



Diverse Gender Identity Development: A Qualitative Synthesis and Development of a New Contemporary Framework

Molly Speechley¹ · Jaimee Stuart² · Kathryn L. Modecki³

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Abstract

Traditional models of gender identity development for individuals who do not identify with their assigned birth sex have generally treated medical intervention as normative, and non-binary identification as relatively rare. However, changing demographics within gender diverse populations have highlighted the need for an updated framework of gender identity development. To address this gap in the research, this study systematically reviewed the qualitative literature assessing the lived experiences of identity development of over 1,758 gender diverse individuals, across 72 studies. Reflexive thematic analysis of excerpts were synthesised to produce a novel, integrative perspective on identity development, referred to as the Diverse Gender Identity Framework. The framework is inclusive of binary and non-binary identities and characterises the distinctive identity processes individuals undergo across development.

Keywords Gender diversity · Developmental experiences · Identity development · Non-binary identity · Qualitative review · Transgender

Gender diverse people (people whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex as assigned at birth) have become highly visible within society. Worldwide, individuals are increasingly adopting both binary identities that challenge traditional conceptualisations of gender and non-binary identities, which exist on or beyond a spectrum of gender from masculine/male and feminine/female. To better understand the experiences of gender diverse people, theoretical models have sought to explicate how their identities develop (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004). These models have had resounding effects on both sociocultural understandings of gender diversity (Johnson, 2016) and the provisioning of

medical care (Coleman et al., 2022). However, these models have been predominantly predicated on the experiences of binary-identified, gender diverse adults seeking medical or clinical intervention. As a result, they tend to focus upon facilitating transition; that is, the psychosocial and medical processes of moving from one gender identity to another.

Many of these models are being recognized as increasingly inadequate for representing the experiences of gender diverse people. In particular, many gender diverse individuals are disinterested in pursuing transition, either wholly or in part. Additionally, the experiences of contemporary gender diverse children and adolescents is arguably poorly represented by early models, given that many children now experience support and affirmation from a relatively young age. As such, the current study seeks to synthesise extant research on diverse gender identity development and introduces a novel framework that is highly inclusive and representative of gender diverse people's experiences of development.

✉ Molly Speechley
molly.speechley@griffithuni.edu.au

Jaimee Stuart
stuart@unu.edu.au

Kathryn L. Modecki
k.modecki@griffith.edu.au

¹ School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

² United Nations University, Macao, China

³ Centre for Mental Health, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

What is Gender Diverse Identity?

Gender diverse people are those individuals that are *not cisgender* – people who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. In describing the history of gender

diverse people across time, Stryker (2017) identified several key developments in the labelling and conceptualising of gender diversity that are pertinent for characterising an updated framework of gender diversity identity. Among those who do identify with a binary gender (for example, male or female), but not with the gender assigned at birth, early research used the label *transsexuals*. However, this term was generally applied to those who pursued medical transition (the affirmation of gender through use of hormones or surgeries). As a result, the label *transgender* emerged as an alternative in the 1990s to capture the experience of those who did not (or could not) pursue medical interventions to affirm their personal sense of gender. Transgender soon became an umbrella term for describing the experiences of gender diverse people regardless of their attitudes towards and experiences of medical transition, in part as the term seemed to better specify gender identity as being distinct from both biological sex and sexual identity.

Growing awareness of those who identify as *neither* male nor female led to the adoption of the community term *genderqueer* in the 2000s. One of the key reasons for taking on the label genderqueer is that it arguably offered a solution to categorising gender identities that could not be conceptualised solely based on origin and destination (studies from this period often labelled trans feminine and trans masculine people *Male-to-Female* and *Female-to-Male* respectively). As thinking about non-binary identities evolved within gender diverse communities, different labels emerged to capture the specific and personal ways an individual could experience gender (genderfluid, non-binary, agender, to name a few). Thus, personal use of labels by individuals often changed in response to emerging terminology from within the community (Oakley, 2016). To capture this plurality of experience, researchers have more recently begun to refer to their gender diverse samples as *transgender* or *gender non-conforming*.

