuals but individuals also have the power to affect society. While the constructivist-ecological model focuses specifically on children and their direct environment, structuration theory views the child as an agent of change for their entire society, not just their immediate environment. Giddens (1984) views people as actors, upholding or rejecting the society in which they were raised. When people

reject gender stereotypes, they reflect this through actions and words, disrupting the gender constructs around them.

Gender schema theory, as put forth by Sandra Bem (1983) incorporates socialization theories and cognitive-developmental theory. Bem questioned sex role socialization theory because it placed the child in a passive role; accordingly, she put forth gender schema theory, which incorporated cognitive-developmental theory, as it gave the child a more active, agentic role (Bem, 1983). Gender schema theory focuses on how socialization leads to sex typing, which Bem (1983, p. 598) defined as “the acquisition of sex-appropriate preferences, skills, personality attributes, behaviors, and self-concepts.” Being sex-typed involves internalizing the categories of masculine and/or feminine and the qualities society ascribes to each. Bem created the Sex Role Inventory to determine if an individual is sex-typed, which started as sixty questions and was eventually narrowed down to twelve (Carver et al., 2013). While the scale was originally intended to measure only masculinity and femininity, Bem recognized a third option, androgyny, in which individuals scored highly on both the masculinity and femininity scales and a fourth option in which individuals scored low on both scales, known as undifferentiated (Bem, 1974; Risman & Davis, 2013). However, Bem noted that sex typing is not inescapable or universally applicable and that if our society placed less importance on gender, sex typing would not exist (1983).

Risman and Davis (2013) brought up socialization theory as it has been applied to sex roles. They mentioned that although sex role socialization was a popular course of study, socialization theory was left behind by many sociologists, or expanded upon, for a multitude of reasons. Rather than simply study gender as a personality trait imprinted upon us in our childhood, sociologists wanted to examine gender on levels beyond the individual. Sociologists

began to focus on new structuralism and gender as performative. The framework of new structuralism focused on organizations as the cause of gender inequality and provided evidence as to how organizations created and perpetuated perceived differences in gender, rather than individuals (Kanter, 1977). However, key to new structuralism was the theory that “the same structural conditions create behavior, regardless of whether men or women are filling the social roles” (Risman & Davis, 2013, p.739). This theory has been reviewed and empirical support was found lacking (Risman and Davis, 2013). Since the key component of new structuralism does not have adequate empirical support, the theory as a whole is called into question.

Gender Theory

The performative aspect of gender was examined by West and Zimmerman (1987). They posited that gender is something we *do* — an activity we engage in within society — not something we *are*. West and Zimmerman (1987) established differences between sex, sex category, and gender. Sex is based on biological differences identified and defined by culture. A sex category is often based on sex, but not always — a transgender person who has not gone through medical transition may have a different sex than their sex category. The sex category is how they are perceived through clothing, traits, etc.; sex categories, therefore, are placed on individuals — not personally chosen. Alternatively, gender is a result of a signification process — in other words, how people go about being perceived as a member of a certain sex category. Gender is performative; it is an activity which people do to lay claim to a sex category, including choosing the ways in which they dress, speak, and behave. Sex category is the perception, gender is the action. To West and Zimmerman, gender is created and performed within every interaction (1987). Gender is now widely accepted as a social construct (Terry, 2016), and this is reflected in many gender theories (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Bem, 1983; Martin, 2004; Risman, 2004). An important point made by the authors is that “it does not seem plausible to say that we have the

option of being seen by others as female or male” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This sentiment is repeated by other authors, including Judith Lorber (1994) and non-binary advocate Alok Vaid-Menon (2020).

Human beings feel the need to categorize. It helps us understand our world better. In a patriarchal society, gender is seen as a vital category — how do we know where we stand in terms of power and patriarchy if we do not know if we are male or female? West and Zimmerman (1987) related an incident told to them by a woman who was in a store being helped by a salesperson. The salesperson was visually androgynous, and the woman spent time trying to figure out if this person was male or female by actively looking for signs of masculinity or femininity. The woman was so distressed by not being able to fit the individual into a binary category that she recalled the event years later and reported being “disturbed” by not being able to ascertain the salesperson’s gender. This situation exemplifies several issues that modern gender theory and “new” gender identities bring to light. We, as humans, expect others to fit neatly into our boxes and can become upset when they do not. This shows that gender is performative and that our identities are as much for others as they are for ourselves. While we do not know if the salesperson was non-binary, the mental processes the woman goes through to discern the gender of the salesperson shows how little room there is in the patriarchy for a gender spectrum. Even people born intersex, with sex characteristics that are not strictly male or female as defined by the culture’s definition of sex, are pressured to choose a gender and/or a sex — or more often have one chosen for or applied to them (Lorber, 1994). As Lorber said in *Paradoxes of Gender*, there is nothing like “the intense uncertainty that a genderless child produces in our society” (1994, p. 82).

Queering Theory

We live in a world full of dualities and binaries: man/woman, gay/straight, good/evil. Even transgender and cisgender (re)create a binary (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019). These dualities also have a connotation of power. The patriarchy perpetuates that men are above women, heteronormativity suggests that heterosexuality is “more natural” than homosexuality, and many stories teach us that good will always conquer evil. As we grow, however, we learn that rarely is anything as cut and dry as this. Patriarchy is difficult to define, and it has been suggested that rather than focusing on how to study and break free of patriarchy, we can achieve more by focusing our studies on gender (Acker, 1989). There have been attempts to break out of the binary viewpoint and to reexamine the power dynamics within. Deconstructing gender and sexual binaries and crafting a perception of power that contains more fluidity are the main purposes of queer theory (Balzer et al., 2017). Some queer theorists contend that due to the individuality and fluidity of gender and sexuality, the formation of any identity — particularly a stable one — based on either one is a “false effect of oppressive, normalizing, heteropatriarchal, social forces” (Balzer et al., 2017). Queer theorists believe that we need to change the way people think about gender in order to challenge social hierarchies and the binaries within them (Nicholas, 2019). With all the different sexualities and genders, the false dichotomies of man and woman, and gay and straight, are being challenged. Non-binary sexual orientations and gender identities are a step toward breaking out of the patriarchy — simplified as the hegemony of men over women in all aspects of society — and of refusing to be put into one box or have personal power be managed by arbitrary measures such as sexual orientation, sex, or gender.

Non-Binary Genders

Many cultures outside of the United States and pre-United States show more open-mindedness in terms of existing outside of the gender binary. Various Native American tribes

have people defined as being born two-spirit, while north India has a third gender known as hijras, and Oman has a gender known as xaniths (Lorber, 1994). The Andean tribe in Latin America may have also had a third gender (Shiwy, 2007). However, while two-spirit people, hijras, and xaniths may be culturally accepted, they are simultaneously outcast — they live separately from “conforming” members of their cultures and are seen as different or special in some way, rather than just another equivalent category of gender (Lorber, 1994). Despite this, they are given a place within society that non-binary individuals in modern Western cultures do not typically experience. Non-binary people have existed across time and place, so it is important to recognize that the rejection of non-binary people is a colonized Western phenomenon, which further upholds gender as a social construct. Shiwy (2007) explores the impact of the gender binary on indigenous Latin American cultures who are actively trying to decolonize and break away from the binary system of oppressor/oppressed and other power dynamic binaries. Similar to the way in which the concept of race has contemporarily been readdressed, the gender binary is a social construct created by Western imperialists to reinforce Western power (Shiwy, 2007).

Current ideologies and systems do not support individuals breaking out of the binary, as demonstrated in the anecdote from West and Zimmerman (1987), the discrimination experienced by intersex people as described by Lorber (1994), and the rising homicide rates of transgender people (Dinno, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017; Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Part of this may stem from the early psychoanalytic conceptions of gender-diverse people as mentally ill — the recipients of trauma or bad parenting (Losty & O’Connor, 2018). Clinicians tend to attempt to be more accepting today, but even within these attempts are cases of insensitivity and outdated terms. Donatone and Rachlin released an intake template in 2013

geared toward gender-diverse individuals but used outdated terms like ‘transsexual’ and ‘male-to-female’ rather than the preferred term ‘assigned female at birth’ (AFAB). While the move from male-to-female/female-to-male to AFAB or AMAB (assigned male at birth) is relatively new, by 2013 transsexual had been replaced by transgender for years (Bolton, 2019). Another issue, specifically for school counselors, is the perceived connection between gender and sexuality, and thus sex. Counselors report not being able to discuss gender orientation with students unless the parents sign a permission slip ahead of time, which severely impacts students’ ability to go to school counselors when in need (de Jong, 2014). This enforced silence reinforces the gender binary and heteronormativity, as well as negatively impacting gender diverse students’ mental health.

Non-binary people are on the “transgender identity spectrum” (Tatum et al., 2020), although recent research found that significant differences between binary and non-binary transgender people and urged future research to delineate the two when studying transgender communities (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019). Studies have shown that even in spaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, non-binary individuals have not always been welcomed (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019). Thus, non-binary people may struggle building support systems and feeling a sense of belonging in their environments. This was supported by Bradford and Catalpa’s (2019) findings, which showed that non-binary participants felt significantly lower social support and life-satisfaction than cisgender participants. However, the correlation between life satisfaction and friend support is weaker for non-binary individuals than transgender and cisgender individuals, implying that non-binary people may have realized they cannot rely on the support of friends for happiness (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019). Bradford and Catalpa (2019) also found that both cisgender and binary transgender participants had higher

levels of gender determinism (the belief that gender determines personal attributes) than non-binary participants. James and colleagues (2016) found that non-binary individuals are at more risk for mental illness, or at least subpar mental health, than binary transgender individuals. However, both binary and non-binary transgender people face higher rates of mental health issues than the overall U.S. population (James et al., 2016).