Here we refer to all gender diverse individuals as having a *diverse gender identity*. Moreover, to aid in explication of the developmental processes of gender diverse identities, we conceptualise two broad groups among gender diverse individuals: *binary-aligned identities*, which describes individuals who strongly or entirely identify with either masculinity or femininity (encompassing but not limited to the labels trans masculine/feminine, transgender men/women, trans men/trans women) and *non-binary identities* (non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, third gender, among many others), which describes identification wherein gender is considered neither masculine nor feminine. Rather, individuals who identify in a non-binary way may conceptualise personal gender as existing somewhere on a spectrum between the two, or they may reject the notion that their gender identity can be expressed in terms of binary notions of masculinity and femininity all together.

Developmental Perspectives of Diverse Gender Identity Formation

Beyond changing labels and definitions related to gender diversity, developmental perspectives on identity formation among gender diverse individuals have also undergone substantial change. Illustratively, early work describing how diverse gender identities develop sought to identify whether the childhood experiences of gender diverse people might differ from those of cisgender sexual minority (e.g., gay or lesbian) individuals. A common reported finding was that the earliest experiences of both cisgender sexual minorities and gender diverse people was marked by poor fit with and/or rejection of gender roles (Money & Primrose, 1968). However, gender diverse people also articulated a sense of not feeling comfortable in their physical bodies (Ehrhardt et al., 1979). Evidence for experiences of feeling different has since become a common finding in developmental studies of gender diverse individuals (Devor, 2004; Gagné et al., 1997; Medico et al., 2020), eventually becoming an expected and normative feature of the early life of gender diverse people (Bradford & Syed, 2019). This narrative has become highly influential, both within developmental research and amongst broader society.

Within developmental psychology, many study designs have been predicated on identifying quantifiable, discrete differences between gender diverse children and their cisgender peers and siblings, such as exaggerated gender expression or strong preference for the toys and interests of their affirmed gender (Gülgöz et al., 2019). Yet many individuals emerge as gender diverse later in life and hence are unlikely to personally fit with this narrative. Likewise, they may experience invalidation when others expect them to cleanly fit within this narrative (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Indeed, these expectations have, to an extent, been codified in the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH)'s treatment guidelines for physicians (Coleman et al., 2022). These guidelines suggest that a history of non-conforming gendered behaviour represents a normative developmental experience for gender diverse individuals. Yet including these childhood behaviours as definitional characteristics of a diverse gender identity is not only inaccurate, but it may also lead to the invalidation of identity and closure of treatment doors for gender diverse people whose experiences do not adhere to this pattern (Gridley et al., 2016).

Scientific understanding of the early life experiences of gender diverse individuals has become increasingly nuanced, however, acknowledging the role of developmental contexts in influencing children's willingness to express complex feelings related to their gender. For example, in their theory of "Silent, Neutral, and Affirmed Pathways,"

Medico and colleagues (2020) propose that children may follow a variety of potential developmental pathways related to questioning sex and gender. For example, it is possible for a gender diverse person to feel out of step with their gender and body from a young age but suppress or otherwise not act upon those sensations due to implicit or explicit signals that these gender expressions are off-limits (silent children). For others, they may not experience any sensation of difference at all until social or physical changes later in development (generally adolescence) mean they are forced, perhaps for the first time, to explore their own relationship with gender (neutral children). Finally, children may report feeling early incongruence with their biological sex, and act upon that incongruence in such a way that parents celebrate and encourage their child's difference (affirmed children). Notably, this pattern tends to occur least commonly in Medico's research (with similar prevalence to neutral children, whereas silent children are the most common).

Existing Developmental Models of Diverse Gender Identities

The Silent, Neutral, and Affirmed trajectories (Medico et al., 2020) articulate specific early life circumstances that can affect the onset of gender discomfort and later identification as gender diverse. However, models that trace an individual's path through gender identity formation beyond these early years have also been proposed. The most influential of these models emerged in the mid-2000s and present many ideas that have since become commonplace in academic and social understandings of gender diverse identity, including eventual adherence to binary gender (Devor, 2004), early identification (Lev, 2004), and psychological comorbidity and medical transition (Bockting & Coleman, 2007). However, these findings may be increasingly less relevant for describing or meeting the developmental needs of contemporary gender diverse individuals.

Reflecting the most contemporary findings (Medico et al., 2020), Devor's (2004) Witnessing and Mirroring does not make the claim that early gender non-conformity is a prerequisite for adopting a diverse gender identity later in life. Rather, Devor notes that socialisation may prematurely foreclose the expression of diverse gender identity, potentially for decades. This model is only very loosely linear, and instead describes the path to diverse gender identity as a process comprised of up to fourteen steps wherein steps may be skipped, forestalled, or occur in any order. These steps begin with a sense of anxiety about personal gender, and processes of exploration, exposure, and giving back to community are presented as potential routes to identity achievement. However, while the model does not go as far as to claim that medical transition is mandatory, it does suggest that some level of hormone replacement might be necessary to affirm

diverse gender identity. Moreover, later stages presuppose some level of medical transition may have already occurred. Overall, the model is still binary in its conceptualisation of gender, making relatively few concessions for gender identities that do not entirely embrace masculinity or femininity. Most notably, Devor's model was constructed primarily from experience interacting with transgender men, from the perspective of a transgender man. As such, the conclusions it reaches about identity development may be less relevant for non-binary individuals, or those who do not pursue medical transition.

The Transgender Emergence Model of Gender Diverse Development (Lev, 2004), has similar drawbacks. While quite careful to note that diverse gender identity may not be binary, the Transgender Emergence model is nonetheless written from a largely binary perspective, whereby stages are considered both normative and sequential. To an extent this is unsurprising, as, like Devor, this model was built out of experience with mostly binary, transgender clients. In this case, the model was written specifically for future practitioners in anticipating this demographic's specific developmental needs. Despite being one of the first models to acknowledge non-binary gender identity as a possibility, the Transgender Emergence Model does little to address non-binary individuals' personal developmental needs or experiences. Non-binary identities are instead discussed in terms of contrasting their labelling conventions with binary-identified people and exploring how they might avail themselves of medical steps to gender affirmation, for the benefit of the treating therapist.

Finally, the developmental stages of transgender coming out (Bockting & Coleman, 2007) represents possibly the most influential model of diverse gender identity development to date. Based upon work describing gay and lesbian identity development (Coleman, 1982), this model was also synthesised from experiences within a clinical setting. As a result, it makes assumptions that render it unique to other models. It assumes, for example, that childhood gender uncertainty will be associated with some level of comorbid psychological pathology and makes no mention of these feelings potentially emerging at later developmental periods. Additionally, while non-binary identities are identified in its discussion of the 'full-time experience' for individuals pursuing medical transitions (a period of time wherein a person is expected to assume their gender role completely, before being considered eligible for further medical interventions), this represents the only mention of such identities. Ultimately, despite its continued influence upon both scholarship and practice, this model does little to address the non-binary developmental experience. Further, it fails to speak to the experiences of an emerging population of children who receive and enjoy gender affirmation from a relatively young age (Carlile et al., 2021; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020).

Current Study

Given the changing demographics within gender diverse populations, both in terms of age of presentation and non-binary identification with gender, previous models may be poorly placed to address the questions of development. Unfortunately, no contemporary model has emerged that integrates the unique developmental challenges experienced by non-binary individuals into broader gender diverse identity processes. Further, the three models discussed are borne out of clinician's personal experiences working with largely binary, adult populations (both in and out of clinical settings), during a period in which non-binary visibility was generally low or absent. Therefore, a clinical lens is reflected in these models such that there is an emphasis on treatment outcomes and medical pathways. This approach gives relatively little consideration to how diverse gender identity may adapt or change after the achievement of developmental milestones and may be increasingly unrepresentative for emerging gender diverse individuals (Clark et al., 2018).

While other models have begun to emerge since the publication of these models that address the non-binary experience, for example Rankin and Beemyns' (2012) work identifying specific milestones of development in both binary-aligned and non-binary individuals, few efforts to date have embedded their results specifically within processes of identity development. To address this gap between theory and current lived experiences, this study synthesises the qualitative literature addressing gender diverse identity development and introduces the Diverse Gender Identity Framework (DGIF) to provide a novel developmental perspective of gender diversity which is inclusive of both contemporary understandings and experiences of gender diversity.