Some non-binary individuals take hormones and undergo gender affirming surgeries like binary transgender people, although not at the same rate (Losty & O'Connor, 2018; Tatum et al., 2020). One issue facing non-binary people wishing to undergo hormone treatment is the medicalization of being transgender; this includes a significant number of obstacles to being deemed worthy of hormone treatment (e.g., all the medical hoops transgender people must jump through and boxes they have to check to gain access to hormone treatment) and the way testosterone has been viewed as “distilled masculinity” (Bolton, 2019). While binary transgender men use testosterone to reinforce and confirm their gender through physical changes, non-binary AFAB individuals have been found to use testosterone (or wish to use it) as a way of “undoing” gender (Bolton, 2019). Aside from the medical intricacies, non-binary people encounter social obstacles to using testosterone, mainly from what they learn from online queer spaces that reinforce the belief that testosterone is for binary trans men alone, and one must feel specific things about your past and your future in regard to one’s masculinity and male gender to want and need testosterone (Bolton, 2019). Concisely, non-binary people are told that testosterone is for binary men only.

After reviewing transgender and “wrong body narratives” and the historical use of testosterone for transgender people, Bolton (2019) performed narrative-based, qualitative interviews with seven non-binary individuals. Based on their findings, Bolton (2019) pushed for

testosterone to stop being associated solely with masculinity, which they argued is possible through Science and Technology Studies. One non-binary person within Bolton's (2019) study was able to reconceptualize testosterone to separate it from masculinity through discourse and science and subsequently felt freer to use testosterone to "unmake" their gender. Like binary transgender people, non-binary people may (or may not) experience gender dysphoria. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), which sets standards of care for transgender people worldwide, defines gender dysphoria as "discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)" (Coleman et al., 2012, p. 5). Testosterone is a way for AFAB non-binary people to be more comfortable with their bodies and to alleviate dysphoria (Bolton, 2019). For some non-binary people, testosterone is a way to move away from being viewed as female, rather than a way to be viewed as or feel male (Bolton, 2019). As Bolton put it, "they used testosterone to jump into the gender void, but they had no intention of coming out the other side" (2019. p. 25).

There are many other ways that non-binary people express their gender identity, with the most easily identifiable being through clothing and general appearance. For example, growing out facial hair as well as wearing clothing that highlights their breasts. Some non-binary individuals love this and can reject gender norms by identifying as non-binary while wearing clothes stereotypical of one gender (Losty & O'Connor, 2018). However, others feel dysphoric when their clothes do not match the gender they feel at the time, including those whose gender was self-identified as fluid (Losty & O'Connor, 2018). The world of fashion sees non-binary people feeling freer to be themselves and are stepping up to the plate by designing androgynous

clothes, creating genderqueer clothing lines, and showing off gender non-conforming models like Andrej Pejic (Anderson-Minshall, 2013).

Like binary transgender people, non-binary individuals may change their names to better reflect their identities (Losty & O'Connor, 2018). It has been observed that genderqueer people also exhibit linguistic differences (Corwin, 2009). Everything about our language is gendered — syntax, speech style, affect, pitch, intensity, etc. (Corwin, 2009). Non-binary people often use different pronouns, in some cases creating new ones to better fit their identities (example: zhe/zhir). However, Corwin (2009) found that over half of the participants in the study also used phonetic patterns that exemplified both masculine and feminine stereotypical ways of speech, including pitch changes.

Narratives

To help start addressing the gaps in knowledge, and more generally to create a better understanding of the meaning of non-binary, it is needed to hear the voices, stories, experiences, and perspectives of those who identify as non-binary. For the purposes of research into individuals' lived experiences, meaning making, and perceptions, narratives can offer the most in-depth insight, and a large portion of what we do know about non-binary individuals comes from narratives. Narratives are how we tell our life stories, connecting our past experiences into a comprehensive set that explains why we are the way we are (Rogers, 2020). The two most overarching narratives are master narratives and alternative narratives (Rogers, 2020). Master narratives are the narratives of a society. They explain our culture, including gender stereotypes and roles, and often perpetuate dangerous binaries of inequality. Thus, master narratives outline individual narratives within a society. In terms of gender, master narratives maintain stereotypes and patriarchal views and dictate how people build their gender identities. Not everyone adheres

to these master narratives, though. Alternative narratives resist the outline master narratives provide. McLean and colleagues (2020) found that people who actively build alternative narratives tend to be the same people consciously participating in the development of their identity. They have also found that people who are at a disadvantage within the collective narrative are more likely to break out of it and form alternative narratives (McLean et al., 2020).

Research has suggested that alternative narratives are just as key to identity development as master narratives (McLean et al., 2020; Rogers, 2020). Rogers (2020) identified subsets of both master and alternative narratives, and these subsets could benefit future research on identity development. Within master narratives, children in Rogers' (2020) study expressed narratives with themes of either gender difference or gender blindness, in which children either acknowledged that there is a difference between genders and upheld their cultural stereotypes or did not think gender was significant at all (this was far less present than other narratives). The alternative narratives held themes of incongruence — children repeated the stereotypes they were fed, but then expressed examples that contradicted these stereotypes — or counternarratives, which explicitly rejected gender stereotypes (Rogers, 2020). While master narratives were more common overall, alternative narratives were more popular among older children, which supports that alternative narratives are part of identity development, and among girls, which supports that alternative narratives are common among those at a disadvantage in current society (Rogers, 2020).

Other research has identified a multitude of other types of narratives, especially within the LGBTQ community, including narratives of autonomy, individuality, and fluid identities (Bates, 2020). Accordingly, this collective past research suggests that utilizing interviews to examine narratives for thematic differences and comparisons enables researchers to better

understand identity development and the mechanisms with which gender diverse people make sense of their lives and their worlds.

Methods

This study gathered data through interviews with non-binary individuals on how their gender identity affects their daily lives and to add to the general body of knowledge on non-binary identities; including what non-binary means, the importance of gender identity, and the effect gender identity has on self-view and worldview. Rather than create an operational definition of non-binary gender identity prior to the interviews, the author chose to ask participants for their definitions to help determine the possibilities for establishing common ground for a definition, or definitions, of non-binary and other related terms.

Overall, the author was interested in non-binary individuals' daily lives and experiences, so several questions focused on lived experiences with family, friends, and strangers, along with how being non-binary affected relationships and sense(s) of self. They were also focused on if breaking one norm (being non-binary) is related to, or perhaps would empower participants to, break other norms — or if breaking other norms empowered participants to be openly non-binary. For instance, the author asked participants if they viewed being non-binary as being out of the norm and if participants saw themselves as breaking norms in any other ways.

Participants

The author recruited participants through various organizations, mainly a large southeaster university and a nonprofit center for LGBTQ+ youth in the central Florida area. Since the non-binary population is relatively small, a snowball-sampling technique and word-of-mouth were employed to further recruitment efforts and gain an adequate sample size to reach theoretical saturation. The author posted flyers advertising the research project on social media

and sent flyers to LGBTQ+ organizations and support groups. Requirements for participation included identifying as non-binary and being eighteen years or older. Before interviews began, participants were sent the consent form detailing the purpose of the study and asked to offer consent per IRB guidelines.

This process resulted in a total sample size of 17 participants. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. Participants ranged in age from 18-72, with a median age of 23. Since one of the pre-requisites for participation was identifying as non-binary, the author was able to establish gender terms for the present study as well as future research that are commonly viewed as within the non-binary umbrella, as many participants described it. The most common gender in the sample was non-binary, with the most common subset of non-binary being genderfluid (Figure 1). Most, but not all, participants used the pronouns they/them/theirs either exclusively or in tandem with other pronouns (Figure 2). Five participants identified as queer, five as bisexual, three pansexual, and two on the asexual spectrum. Most participants reported having completed or were currently attending college. Based in an open-ended demographic question of their race and ethnicity, 10 identified as white, four as mixed, two as white and Ashkenazi, and one as Hispanic. Five participants identified as pagan, five as atheist or agnostic, two as spiritual, two as Christian, one as a Satanist, one as Buddhist, and one as Jewish.

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Eth.	Faith	Education
Kat	They/them	18	Nonbinary	Bisexual	White	Christian	Some college
Sam	They/them	19	Genderqueer	Queer	White	None	Some college
E	They/them	20	Nonbinary	Bisexual	White	Agnostic	Some college
Mochi	She/they	21	Nonbinary	Bisexual	Mixed	Pagan	Some high school

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PIF	They/zie	22	Agender	Asexual	Mixed	Satanist	Associate in Arts
Astrophel	They/them	22	Genderfluid	Bisexual	White	Atheist	Some college
Hari	They/them	23	Nonbinary	Queer	White/ME	Agnostic	Bachelors
Mbunche	She/her	23	Genderfluid	Queer	Mixed	Spiritual	Some college
Jay	He/they	23	Genderfluid	Bisexual	White	Pagan	Bachelors
Olive	They/them	23	Genderqueer	Queer	White	Spiritual	Bachelors
Rock	They/them	25	Nonbinary	Demisexual	Jewish	Pagan	Bachelors
MJ	They/them	28	Genderqueer	N/A	Jewish	Jewish	Bachelors
Kathy	She/her	33	Trans femme	Lesbian	White	Atheist	Associate in Arts
Day	She/they	34	Nonbinary	Pansexual	Mixed	Christian	Some college
Star	She/they	39	Agender	Pansexual	Hispanic	Spiritual	High school
Lily	She/they	50	Salmacian	Queer	White	Pagan	Masters
Tokyo	She/they	72	Genderfluid	Pansexual	White	Buddhist	High school