Method

Document Selection Procedure

Inspired by meta-ethnographic methodology (Noblit & Hare, 1988), the first step taken was to isolate the research question. As such, the following question was posed: "what do we know about the key features, experiences, and processes of gender identity development among gender diverse peoples?" The phrasing and scope of this question was intentionally broad, with the epistemological intent of capturing as much multidisciplinary evidence on the subject as possible. A query was developed with the following keywords: (transgender OR transsexual OR trans OR nonbinary OR non-binary OR genderqueer OR "gender diverse" OR lgbt* OR glbt* OR queer) AND ("identity development" OR "identity formation" OR "identity negotiation" OR "transgender identity

development" OR "identity confusion" OR "identity conflict" OR "self-concept" OR "gender identity" OR "gender variance" OR "gender dysphoria" OR "gender non-conform*" OR "coming out") AND (qualitative* OR interview* OR "focus group" OR ethnograph* OR "thematic analysis" OR "grounded theory" OR photovoice OR narrative OR "narrative inquiry" OR workshop* OR "phenomenology" OR "discourse analysis" OR "mixed methods"). This query was altered as necessary to suit the conventions and features of different databases. Four databases were searched: SCOPUS, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Additionally, the journals *Transgender Studies Quarterly* and the *International Journal of Transgender Health* were searched manually, due to poor indexing in existing databases.

No limitations were placed in terms of date of publication. The results from these searches were then imported into the online systematic review tool Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), and were subject to a process of duplicate detection, assessment of suitability in terms of answering the research question (methodology, research question, and results) and quality checking. Quality checking processes were performed by referencing studies against an adapted form of the CASP qualitative checklist (see Table S1 in the online supplement; Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2019), which introduced several additional quality controls informed by the primary author's experience with the literature (e.g., whether questions of development were being asked of gender diverse people directly, or to third parties such as parents or doctors). The results of the systemic review process are illustrated in Fig. 1.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Having identified documents for analysis, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was then employed to extract meaning from the qualitative data embedded in the documents. As per Braun and Clarke, the first step employed was familiarisation with the data; by virtue of the extensive and exhaustive quality checking process, this had already been achieved during the systematic review of studies. The second step was open, inductive coding of in-text excerpts (raw data) and authorial statements free of interpretation, using the software NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020). As each document conceptualised themes in their own way, codes were developed by integrating across both the document-specific themes as well as interpreting full text excerpts and quotes. Additionally, demographic data was coded when such information was made available in the text.

Having completed this initial coding, generation of themes began in an iterative process between the authors. Over the course of many months, authors discussed how

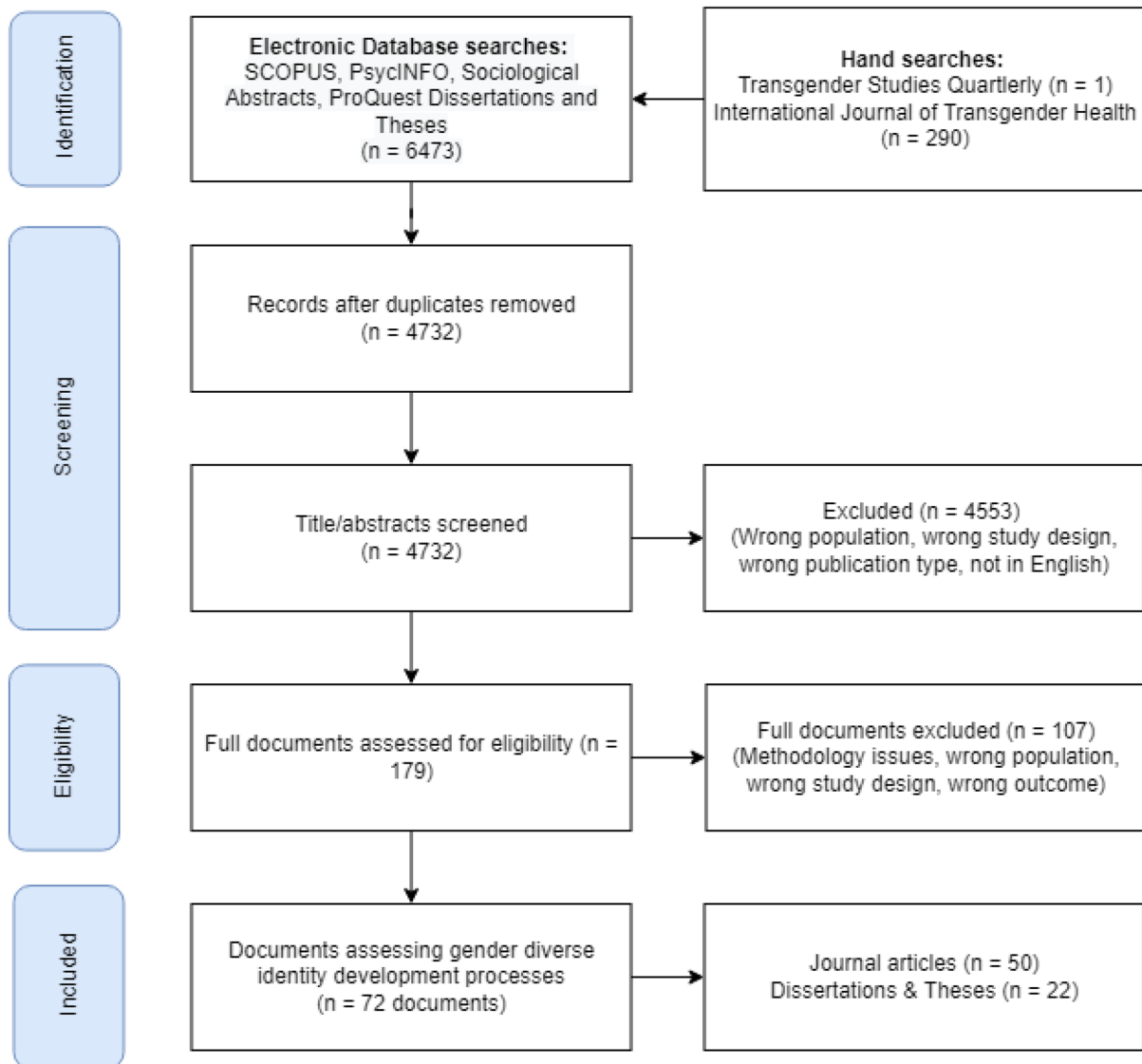


Fig. 1 Document Selection Process

the codes identified reflected larger themes of development, in the context of both gender diversity and broader developmental literature, and how the resultant themes represented enmeshed processes of diverse gender identity development. This process initially generated three overarching themes. These themes were then further developed and refined through a process of comparison, reflection, and rechecking of data. Through this process, four overarching developmental themes and eleven subthemes were generated.

Reflexivity

The primary author (MS) is a transgender woman, having come to an understanding of her transgender identity in

her early teens. MS subsequently came out to her family as transgender at 24 years old, and enjoyed a very fast, and uncomplicated transition. Due to this experience, and the high levels of instrumental and emotional support she experienced from her extended support network, she occupies a role as outsider to her own community, having never experienced some of the challenges or opportunities described by the gender diverse individuals in these data. Her research into how these identities form is driven by both intellectual curiosity and a drive to better understand herself and her own lived experience. The second (JS) is a cisgender women, she has extensive experience in working with marginalised and vulnerable groups and a background in feminist and critical psychologies. Her research has specifically focused on processes of identity development under conditions where

identities are contested. The third author (KM) identifies as a US White American cisgender woman. Her years of experiences working with young people who experience marginalisation, discrimination, and risk continue to inform her work as an ally. She seeks to broaden her perspectives through ongoing learning with young people, including students with diverse lived expertise and experiences within the lab.

Results

Study Characteristics

Full results of the systematic review are presented in Table S2 and S3 in the online supplement. The major results are summarised subsequently. A total of 72 documents were included. Fifty of the documents were published in peer reviewed journals, with the most common journal being the *International Journal of Transgender Health* ($n = 8$, 16%). The other peer-reviewed articles were predominantly located in sexuality or gender-related journals ($n = 19$, 38%), with the remainder in a range of both generalist and special interest (e.g., autism studies, body image) psychological or sociological journals ($n = 23$, 64%). Twenty-two of the documents were dissertations or theses, 18 of which were PhD dissertations, while four were Master's theses.