Table 1: Participant Demographics

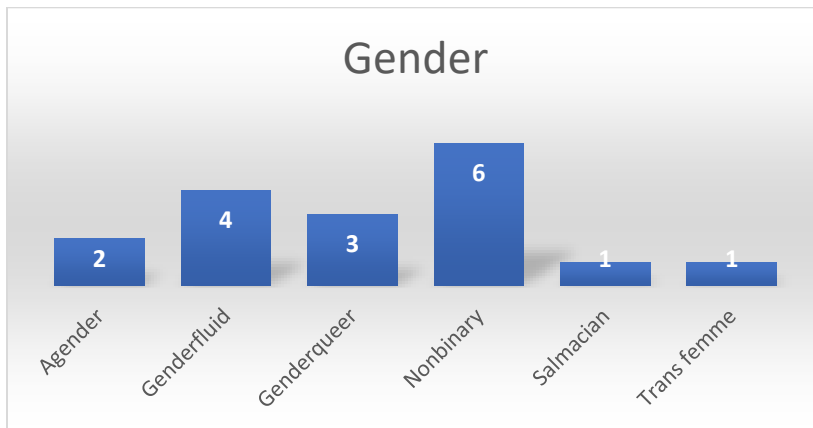


Figure 1: Gender

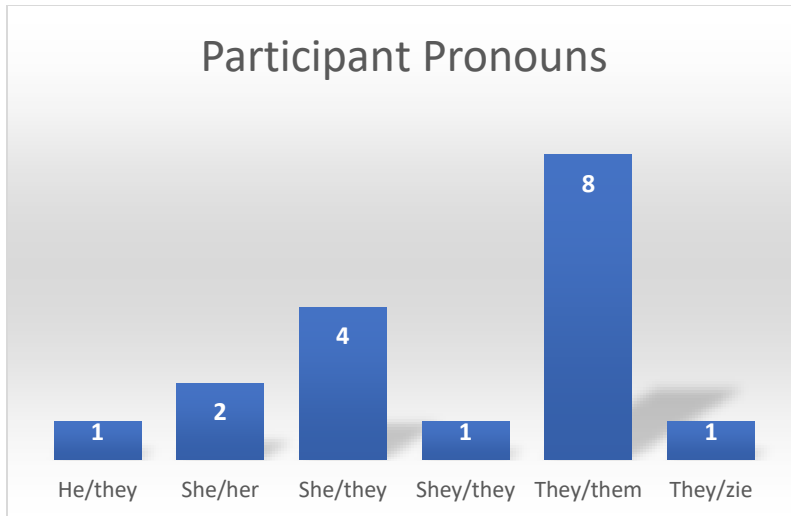


Figure 2: Participant Pronouns

Procedure

Prior to the interview, the interviewer (author) went over the consent form with the participants; all participants recruited gave their consent to be recorded and interviewed as a part of the study. Participants were given the option to select a pseudonym for confidentiality and analytical purposes. No names used in this article are their legal or chosen names and all information has been de-identified. Semi-structured interviews were utilized in order to ensure the same questions were asked of all participants, yet in the order most logical based in their responses. Additionally, as based in the narrative approach, semi-structured interviews allow for follow-up questions to ensure full understanding of the responses, clarification on the usage of terms, and to probe on topics that organically arose and seemed potentially relevant to the answering the research question. Due to the current societal context, these interviews were conducted via Zoom to respect contemporary social distancing policies (Appendix A).

The author transcribed interviews on a rolling basis (after the completion of an interview, the transcription process began). Analysis was based in Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach to coding. While this research adopted a semi-grounded approach, as coding was sensitized by the reviewed literature, analysis began with initial coding that was based in words,

topics, and concepts derived inductively from the interview data. As such, the coding process began with initial coding, grounded in the data and sensitized by the literature reviewed in this work. Then, each interview was analyzed based on the narrative thematic codes developed from the first round of coding. Accordingly, the second round of coding entailed axial coding, with the initial codes and excerpts being compared across each other to determine themes. Once the data had been organized into these themes, a third round of coding entailed constant comparison across the themes and literature. Through this theoretical coding, themes were compared with theory to construct analytical categories. Final analytical categories were determined and it was determined that a point of saturation had been met, as there were no additional overlaps in quotes and themes across categories.

Results

The analytical process uncovered six overarching themes, each with multiple subcategories. The first goal of this research was to determine possibilities for establishing common ground for operational definitions of common gender terms. Participants' explanations revealed the ways in which (1) participants' shared views on what non-binary means to them, and (2) how they differentiate between non-binary and terms commonly associated and confused with non-binary, such as "androgynous" and "gender non-conforming." After establishing these basic definitions based on participants' own phrasings, results are then divided into five other themes based on their narrative descriptions related to how they negotiate living in a binary world: (1) the coming out process, (2) mental health, (3) support systems, (4) identity, and (5) the binary world.

Gender Terms

Before establishing basic definitions, it is important to note that, as established by prior literature, the term "gender" is socially constructed, yet holds great weight in our society. As

such, the lived experience and understanding of what one's own gender identity is can be nuanced and personal. As such, one term can mean different things to different people. However, in the case of this study, participants' explanations all had unifying points. When asked to provide definitions for gender terms, many participants clarified that their answers were personal, specific, and may not apply to everyone. Some terms can be used as gender identities, as well as descriptions of gender expression and aesthetic, but it depended on the person. The differences between androgyny, gender non-conforming, and non-binary were asked about in order to clarify these seemingly similar terms. The main gender terms that participants discussed in interviews were non-binary, genderfluid, agender, gender non-conforming, and androgynous.

Non-Binary

Five participants described non-binary as an “umbrella term” — a category that houses other, more specific terms within itself. Nine participants, about half of the sample, defined non-binary by what it is not. MJ, a 28-year-old trans femme non-binary person, remarked they know that “to say nonbinary is to define something by what it is not. And therefore create a space for 10 trillion different subcategories of nonbinary to fill the beautiful vacuum left by all that it can imply.” In the words of Hari, a non-binary 23-year-old, “non-binary for me is a complete breakaway from gender as a social construct ... [it] means that, like, I'm not binding to anyone else's perception and I'm completely free to just be who I am.” Overlapping with the connotation of an umbrella, Hari and MJ's words encapsulate the shared view that the term non-binary can be appealing, in part, because of its lack of precision and the according opening to define one's self, for one's self, outside of traditionally restrictive labels.

Based on the points of intersection across participants' definitions, findings suggest that an operational definition of non-binary can be understood as: non-binary is an umbrella term that

refers to genders that are not strictly male or strictly female. Within this umbrella are many other genders, including but not limited to genderqueer, genderfluid, and agender. Genderqueer, which three participants used to describe their gender, is seen to mean essentially the same thing as non-binary.

Genderfluid.

Participants placed genderfluid as within the non-binary umbrella. One could identify as both genderfluid and non-binary, using both labels or preferring one over the other. Seven participants gave their definitions of genderfluid and all essentially said the same thing: someone who is genderfluid experiences a gender that is not fixed; their gender fluctuates between multiple genders. However, the genders they fluctuate between, and how often they fluctuate, depends entirely on the person.

While seven participants discussed genderfluidity, only four specifically identified as genderfluid. MBunche described her gender as a sliding scale, while Astrophel, a 22-year-old genderfluid college student, described their gender as a DVD idle screen: “you remember those DVD screens from the old days? It would like hit the screen and turn a different color, float around and hit the screen. Kinda like that.” Astrophel also noticed that their personality changes in conjunction with their gender, describing feeling like a flamboyant gay man sometimes and an effeminate woman at others. Although these participants did not describe a particular reason for when such shifts occur, these descriptions help to exemplify how non-binary allows for individuals a freedom to follow their felt sense of self, rather than trying to contain these fluctuations to meet external, binary-specific expectations.

Rock says that genderfluid more describes their relationship to gender than their gender itself:

For me while I can't necessarily put exact words to my genders, genderfluid for me is like I'll wake up one day and my gender will feel like x, and then the next day my gender will feel like y. But that doesn't necessarily at any point I would describe either of those genders as genderfluid.

There are many terms within genderfluid as well, including alexigender and genderflux. For those who are genderfluid but unable to describe the genders they fluctuate between, like Rock, the term alexigender may be useful. Alexigender is a term that Rock does apply to themselves, but they are happy with the term genderfluid as well. For those who fluctuate between a specific gender and agender, genderflux is used. Agender simply means genderless. In contrast to genderfluidity, in which people fluctuate between many genders, agender is a total rejection of gender. People who are agender do not have a sense of any established genders, within or outside of the gender binary. Two participants identified as agender and their explanations of what it means to be "agender" aligned with a lack of connection to any set of genders or gender labels.

In the following sections, I review the terms gender non-conforming and androgyny in greater detail, as they additionally help to clarify the difference between the connotations of those terms and non-binary.

Gender Non-Conforming

Gender non-conforming is a term with multiple functions: it can be a descriptor, an action, or a gender identity. In their own words, six participants gave definitions of gender non-conforming, five of whom mention that gender non-conforming is generally thought of as more of an aesthetic choice but could be used as a gender. As Kathy puts it, "you may identify with the gender but not conform to the societal expectations thereof." Once again, it all depends on the

person. Based on participants' definitions, gender non-conforming refers to breaking social norms tied to a specific gender, whether that person is cisgender or transgender.

PIF described gender non-conforming in terms of the stereotype that boys wear blue and girls wear pink:

They can use [gender non-conforming] as their own terminology, it is a valid gender outside of gender. Or it can also be used as a terminology of “you think that pink is strictly for girls, so I’m going to identify as a mostly male individual who wears pink all the time.”

Essentially, gender non-conforming describes someone who is defying gender norms. PIF's description also exemplifies how gender non-conforming is an action — a conscious choice one makes to defy gender norms.

Androgyny

Seven participants gave their definitions for androgyny. Like gender non-conforming, androgyny most often refers to an aesthetic, rather than gender. However, it can also be used as gender identity. West and Zimmerman's (1987) story of the woman disturbed by a salesperson's androgynous presentation is a perfect example. The salesperson in the story could have identified as androgynous, we never find out their gender.

Jay describes an androgynous person as “somebody who would either identify or present in a way that is essentially a mix of what you might consider stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine presentations.” Participants generally agreed that androgyny involves appearing in the middle of male and female and not being perceived as either.