Of the 72 documents, the majority utilised either a form of grounded theory ($n = 17$, 23.6%) or interpretative phenomenological analyses ($n = 13$, 18.05%). The remainder used generic qualitative methods (in that they described methodology that was non-specific but largely involved processes of theme generation; $n = 12$, 16.66%), specific forms of thematic analysis ($n = 11$, 15.28%), or a range of less common alternative methodologies. These included narrative inquiry ($n = 4$, 5.56%), hybrid methodologies (in that they explicitly combine two extant methodological frameworks; $n = 5$, 6.94%), and a small number of documents that used uncommon methodology (only present once or twice in the dataset; $n = 7$, 9.72%). Three documents (4.17%) were unclear in their methodology. Of the documents that reported researcher positionality, 17 documents (23.61%) were co-authored by or incorporated a gender diverse individual in the research process. Thirty-eight documents (52.78%) used convenience sampling methods, while 32 (44.44%) used purposive sampling to answer specific research questions. Most documents had been published since 2010 ($n = 63$, 87.5%).

The number of people in each document ranged from 2 to 463, with the perspectives of 1758 gender diverse individuals being represented in the final sample for analyses (one study did not report participant data, due to using social media scraping). Excluding two large samples which used qualitative survey data rather than focus groups or interviews, the

mean number of participants within documents was 13.53. Participants ranged in age from 5.5 to 82 ($M_{age} = 27.37$). When demographic data was made available in the documents, individuals assigned female at birth outnumbered individuals assigned male at birth, reflecting contemporary population estimates (Goodman et al., 2019), and binary-aligned individuals outnumbered those who identified with non-binary identities. More specific identity information has been appended to exemplar quotes when unambiguously available in the source document. Sixty-six documents worked directly with gender diverse participants to generate data, five worked with parents and children, and one was predicated on the experiences of very young children ($M_{age} = 6.25$) and worked with parents exclusively. Forty-five documents reported ethnicity; most participants were white ($n = 1269$, 71.17%), followed by Latino/Hispanic ($n = 106$, 5.96%), African American ($n = 103$, 5.78%), multiracial peoples ($n = 59$, 3.31%), and Asian-Americans ($n = 44$, 2.47%).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis Findings

Across the 72 documents, four over-arching themes were identified, with eleven subthemes in total (see Fig. 2). Importantly, these themes were not considered time-bound nor indicative of a discrete process and are not theorized to take place in a stepwise manner. Rather, the themes are thought to reflect common developmental experiences that take place at different developmental time points for different individuals. As a result, the model is not procedural. In fact, it is suggested that these processes often occur for gender diverse peoples simultaneously (e.g., redefining the self while still actively negotiating gender) and reciprocally (e.g., re-entering active gender negotiation after making irreversible commitments), and for many, may be revisited across the lifespan as personal and social circumstances lead to further introspection.

Theme 1: A Sense of Difference

Similar to previous models, the first theme identified was a sense that gender diverse individuals, in some way, felt inherently different to their family or peers, in a way they might feel is difficult to articulate or verbalise without context. However, the subthemes that were isolated suggest that the onset of awareness was not uniform. Subtheme 1.1, *early awareness*, describes the experience of such feelings emerging early in life, with some reflections stating they had experienced this sense of difference since they were as young as 3 years old. In contrast, subtheme 1.2, *delayed awareness*, describes the many others who reported they only became aware of these feelings at later developmental junctures. This delayed awareness generally coincided with onset of puberty or adolescence, when both biological and social changes