The Coming Out Process

While media narratives would suggest a singular point in time when individuals “come out,” participants’ narratives suggest that the process of coming out as non-binary is less based in one point in time, but rather a series of “coming out” moments. As such, the coming out process was different for every participant. Participants recounted narratives concerning their experiences pre-realization in retrospect, their realization process, and coming out to different groups in their lives. As such, three themes emerged in relation to the entire process: pre-realization, realization, and coming out moments.

Pre-realization

Multiple participants reported not feeling a connection to their assigned gender throughout childhood; they felt wrong when being addressed as that gender and struggled to conform to the expectations pushed upon them. Early experiences regarding not fitting in with gender still stuck with many participants. PIF recounted going to see a magician with their grandmother and siblings as a child:

There were these two entertainers, and their joke was like,

“Oh, blah blah blah how are your kids?”

“Oh, they’re doing great.”

“You have three of them, right?”

“Yeah, one’s a boy, one’s a girl.”

“What’s the other one?”

“I don’t know.”

And everyone like laughed and I was like, “I have a brother and a sister; one’s a boy, one’s a girl” and that kind of just always stuck with me in the back of my head.

Even before realizing that their assigned gender was not correct, the idea of not having to be a boy or a girl resonated with PIF. Similarly, other participants mention feeling like something was “off” in childhood, they did not like being addressed with gendered terms, and experimenting with gender from a young age.

Since participants did not have terms, they now look back at their childhoods and see “signs” of them being non-binary. Tokyo, age 72, spoke repeatedly about suppressing her feelings. This narrative is important to cover because it addresses the different experiences non-binary individuals face based on age. She is genderfluid and uses she/her/hers as well as they/them/theirs pronouns now, something that they explained would have been unthinkable when they were growing up in England. They talk about how, in retrospect, their genderfluidity should have been obvious much earlier, but she always repressed it:

I could repress it for six or seven months at a time and it would go away. But, of course, it never really goes away, but it seemed like it’d gone away. So, for six months I might not have experienced it because I was sitting on it, you know? And I could live as a male no problem.

Tokyo said it should have been obvious to her when she was 11 years old, and the model April Ashley was outed as transgender. “I had the Sunday newspapers and I kept them under the bed and reread that article and reread that article and reread that article. So at 11 I was already thinking about transitioning. How did I miss that sign? ’Cuz I didn’t want to face it.” Here, Tokyo’s use of “sign” is a helpful descriptor for how participants constructed their narratives. In

reviewing their past experiences, they discovered what they now understand as “signs” or markers that pointed to their essence as being non-binary, even if they were unable to accept or label it as such at that point in their lives. Reflection on their pasts from this lens helped them to make sense of themselves as “always” this way, even if they did not have the resources or capabilities to realize their sense of self earlier in their lives.

Realization

Secondly, participants described a turning point in which they could recognize the signs, even if they were still not yet able or wanting to externally act on them. There were two main types of realization in the sample: “a switch flip,” as Kathy said, and a “seed being planted,” as Astrophel described. For many participants, it was both. It often began with a feeling or an idea that grew, and as soon as they found the right term or heard their proper pronouns, their realization became solid. For Hari, there was a process of experimenting with their gender expression, which led to a turning point of realizing they are non-binary. Nine participants reported doing research on gender and gender terms before coming to the realization that they are non-binary, learning and trying on different labels outside the binary (see also Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010 on identity play and trying on future selves). Through their own research, participants found terms that best fit them and helped them understand their gender. This supports Bates and Bell’s findings that LGBTQ+ youth use social media to experiment with labels and find labels that fit them best, and ties directly in with their narrative theme of “external identity alignment” (2020).

Astrophel described the idea of genderfluidity as a seed that was planted in high school, around age 18, when a friend came out as genderfluid. However, it was not until years after that that they began to internalize the idea of genderfluidity. They came out a year ago, when they

were 21. PIF's story is almost completely different. Although they discovered the term genderless at the same point in life as Astrophel, they immediately identified with it and came out as agender the same year. This reflects how varied non-binary people's experiences are. Although non-binary people share an identity, they are still each individual people with unique personalities and perspectives.

Coming Out Moments

As mentioned earlier, coming out is less of a concrete moment and more of a series of moments and a lifelong process of further self-discovery and self-disclosure. As such, less of the participants' stories would fall under the established understanding of coming out. In the age of social media, there is less of a need to have a concrete coming out. After all, why put yourself through the anxiety of repeatedly sitting down with all your loved ones and explaining your gender to them? Additionally, while some narratives could be categorized as coming out, as a part of a series of coming out moments, they more richly express issues of rejection in support systems and thus will be discussed in a later section (Support Systems).

The primary finding in this process is that non-binary people are constantly coming out by correcting pronouns, wearing items such as buttons that identify them as non-binary, and introducing themselves to new people. Since there is rarely a single, solid coming out moment, there are few solid coming out narratives. For example, two participants recount simply changing their names on social media and adding their pronouns to their social media biographies. They texted close friends and talked to family members, but for the most part just put it out into the world. At the same time, it is important to note that it is possible that a coming out moment can, in fact, overlap with the realization moment; the process of externalizing one's identity and

registering the reaction of others can lead to a “crystallization” of being non-binary, as Kathy put it. Kathy says her realization and initial coming out were one in the same:

I had told [my future wife] how I wanted to wear a skirt and things like that. So finally one day she was like alright, well let's do this and got out a skirt and a shirt and had me try them on. And I looked at myself in the mirror and I just broke down, started crying, and it felt right. And then I started crying because oh my god — my life is going to be so much harder now. So that was really my coming out experience.

Kathy calls this experience her crystallization.

I went from not understanding who I was at all to suddenly having a realization, so that was a switch flip completely. I had to slow things down for my wife, but to me I'm like a switch flip. I would have gone and gotten clothing and lived my life as a girl from that day forward.

Kathy's experience also emphasizes how much other people affect the coming out and transition of non-binary people. Kathy slowed down her transition to honor her wife's wishes, sacrificing taking steps to feel more comfortable in her body in order to placate the woman she loves.

Having the proper terms can help in the coming out process, both for internal understanding and external explanations.

A critical point in both defining themselves and shifting beyond the binary was learning of different terms. In examining whether participants felt they had always been non-binary — and simply did not know of labels for it — or if they felt their gender changed over time, the majority of participants (10) explained that they had always been this way, but just did not have

the terms. In delving further into how participants came to learn and adopt these terms, they discussed the topics of socialization, why having terms is important, and representation.

One participant, 23-year-old Jay, mentioned the role of socialization in their journey, describing living as the gender they were socialized to be as “being a puzzle piece that almost fits but doesn’t entirely”:

Male was close enough to suffice while I didn’t have that vocabulary for being nonbinary, but the reality is I’ve always existed partially if not completely outside of that concept, outside of that role that kind of I was expected to have. And that I was socialized to have.

This brings into question the accuracy of socialization theory, as well as Kohlberg’s (1966) theory on gender development. If gender is something we are socialized to be, with learned behaviors, based on biological sex, why and how do non-binary people exist? And if gender is stable after age seven, why do so many people realize they are not the gender they are assigned at birth in adolescence and early young adulthood? A majority of participants in this study began to realize their non-binary gender in their late teens and early 20s, although many also said there were signs far earlier than that. This supports Tatum and coworker’s (2020) findings that many non-binary people come out in adolescence and young adulthood, closer to Erikson’s (1968) identity development stage than Kohlberg’s stages of gender development. However, over half of this study’s participants said that they have always been non-binary but did not have the terms for it until later in life.

Building from this, it comes to reason that while the signs were there, as described in the coming out process, it was not until they learned of terms that they could have their

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realization and/or come out to others. Many participants talked about the effect of simply learning the correct words to describe their genders. The most common adjective used was “freeing.” Being able to apply a label to an important part of yourself is extremely beneficial for mental health. Participants said that having a label for how they feel is validating and essential to resolving self-image struggles.

For MBunche, a genderfluid 23-year-old, finding the terms non-binary and genderfluid had a significant positive impact:

It just feels like I’m able to touch a part of my soul and just kind of place my hand on it and say “I see you. And I acknowledge you. And I will speak your name. Even if it’s whispers in the dark. You don’t have to be alone. You don’t have to be unseen and unheard.”

Having terms is beneficial for another reason too: community. It is hard to seek out support and community when you do not know the name of the community you are looking for. Having terms for their gender allowed participants to seek out support groups that were designed to hold space specifically for them, and even inspired a couple participants to create and lead their own non-binary support groups.

One of the many ways people can discover the terms for their identity is through media representation. Non-binary people very rarely stumble upon representation. Rather, as one participant mentioned, they must go looking for it. While there were three mentions of characters participants resonated with, only one of those characters was actually non-binary: Double-Trouble from the cartoon series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. One character was a cisgender anime character from *Ouran High School Host Club* who simply did not care how she

was perceived by others, and another was a binary transgender character from the live action show *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*.

Media matters. Studies have shown that what we see on TV affects our stereotypes and behaviors (Myers & Twenge, 2017; Blaine, 2018). What we see influences how we perceive our worlds and ourselves. What we do not see has the same effect. Rock spoke about how they feel when they consume media, saying “characters in media being so heavily gendered, the lack of representation, things like that tend to pop up a lot and they lead to me feeling very othered.” Feeling ‘othered’ is mentioned by a few participants. This ties into what the bulk of narratives traced back to: mental health.

Mental Health

The participants’ narratives also consistently revolved around topics that impacted the mental health of participants. While themes mentioned beforehand can also pertain to mental health, such as having terms and finding community, other stories tied into mental health more directly. This section covers situations in which participants described the ways in which interactions with others affected their mental health and wellbeing, as well as the emotions that result from being non-binary in a binary world.

Pronouns

Fourteen participants reported experiencing negative feelings due to how others use (or rather, do not use) their proper pronouns. PIF emphasized that someone’s pronouns are not “preferred,” they are “proper.” Using the term “preferred pronouns” implies a choice; it sends the message that it is okay if people do not use those pronouns. Because of the importance of pronouns and how often they are used in everyday life, being misgendered has a significant impact on mental health. Many participants have even developed tools to help prevent

misgendering, so they do not have to go through the emotional labor of correcting people or endure the inner battle of choosing whom to correct, when, and how.

Misgendering – “Death by a Thousand Paper Cuts.”

Misgendering refers to using incorrect pronouns when referring to someone or otherwise addressed in ways inconsistent with their gender (Dolan et al., 2020). Being misgendered is invalidating and can cause feelings of discomfort, pain, and dysphoria. Thus, it is not surprising that eleven participants brought up the impact of being misgendered. The reactions can be looked at as a spectrum, from something that does not really bother participants to something that is extremely harmful.

For 18-year-old Kat, being misgendered is not a big deal:

It doesn't feel correct, you know? It doesn't hurt me; it doesn't make me feel depressed. It does feel a little invalidating. But it just doesn't feel right. Like you can call me that, but it's not accurate, it's not right. It's like calling me by a different name or thinking I'm in a different major. It's just not correct.

This was an uncommon response, however.

Three separate participants described being misgendered as “death by a thousand paper cuts.” Being misgendered by itself is not bad for all participants, rather it is the repetition of being reminded how they are viewed by others that hurts. Each incorrect pronoun is a paper cut. For participants like 34-year-old Day, who works at a supermarket and is addressed by strangers quite often, those paper cuts add up quickly. Olive came across the phrase death by a thousand paper cuts in a work training about microaggressions and used it to describe their experience: “it's like this little thing that cuts me a tiny bit. Like, it doesn't like totally shift my day, but it's

just like ‘ugh, damn it.’ I think that in isolate it doesn’t impact me very much, but in society it is heavily impactful.”

On the other side of the spectrum, E described being misgendered after being correctly gendered for a while as jarring, and Lily reported that being misgendered is like being slammed into her body. It immediately reminds them how they are perceived by others.

Gendered Terms.

Pronouns expand beyond just being used as replacements for names. They reflect internal feelings and are connected to other gendered words and roles. One term that was discussed was the label “mother.” Mochi is a parent and uses the term “mom,” which is something she struggled with. She is attached to the label of “mom,” but was worried that invalidated her non-binary identity.

I kind of told myself you know being motherly or having motherly energy isn’t inherently feminine or isn’t attached to specific pronouns. I’ve met a lot of different people on the gender spectrum whether they identify as male or enby (non-binary) or whatever where they have a very motherly aura or energy. I think it’s more the way you treat people, the way you act, the way you feel to other people rather than like a gendered label. So luckily, I was able to convince myself that being a mom doesn’t mean I’m a woman.

Kat discussed needing to find a different word for girlfriend that was non-gendered and felt comfortable to themselves and their significant other. The same situation happens to non-binary people whose siblings have children, such as Olive. Olive said it was bittersweet when they found out their brother was having a child because instead of celebrating, he was worried about what his child could call Olive that would not invalidate their gender. As Olive said, “so

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much of who we are is relational, we're always called sister, or mother, or daughter, or like these words that show our relation to other people are often so gendered." Even words that society now views as "gender-neutral," like dude and man, are explicitly gendered. Furthermore, many of these "gender-neutral" words are masculine, which reinforces the patriarchal view that men are the norm.

Humans also tend to gender inanimate objects, regardless of the language. In English, we call boats and cars "she." In Spanish, every noun has a gender. As Star pointed out, we even gender planets:

Masculine energy, which we say is like strength as opposed to emotion, there's so many different labels that are given to those terms. A lot of times I hear that "well the sun is masculine; the moon is feminine." So there's moments when I would embody moon energy and very creative, flowing, emotion. And then there's other times when I embody pure sun energy, which we call masculine and that's strength and getting it done.

The gender binary affects every facet of our lives. This is frustrating for those who operate outside it and those struggling to break out of it. Since our pronouns, roles, and terms all hint at gender, it is hard to avoid being misgendered when interacting with people within the binary.

Preventing Misgendering.

Since being misgendered is a common experience for non-binary people (as well as binary transgender people), many participants have tools that help prevent being misgendered in public, at work, and at school. The most common way to do this was putting their pronouns in their email signatures and their Zoom names, as well as in social media biographies. Many mention their pronouns when they introduce themselves, depending on how safe they feel to do

so in a given environment. Some participants have pronoun pins, and one even has a pronoun wheel that she spins to indicate her pronouns that day. PIF even has pronoun cards that they hand out to people explaining what pronouns are, the importance of using someone's proper pronouns, and what their name and pronouns are.

Correcting Misgendering.

Multiple participants reported struggling with choosing when to address being misgendered. Depending on factors such as presentation and environment, the amount participants are misgendered varies. Some non-binary people, such as Lily and Star, continue to use binary pronouns just to avoid being misgendered. A common experience among participants was choosing when to correct or inform people who have misgendered them. Participants reported that their choice often depended on the situation — if it is a person they will likely not see again, if it happened mid-sentence and correction would require interruption, if correcting the person will require further explanation and emotional labor, etc. 19-year-old Sam mentioned that rather than correcting a professor, they would instead include their pronouns in the next email they sent as a reminder. Another participant, MJ, tends to mutter a correction under their breath. They do not like thinking of it as correcting and they feel that dealing with being misgendered prevents them from developing and maintaining relationships: “I’m trying to have a peer relationship, like a loving, equal, normal friend relationship, I hate this idea that I’m correcting my friends. I’m like, what? Correcting is something that you do to your children and your students.”

Being misgendered is harmful, and correcting misgendering requires emotional labor. Sometimes the people you correct do not know what non-binary is or what gender-neutral

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pronouns are. This adds another layer to the choice of when to correct people. E, a 20-year-old non-binary student, explained how exhausting it is:

It's emotionally a lot if I am the only nonbinary person somebody has ever met to have to explain everything over again. And justify myself. Like it's just a lot and sometimes I don't want to do that and it's better to just endure being called 'she' than to like have to go through that emotional labor again.

Six participants discussed the emotional and energetic toll being misgendered and correcting people has. Rock again referenced death by a thousand paper cuts when speaking on the mental impact of correcting people. Many non-binary people experience negative emotions intertwined with self-discovery. Seven participants reported feelings of isolation and being "othered." Along with feeling isolated, two participants reported feeling ashamed of their gender identity, one feeling ashamed of how others would view her, and one feeling they did not deserve to identify as non-binary. Two others mentioned feeling like burdens, especially regarding correcting people who have misgendered or deadnamed them. Hari described the feelings of burdensomeness very well:

I don't want to be a burden. I think that's the other thing. You're reminded every day that you're not the same and I don't want to be a burden. So that's been a challenge for me.

Being non-binary has been a huge instigator to grow because I have to educate people and be like "I use they/them" and I don't want to do that you know; I don't want to make people uncomfortable.

Being misgendered has a significant impact on non-binary people's daily experiences and mental health and can trigger dysphoria.

Dysphoria and Transitioning

Not all non-binary people experience gender dysphoria, and not all non-binary people medically transition. Dysphoria, as defined above by WPATH's standards of care, is "discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)" which naturally impacts mental health (Coleman et al., 2012, p. 5).

Medical transitioning refers to the use of surgeries and gender affirming hormones to alleviate dysphoria. Of the 17 participants interviewed, 10 reported experiencing dysphoria and are either currently medically transitioning, have medically transitioned, or plan on medically transitioning in the future. One participant was on gender-affirming hormones but had to stop due the financial strain. Day said that she misses being on testosterone blockers because they made her feel more comfortable in her body. Rock mentioned that having body hair is a constant trigger for their dysphoria. They began getting hair removal but was informed that laser hair removal will not fully remove hair unless you are also on testosterone blockers. They also explained that laser hair removal is painful and must be done every month. Because insurance rarely covers it, Rock was spending about \$200 every month sitting through painful procedures to alleviate their dysphoria. Due to how expensive hair removal is, they eventually stopped and are now doing hormone affirming therapy.

19-year-old Sam is planning on getting a hysterectomy and talked to me about the process they went through to arrive at that decision. At first, they did not realize that they were experiencing dysphoria when they menstruated, saying "the fact that I was having a mental breakdown every time I got my period, I thought that was just normal." The negative

ramifications of untreated dysphoria can be anywhere from mild to severe, but dysphoria undeniably has an impact on non-binary and transgender people's mental health.

Due to economic barriers, alleviating gender dysphoria can be difficult. According to the WPATH Standards of Care 7, access to gender-affirming hormone therapy and chest surgery (whether for reduction, removal, or augmentation) requires a referral from a mental health professional, and access to genital surgery such as a hysterectomy or orchiectomy (the removal of the testicles) requires letters from *two* mental health professionals (Coleman et al, 2012). Simply gaining access to a therapist can be beyond individuals' economic ability, gaining access to one familiar with non-binary and transgender patients is even more difficult. This is just the first part of the process, and it is expensive. Surgery and hormone therapy are not always covered by insurance, which creates even greater economic hardship for people trying to alleviate gender dysphoria through hormone therapy and gender affirming surgeries.

Reactions and Safety

12 participants commented on fearing for their safety as non-binary individuals. As mentioned in the Literature Review, crimes against transgender people are rapidly rising (Dinno, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017; Human Rights Campaign, 2020). With that in mind, it is not surprising that many non-binary people live in fear of being attacked or killed simply for their gender or gender expression. This fear is so pervasive that one participant even has recurrent nightmares in which they are attacked. Multiple participants report that they know someone who has been harassed, either physically or verbally, due to their gender or sexuality.