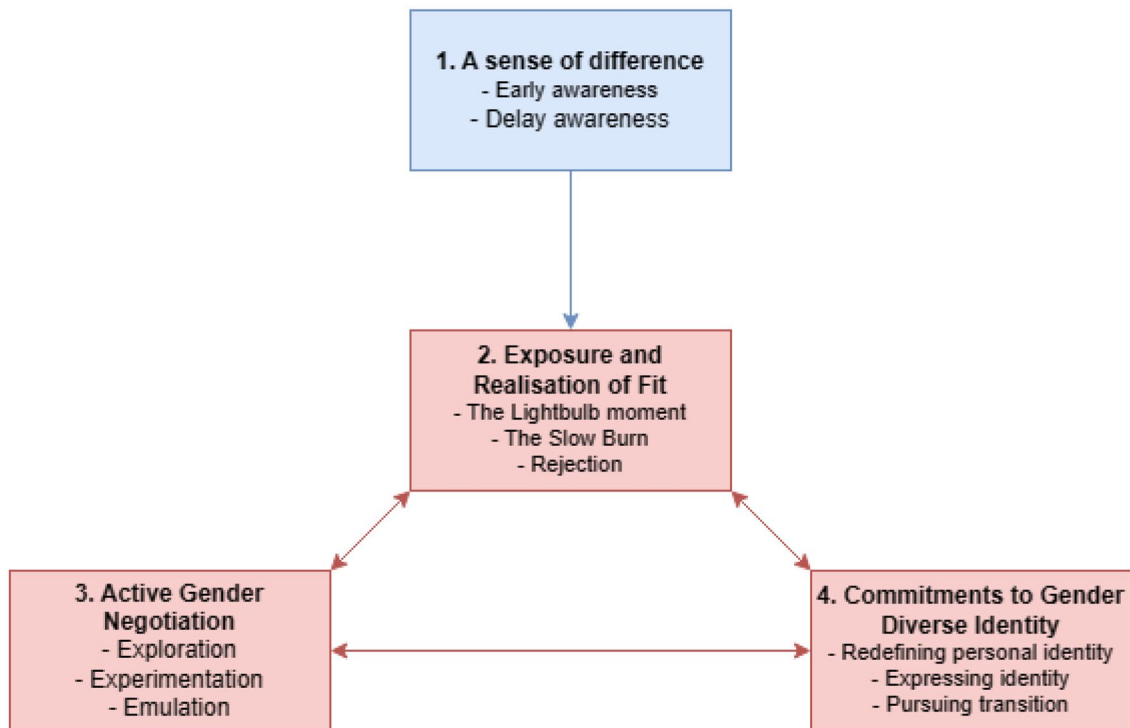


Fig. 2 Diverse Gender Identity Framework: Identified Developmental Themes, and Proposed Relationships

made the individual increasingly aware of either their changing body, the internal conflict between the expectations of their biological sex and their developing identity, or both.

Early Awareness Those who reported a marked, early feeling of being different tended to do so in very concrete terms, often reporting these feelings to have come about and remained present for as long as they were able to remember ("Well, I think I always kind of, as far back as I can remember I've always, I had this understanding that I was 'wrong'", trans woman; Baker, 2014), or having emerged before they began schooling. Unsurprisingly, this is the period during which cisgender children begin to come to an understanding of gender as well, though, like cisgender children in this age group, understanding of gender seemed to rarely be complete at this age. Instead, poorness-of-fit with assigned birth sex was often reflected upon as a vague feeling of unease ("[...] it's more like I describe a penny in your shoe. You know it's there, but it's not a stone, so it's not giving you a blister. You know something's there and you know it's not right", trans woman; Hawkins, 2009), or straight-forward identification with the opposite gender ("I remember being very young and thought I was, I honestly thought I was a girl!", trans woman; Graham et al., 2014) rather than a mature understanding that they were in some way not cisgender.

Growing awareness of these differences did not mean that children would necessarily vocalise these feelings, or even

act upon them past a certain age, however. Both implicit ("You know, they assumed, you know, 'Oh, you're a boy, so you have to act like a boy"; Opromalla, 2019) and explicit ("[...] if any son of mine ever came home with earrings looking like a girl, you know, I'd do something to him, something really nasty to him [...]", trans woman; Downing, 2013) messaging made children suppress or otherwise leave the question of their gender identity unaddressed, instead deferring to the expectations of their birth sex.

Delayed Awareness The sense of being different did not always emerge in early childhood. Many gender diverse individuals reported that they only became aware of their lack of fit with birth sex during adolescence (Medico and colleague's neutral children; 2020). Often the impetus for this growing discomfort was the physical reality of puberty. Specifically, rather than interpreting their changing bodies as a sign of maturity and celebration like their peers or parents, puberty tended to instead bring distress. This was often due to the changes they themselves were experiencing ("Menstruation was just the nail in the coffin of absolutely hating my body", trans man; Baker, 2014), or a realisation that they would not, without some kind of intervention, experience the developmental changes they had been expecting ("[...] when puberty hits and all the girls start growing breasts, and I wondered why I didn't develop any", trans woman; Baker, 2014).