Multiple participants have been catcalled, grabbed, groped, and sexually assaulted while dressing more femininely. MJ recounted being followed for five blocks while in New York City. Some participants have had negative experiences in which they are met with open hostility or

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impertinent, personal questions. Often when Tokyo is performing and presenting with a feminine gender expression, they will see people laughing at them. She says that people will often come up to her and ask inappropriate questions about her genitals. Hari also noted that people would speak to them as if they owned them. “Just realizing how presenting a certain way will literally change the way people treat you” was a big awakening for Hari. While no participants report personally being assaulted specifically for being non-binary, Hari recounted a close call:

I was at a pizza place at a counter, and I was like presented like wig and everything and this dude literally with a girlfriend grabbed me and pulled me into him and started talking at me and was like “oh, you looking at the menu?” Just messing with me. And the girl was like “stop messing with her.” And in that moment, I’m like don’t say anything. I don’t want to get beaten up if they hear that I have a different voice.

Rock spoke about how this fear impacts their life:

I need to be careful where I’m walking and who I’m with and if it’s late at night being careful to stay to well-lit areas, watch my back, I’ve probably become a lot more suspicious since coming out as nonbinary and dressing more femme and being more visibly queer in public.

Mochi similarly reports how she experiences more scrutiny from customers when presenting femininely:

When I dress more feminine, I work at a video game store, people are questioning like “oh do you know about this video game?” Like they’re questioning my knowledge about video games or gaming in general. But when I’m more andro[gynous] or masculine, they

kind of tend to take me a little bit more seriously than if I was wearing like a bright pink dress and heels.

Six participants experienced transmisogyny. Transmisogyny is, put at its simplest, the oppression and discrimination against transgender women for being transgender and women (Krell, 2017). Since all participants are non-binary, and thus under the transgender umbrella, there is no way to know if the way participants were treated is because they were seen as cisgender women or if they were seen as transgender women, especially for participants assigned male at birth. One participant reported that she is now being talked over at meetings and feels that other women at her workplace pay more attention to her now, scrutinizing her. A few participants additionally mentioned that they will assess a person or situation before deciding if it is safe enough to mention their pronouns or wear a pin with their pronouns on it. This prevents non-binary people from being their true selves. Fear of being assaulted effects non-binary people's daily lives, from choosing to correct misgendering to using public restrooms.

Bathrooms.

Whether transgender people should be allowed to use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender has been a hot topic in the news and legislature for years now. This issue is vital but does not (yet) address non-binary people whose genders do not correspond with either bathroom. Many participants addressed the discomfort and fear they experience when using public restrooms. Five out of seven participants who discussed public restrooms said they would feel unsafe using a gendered restroom. MJ compared deciding which bathroom to use with performing:

It 100% depends on how I'm presenting. And it depends on the space. ... Performing is a lot of building gut instincts. And so, it's just like seven billion factors going on at once influencing your decision-making, and your body is able to make the decisions faster than your brain is. And deciding which restroom to use is pretty much that exact same thing. It's like "okay, what am I wearing today, what city am I in, what is the locale, what time of day is it, what restroom options are there?"

Deciding which restroom to use is exhausting and often anxiety-inducing. Multiple participants said that in order to avoid this, they use family or handicap-accessible restrooms when they are available. However, participants who use family and handicapped restrooms report feeling guilty and worrying that they may unintentionally prevent someone who "really" needs that restroom from having access, such as someone in a wheelchair.

Intersectionality, Privilege, and Gender Roles

An unexpected theme was privilege. Out of the seven participants who addressed safety concerns, six brought up their privilege in tandem, completely unprompted. It was as if the participants were using their privilege to discount or downplay their fears. The participants would confirm that they did have anxieties concerning their physical wellbeing but would then say things along the lines of "but I'm very privileged." They acknowledged that other transgender and non-binary people, specifically those of color, were more likely to be assaulted. Participants mentioned white privilege, socioeconomic privilege, and male privilege.

This brings up an interesting intersection between identities. Participants with white privilege used this to downplay the oppression they face for their marginalized identity as non-binary. Participants like Lily listed all the ways they were privileged, weighing the privilege of being white, assigned male at birth, and middle class against the discrimination faced for being

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non-binary. This also shows the intersectionality of identities. Participants understood their interactions with others differently, based on how they perceived the positive or negative side of the gender roles they were assigned based on how they were presenting. Based on their appearance and presentation, certain participants have claimed positive experiences, noticing people complimenting them more or being more willing to start conversations with them. Two participants noticed being complimented more when they are presenting as feminine than when presenting as masculine or androgynous.

Seven participants reported being treated differently based on their gender presentation. Participants reported that when dressed more masculinely, they were seen as fitting into masculine gender roles. This applied to participants regardless of gender assigned at birth and regardless of if they “passed” as cisgender men or not. Participants were asked to lift and carry things, take the trash out, etc. Participants also noticed a difference in tone and content when people spoke to them. MBunche explained the difference very well:

I feel like I’m looked at as a more capable human being. I can help pull out the chairs, I can help hold the doors, I can, you know, things typically more masculine energies would do. And when I’m complimented it’s on more meaningful things. “Thank you so much for being here, I appreciate your effort,” you know, things like that. Things that are a little more substantial.

Similarly, participants noticed that when dressed more femininely, regardless of assigned gender at birth, people treated them more like cisgender women. Participants were complimented more, had doors held for them, and were spoken to in higher, softer tones. This led participants like Sam to feel as if they must perform femininity to be valued:

I feel like society just values femininity and like, I do feel maybe again this in my head, but I feel like when I present really feminine, I'm more attractive to other people and like I have more people hit on me and stuff like that than if I'm presenting more masculine. So I definitely I think the way other people perceive my attractiveness is dependent on the way I present my gender, which is really upsetting to me. I don't want to feel like I have to perform femininity for people to find me attractive or for me to be valued.

While compliments were perceived as positive, they also enforced feelings of negativity associated with the need to perform femininity and the negative aspects of being feminine in a patriarchal society.

Support Systems

For the purposes of this study, support systems are defined as a network of people that provide comfort, support, and care to an individual. Support systems are important to everyone, regardless of gender. As mentioned in the Literature Review, non-binary people report feeling less supported by friends and family than cisgender people (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019).

Therapists, friends, and families are meant to be our sources of strength and support, not what tears us down. Yet so many non-binary people have experienced those closest to them rejecting or disrespecting their gender, pronouns, and chosen names. Even in the LGBTQ community, non-binary people are often rejected. This theme addresses the acceptance (or lack thereof) in each facet of participants' support systems, and is broken into family, friends, work, the queer community, and the non-binary community.

One of the most striking narratives within this theme was from Lily, a 50-year-old Salmacian person. According to Lily, the term Salmacian derives from the Greek mythology of

Salmacis, an intersex Greek naiad¹. Lily went to see a transgender therapist and upon revealing that they are non-binary, the therapist informed Lily that non-binary does not exist and referred them to be evaluated for bipolar 2 disorder. “That was I’d say the hardest part of claiming my non-binary identity; was that week. Being so completely and utterly shut down in a space where I should not have been. I came very, very close to self-harm and committing myself to a hospital,” Lily said after recalling the experience. Olive also reported struggling to find a therapist that understands and meets their needs: “people who like market themselves as queer friendly but they’re cisgender white women who are lesbians. Who are great people, but constantly misgendered me and just didn’t understand what it was like to be nonbinary or trans.” As covered in the mental health section, being non-binary is both a huge part of participants’ identity and a source of adverse experiences that negatively impact mental health. As such, a therapist that is versed in non-binary and transgender experiences is integral to cultivating mental wellbeing.

Work

Overall, participants reported that their places of work are very accepting of their non-binary identity. Multiple participants mentioned coworkers and bosses making sure to use their correct names and pronouns, and two participants have access to gender-neutral bathrooms at work. Three participants are even active in their workplace as diversity leaders, educating coworkers on LGBTQ topics. Only one participant reported not feeling fully welcome to be themselves at work, where they are out as a trans feminine woman rather than a non-binary person because they worry that they would not be accepted as non-binary.

¹ A naiad is a river nymph in Greek mythology

Family, Partners, and Friends

Of the 11 participants who spoke about their families, three reported their families were accepting or at least some people in their families were accepting. Nine participants reported their families were not accepting of their non-binary identity, four of which did not tell their family about their non-binary identity. Those who were not out to their families did not come out because their parents had been unaccepting of past identities. Lily's parents did not accept any type of "deviancy," and they disclosed that "it took them passing away for me to feel free enough to start questioning who I was." Jay worded their reasoning for not telling their parents in a very descriptive manner:

My family does not really respect any of my identity. ... In my view, they've lost the privilege to get to know that part of me. I still use he/him pronouns, which I have complicated feelings about, you know, hiding behind those with them, but I don't feel like the emotional labor of having to explain that to them. I've been through enough with that and I think they've just lost that privilege.

This echoes previous sections on the emotional labor attached to being non-binary in a binary world.

Alternatively, participants predominately spoke of positive support from their partners and friends. For instance, two participants discovered the term non-binary through partners; as based in the prior section on terms, one can see the potential significance of this to gaining a sense of security in oneself through discovering this label. Only two participants had partners who were unsupportive, and one of those was an ex-partner. Astrophel had the unfortunate experience of having a partner state that they believed being genderfluid was attention-seeking

and a sign of mental illness. This of course delayed their coming out and had an impact on the relationship.

Two participants reported that their partners were immediately accepting, while another reported that their partner was unsure at first but now supports them. Altogether, participants who were in relationships reported feeling supported by their partners. Similarly, participants felt accepted and supported by their friends.

However, even when hanging out with friends, the gender binary can get in the way. Olive spoke about an experience they had last summer:

I was in a park distanced with a bunch of people, and somehow all of the men ended up playing football and all of the women plus me ended up on the ground, eating. And I was like, what is going on? Are we in middle school? Like why is this happening right now? And I was like, I don't feel comfortable in either of these spaces. I felt like because I was sitting with the women, I needed to act like them. It was also just kind of like, oh there's an assumption that I'll be over here, but I also didn't want to play football. So I was like, I don't know what to do.

Other participants recounted similar stories. Participants also mentioned feeling like they could not break into either binary group, no matter how they tried to conform, both before and after realizing their non-binary gender. The gender binary is pervasive and affects nearly all aspects of our life. People within the binary may not realize it, but people outside it certainly do.

The Queer and Broader Community

Interestingly, while many of participants' friends were a part of the LGBTQ+ community, the participants themselves had mixed experiences in the queer community. Often,

non-binary people will seek out queer and transgender spaces to find community. While some participants said they found solace and information in the queer community, it has also been where they have encountered the most hostility and ostracization. As Hari put it, “it’s a queer space where someone asked me what’s between my legs. ... I guess they’re like empowered to do so in those spaces. But it’s also in those spaces that people, I’ve found even more of a group because of my identity.”

Participants reported that support groups for queer or transgender people do not feel safe or supportive for non-binary people. Four participants have attended transgender support groups and felt that the groups were very binary and excluded non-binary transgender people. One participant was called “one of those” when looking for non-binary clothes at a conference for transgender people. Day reported feeling very othered by transgender support groups:

I mean, lot of people even within the trans community are kind of not used to it, especially using the singular them and they. Like there’s still a lot of work to do. Like if you go to even some of the trans forums and stuff they’ll have male, female, and other. And like if you’re lucky they will have a write-in where you type in or they have they/them, but it’s mostly like okay, other. It’s like yeah, I’m not “other.” You know? So yeah, there’s a lot more education to do even within the trans community itself.

Another participant did not feel welcome in queer spaces because of their presentation, which they feel is perceived as heterosexual and cisgender, despite being bisexual and non-binary. Multiple participants’ biggest complaint about queer spaces was how binary the system was, both in the LGBTQ community as a whole and the transgender community. This binary system resulted in participants avoiding queer spaces and seeking out specifically non-binary spaces

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Many of the problems participants mentioned centered specifically on spaces for women that were said to also be open to non-binary people.

Rock explained their hesitation at attending support groups that are supposedly inclusive:

A lot of times it is actually like what they're actually saying is "women and women lite."

And I have a lot of friends who have stories. I have not experienced this myself because I've always been sort of cautious going into women and nonbinary spaces, but I have a lot of friends who have stories about like, "I went into a women's and nonbinary space and I got kicked out because I have a beard" or that sort of thing. Despite the fact that they're nonbinary. So, I have been very, very cautious around those spaces because I don't think that they're actually inclusive.

This applied not only to support groups, but also group activities. Mochi is pagan and has had trouble finding pagan groups that do not reinforce the gender binary. She has gone to many pagan groups and has found that many of them are very cisnormative (view being cisgender as the norm) and use language that reinforces the gender binary. "Even in the Wicca community, there's not a lot of wiggle room for people who identify as nonbinary or just don't really identify with the cis label," Mochi said. She eventually joined a coven which was primarily cisgender women, and even though she was accepted she said that she felt more like a token than an actual member.

The struggle to find acceptance even within the broader transgender and LGBTQ communities makes having non-binary support groups and community spaces imperative. Five participants remarked on attending non-binary support groups or finding other spaces with non-binary people. One participant, PIF, leads a Beyond Binary Support Group each week, which is

where four participants were recruited. PIF also attends furry conventions and Rock LARPs (live-action roleplaying), both are activities that tend to attract non-binary people. Finding community is key, especially for non-binary people who may not have other support systems. Community, and support systems in general, help us to not feel alone and strengthen our sense of identity. This is discussed in the next section.

Identity

For most participants, being non-binary was a main aspect of their identity, whether as a support beam or the framework. Participants said that being non-binary affects their identity and lived experiences. How they view the world, how they are perceived by the world, and how they view themselves. Discovering their non-binary identity also gave participants the freedom to experiment with their gender expression. Nine participants said that being non-binary is a significant part of their identity. When asked how important being non-binary is to who they are, for instance, Jay replied in a way that summarized much of the participants' sentiment: "thinking in terms of like construction, it's not so much a support beam but it's something that kind of like unifies everything together for me."

Gender Expression

Gender expression refers to the external choices people make to perform and express their gender, such as clothing, makeup, and hair styles (Anderson, 2020). There are not the same social rules for how non-binary people should perform their gender the way that there are for binary men and women, so clothes become less of a performance of gender and more self-expression. Ten participants discussed how their clothing reflects their identity and how being non-binary has made them feel freer to experiment with their presentation. Several participants reflected on initially feeling like they had to prove they are non-binary through their gender expression and would do their best to present as androgynous, even if that was not how they

really wanted to dress. Some participants view certain items or types of clothing as feminine or masculine, but most asserted that clothes do not have gender. Mochi loves things that are typically viewed as feminine and initially struggled with being non-binary while still loving feminine things. They eventually concluded that they can be non-binary and still dress in a way they and others see as feminine: “like that was one of my main concerns because I really like dressing in a certain way; I like the color pink, I like glitter. But I kinda was like, well those things don’t have to be gendered.” As participants became more comfortable with their gender, they became more comfortable with breaking out of the androgynous aesthetic and dressing how they really wanted to. This in itself is indicative of change, both internally and societally, demonstrating that non-binary people can dress however they wish and that clothing has no gender.

Making Change

Several participants mentioned feeling a responsibility to pave the way for future non-binary people in similar ways as the people who paved the way for them. They see their place in the world, at least in part, to make things better for future non-binary people through education and visibility. Several participants are active in social justice in some form; one participant does political canvassing, multiple are involved in diversity training at their jobs, and many identify as activists. Six participants have or are working towards careers which have been shaped by their non-binary identity. Hari and Olive are both working towards becoming mental health counselors and want to work with non-binary youth.

Astrophel wants to become a television show creator and give non-binary and queer people more representation in media:

Going back to my life mission type thing, getting more stories out there with queer folk that are not just the coming out stories, not just the tragic lesbian romance, not just the side character that's there for comedic relief and then they like die halfway through. Things like that. I want there to just be stories with queer people and racially diverse people and neurodiverse people as well.

Their goals reflect other participants' focus on visibility, in which they explained that existence is resistance. For example, eight participants believed that they make a difference by being visible and educating the people around them. Participants such as Kathy are willing to put themselves in uncomfortable, even dangerous, situations by being openly non-binary and transgender so they can send the message to other non-binary people that they are not alone. As Kat said, "existence is resistance."

PIF described themselves as "the Kool-Aid man, breaking down the walls" because they are often the first non-binary person their peers have met, and they will educate anyone who wants to learn. As mentioned before, they run a support group for non-binary people. PIF also works for a very large corporation and they are always pushing to make corporate rules on dress-code more inclusive of non-binary and transgender people. Lily has a Tik-Tok where they share their stories and support younger non-binary people. 16 participants believed they are making a difference in some way, whether that is by being visible, bringing people together, or advocating for change.

Out of the Norms

Many participants responded to the question "do you see yourself as breaking the norms by being non-binary" with a comment on normal being subjective. Some said that they do see themselves as breaking the norm, while others said that they are only breaking this society's

norms and this time period's norms. This is true from the perspective of Judith Lorber and queer theorists, and it should be acknowledged that the gender binary is a colonized Western concept (Lorber, 1994). Whether being non-binary is out of the norm or not, it is something that is often looked upon negatively, at least for many participants in this study and for non-binary people in the United States.

Sexuality and Kink.

No participants identified as heterosexual, and only one participant identified as homosexual (Figure 3). While being homosexual is no longer considered as abnormal as it once was, people who are attracted to multiple genders face a lot of backlash both in the queer community and society at large. Some participants mentioned feeling unwelcome in the queer community not only because of their non-binary status, but also because of their asexuality, bisexuality, or pansexuality. As such, any sexuality that is not heterosexual or homosexual is viewed as out of the norm for the purposes of this thesis. With that in mind, almost every participant was breaking the norms in at least one other way beyond being non-binary.

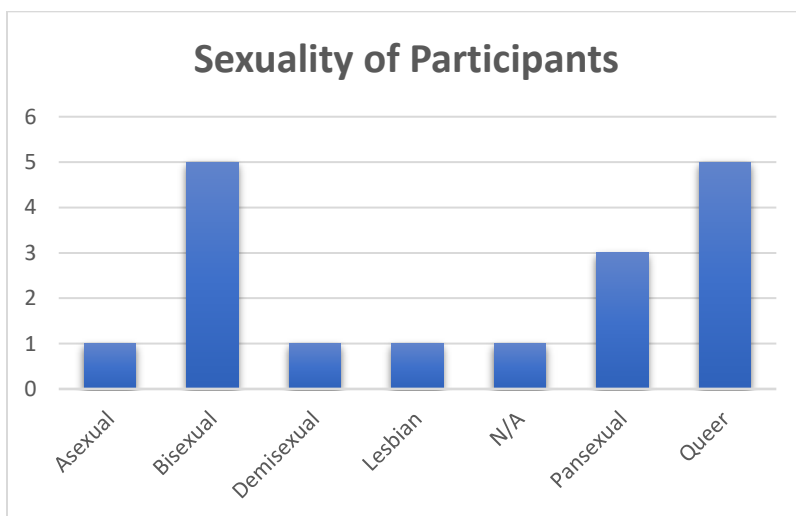


Figure 3: Sexuality of Participants

A few participants were very open about being in the kink community. Our society often does not talk about sexual activities, so being willing to talk about sexual preferences is not common. Being willing to talk about sexual preferences that are often looked upon as “abnormal” is even less common. Both the participation in and the willingness to talk about kink break the norms of sexual silence. Six participants were also polyamorous and in, or willing to be in, romantic relationships with more than one person at a time. In a Western, monogamous culture, polyamory is out of the norm, although that is slowly beginning to change. Pain (2020) calls queer polyamory “a site of resistance to heteronormativity.” Participants who are non-binary, queer, and polyamorous break out of three Western constructs at once: the gender binary, heteronormativity, and monogamy as the norm and only acceptable romantic option.

Neurodivergence.

Neurodivergence refers to neurotypes (ways of brain functioning) that are seen as abnormal, such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Komarow & Hector, 2020). Five participants said they have autism and/or ADHD. As no question was asked about having either disorder, there may have been other participants who chose not to disclose this. As Lily explains it, “Binary ways of thinking do not fit well in the autistic brain because the autistic person experiences a multitude of things at once. So, a multitude of gender is not a far step.” Based on a review of research on the relationship between autism and ADHD with non-binary genders, there is some evidence that being neurodivergent and non-binary tend to go hand-in-hand, but more quantitative research needs to be done to confidently establish a relationship (Thrower et al., 2019). There are many issues with the prior research and Thrower and colleagues (2019) conclude that there is a possibility that rates of autism and ADHD are

higher among transgender and non-binary people than the overall population, but since the research had some problems, no conviction could be reached.

Religion.

Two participants identified as Christian. Ten participants had spiritual or religious beliefs that are seen as outside the norm in a Christian-dominant society such as the United States (Figure 4). Among the participants, one was a Satanist and five were pagan. Two participants were recruited from a local pagan organization, one whom identified as spiritual and another as experimenting. The pagan and spiritual participants often mentioned working with deities who are associated with the in-between, such as Hekate, the Greek goddess of the crossroads and liminal spaces, and Pan, the Greek god who lived on the outskirts of society. Much like being non-binary may be viewed as a liminal space, a place in-between or out of the binary, these deities are viewed as living both beyond and between social norms.

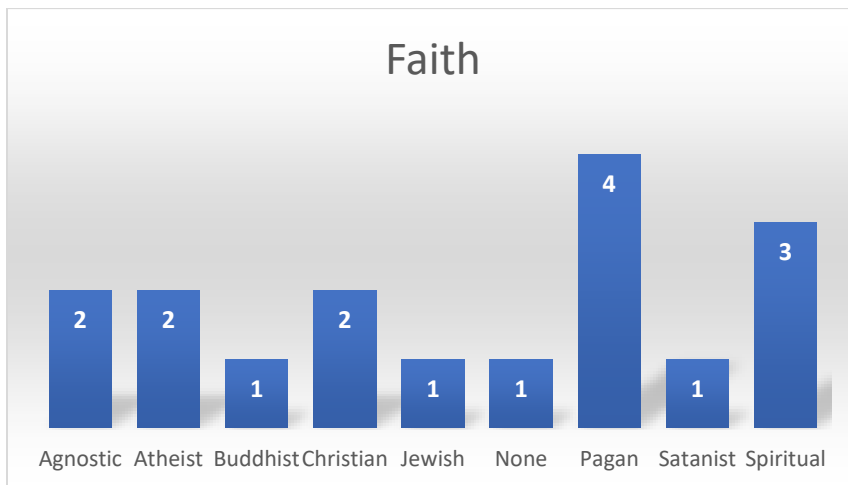


Figure 4: Participants' Faith

Living in a Binary World

One theme that many participants' narratives have in common is navigating a binary world. Coming out, addressing pronoun slip-ups, and choosing public restrooms would not be a

problem if our society were not structured around a gender binary. When PIF discussed why being non-binary is so important to their identity, they mentioned that part of it is how binary society is. Since being non-binary is not currently within societal norms, non-binary people are seen as sticking out and must deal with discrimination. Living in a binary world also means that non-binary people have to navigate their place in gendered groups and figure out alternatives for gendered terms such as girlfriend/boyfriend, aunt/uncle, and the countless other words that have gender attached to them. This is even more difficult in languages that have gendered nouns.

Discussion

Research within Sociology and Psychology has started taking steps towards including gender diverse people. Transgender research, while still lacking, has been established. However, further research on non-binary gender identities is still called for. Within the last two years, journals have published articles examining gender diversity, yet this is only the start; it is not enough to establish this new line of research. Lumping binary transgender and non-binary transgender identities and experiences together has proven detrimental to furthering understandings of lived experiences and inequities (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019). To help advance this new direction of research, the current study examined the differences between gender diverse labels and the importance of gender identity to individuals, especially in relation to negotiating a binary world. While prior research has offered some insight into how being non-binary affects people in terms of mental health and life satisfaction, this study helped expand upon this through examining the experience of non-binary individuals in the context of Western culture and how they move in a deeply gendered world, as well as examining the ways in which non-binary individuals see themselves as part of society moving away from a system of binaries. Findings suggest that many participants saw themselves as making a difference by being visible and inspiring other people to discover their true selves and break away from the binary. This study adds to a body of

general knowledge that, at the time of this thesis, is severely malnourished and may be able to stimulate further research into binaries, gender identities, and the relationship between gender diversity and evolving societal beliefs. For instance, these interviews have shown that non-binary people experience the world differently than cisgender and binary transgender people. Being non-binary in a binary world impacted participants' daily lives, mental health, and relationships. This study found that many participants' careers and goals were impacted by their non-binary identity. Future research could investigate similarities between non-binary people's career choices and personalities to see if there is a link between being non-binary and certain careers or personality traits. This study looked at how being non-binary impacted participants' experiences in broad terms; future studies could focus in-depth on one realm of daily life to better understand how being non-binary impacts specific social systems such as school, work, and dating.

As shown by the socialization narratives, this study raises more questions about the source of gender and how much is social versus innate. More than half of participants reported always being non-binary, but not having the language until adolescence or young adulthood and often struggling to perform their assigned gender throughout childhood. Non-binary and transgender people could be imperative for reexamining previous theories on gender and the development of new theories. Including non-binary and transgender people in broader studies on gender differences could also provide a wealth of new information on both cisgender and transgender people and how they interact with gender.

The study also observed non-binary participants experiencing adverse effects on their mental health, which reflects James and colleagues' (2016) findings that non-binary people have a higher risk of mental illness than cisgender people. This highlights the need for accessible and understanding care for non-binary individuals, including licensing and hiring more non-binary

therapists as well as training all therapists to treat non-binary clients. Multiple participants discussed not feeling understood by their therapists when it came to gender, and this negatively impacted both their client-patient relationship and the participants' overall mental health. As mentioned in the case of Tokyo, these adverse effects may vary by age. Future studies could examine the difference between being non-binary prior to a specific time period, for example, prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, and after. Studies can also look into mental health and support system differences for people who use different pronouns — for example, the experiences of someone who uses neopronouns such as xie/xir could be vastly different than someone who uses pronouns that match the gender they were assigned at birth.

The study also found that participants used their privilege to offset their fears of being attacked for being non-binary. This raises an interesting new direction for research: can privilege be used as a way to discredit and downplay feelings connected to being part of a marginalized group? The intersection between privileged and oppressed identities could be an important point of research in social psychology, sociology, and for mental health purposes; this highlights the importance of examining the felt meanings of privilege, how it plays out in everyday life, and the need for intersectional research to determine how privilege can be used as a defense and coping mechanism interpersonally. While the concept of privilege is currently being examined to a greater extent, the ways in which individuals understand and see the effects in their own lives can make a significant impact on individual health and broader social change. In tandem with that, studying the non-binary experience from different lenses and with diverse participants could give insight into how those intersections impact non-binary individuals' experiences and views on gender.

Due to the demographics of participants, it should be acknowledged that the findings are all from a Western perspective. Future studies could broaden the perspective by offering translators, or do a similar study using participants from non-Western cultures. This could provide an interesting study for comparing gender expectations between collectivist and individualist societies and for furthering research on how colonialism created and enforces the gender binary (Shiwy, 2007).

This research highlights the importance of labels and language, the effect of support systems, and how studying non-binary experiences suggests that breaking gender norms may also enable larger change, as it exposes broader norms and the ways in which they could be questioned and broken to support a positive, more inclusive society. The current study points to many difficulties non-binary people face when navigating a binary world, including misgendering and lacking support systems. The current study also provides operational definitions that can be used by future studies investigating non-binary identities. Future research can further break down non-binary identities and the ways in which society is moving away from binary systems and the effects of colonialism and patriarchy.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Appendix A: Interview Questions

- In order to protect your confidentiality, is there a pseudonym that I can address you as?
- What are your pronouns?
- How old are you?
- How do you describe your gender identity?
- How do you describe your sexual orientation?
- How do you describe your ethnicity/race?
- How do you describe your religion/religious views?
- How do you describe your socioeconomic status?
- What is your education level?
- How do you define non-binary?
 - Do you see any differences between non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender-fluid, androgyny, etc.? If so, could you describe the differences to me?
- What label were you given at birth? For instance, do you know if male or female was marked on your birth certificate?
- Are you out to your friends, family, etc. as non-binary?
 - If not, why?
- Tell me about the first time you can recall thinking you might be non-binary, or when you first started thinking more about your gender identity.
- Can you walk me through your process of discovering the word non-binary, applying it to yourself, and coming out to others as non-binary? For example, how long after discovering the term did you start applying it to yourself?

NON-BINARY PEOPLE IN A GENDERED WORLD

- Describe to me what your experience has been as a non-binary person? Do any moments really stand out to you? Tell me more about them and why they stand out to you.
 - For example, your experiences with being gendered, your interactions regarding your gender, or your internal experiences.
- Do you feel that you have always been non-binary and did not have the label for it, or do you feel that your gender/gender identity has changed as you have grown? Perhaps a mixture? Talk to me more about that.
- Are you doing or considering any surgeries or hormone therapy?
- How important is being non-binary to who you are? Has that changed over time? If so, why?
- How does being non-binary affect your everyday life?
- Are there times where you or other people are more aware of it than others? If so, could you share some concrete examples or memories?
 - For example, are there groups that may be gender-specific that you have encountered and not known what to do?
- Do you sometimes present more masculine or more feminine? If so, could you tell me more about that?
 - If so, do you notice being treated differently when you're presenting more masculine/feminine?
- How does your gender affect the way you see your place in the world?
- Do you see yourself as deviating from the 'norm' by identifying as non-binary? Do you see yourself as deviating from the 'norm' in any other ways?

NON-BINARY PEOPLE IN A GENDERED WORLD

- Do you feel you are helping to make a greater change by the ways you identify and present yourself? Why or why not?
- Is there anything else you would like to talk about that we have not yet touched on?

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