Relatedly, puberty also brought about social changes, especially at the transition from primary schooling to secondary schooling. Awareness of the changing social expectations for adolescent girls and boys was cited as a cause for a growing sense of alienation from birth sex, especially when it represented the loss of relationships ("I was always just one of the lads. It wasn't an issue until secondary school when puberty hit and I became 'the weirdo' because I was like the girl who wants to be a boy"; Patel, 2019) or an enforcing of expectations that did not align with their emerging personal identity ("Casey resisted wearing a bra when he began developing breasts and his peers would tease him about needing to wear a bra"; Evans, 2010). This distress could lead to changes in dress or mannerism, sometimes to hide a changing body (binding of breasts, loose clothing), or aborted attempts to conform to gendered expectations, adopting highly masculine or feminine personas and dress to suppress feelings of difference or distress ("I made this really strong attempt to fit into my birth sex, which is really classically transsexual, it turns out. I didn't realize that at the time, but I tried really hard to be female, and to be a girl, and I took on boyfriends at that point", transsexual man; Sakai, 2003).

Many of the individuals who reported this later emergence of feeling different reflected that in earlier childhood they were either unaware of the realities of gender, or unconcerned by them, as they did not receive modelling or messaging to dissuade their gender non-conforming behaviours ("I grew up in a household where my mom did woodworking. Everybody helped with the kitchen things. Everybody helped with the outside things. I got to play with my brother's toys, that were then my toys. So, I didn't feel dysphoria as a child, which is different than a lot of kids who are trans", trans man; Morgan & Stevens, 2008). This suggests that a certain level of tolerance for gender non-conformity might be a factor that can delay the emergence of feelings of difference. Indeed, many of the individuals who reported this relative lack of concern, and later feelings emergence, were assigned female at birth, and described themselves as having been tomboys as children, a unique social role available to some young girls that allows for (or at the very least, tolerates) a certain level of masculine expression or behaviour. An equivalent social role does not generally exist for young boys, and thus the consequences for gender non-conformity are often much more explicit. As such gender diverse individuals assigned male at birth may be more likely to come to an awareness of their difference earlier, through comparatively stricter enforcement of binary gender norms ("Yeah it's just like, 'Oh yeah, I can see you're a tomboy and it's okay to be a tomboy. I guess that makes sense because you're so masculine for a girl.' But growing up male, you already have to try to fit this mold of 'you're a boy, you like boy things,'" Lambrou, 2018).

Whether feelings emerged early in development or later in life, individuals sometimes reported becoming stalled at this developmental juncture for years, or even decades. Many individuals attributed their sense of difference to homosexuality, for a perceived lack of other explanations or options ("Right before I came out [aged 12], one of my friends at school asked me, 'Do you just want to be a boy so that you can like girls?' And I was really shocked that she put those two things together, because I had begun to realise that I liked girls, but me wanting to be a boy, in my mind, at that time, had nothing to do with sexuality at all.... And so when she said that, that's when I thought, well, maybe that's why I want to be a boy, maybe I am just a lesbian.", genderqueer; le Roux, 2013). Others reflected that they attempted to ignore their feelings in the hope they might spontaneously resolve, sometimes pursuing highly normative, cisgender pathways of life achievement in an attempt to extinguish this sense of difference ("[...] these things that a lot of transgender people do, which is, you know, trying to ignore it, trying to find a way to get married, have children and all these sorts of thing [...]", trans woman; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020). Only when they were exposed to the possibilities of gender diverse identity, and subsequently internalised those possibilities as applying to the self, did they report moving forward in their development.

Theme 2: Exposure and Realisation of Fit

The second theme articulated a turning point: exposure to the concept of gender diverse identities, or the moment (or moments) when individuals have an experience that enabled them to come to the personal realisation that their assigned birth sex did not necessarily dictate their gender. These moments of exposure were described as happening both organically, through incidental exposure in film or media ("So on *Boys Don't Cry* I was able to see a man I could relate to, and I was finally able to figure out the terminology, to figure out what was going on with me, I wasn't stupid, I wasn't crazy, I finally had the terminology to express my identity.", trans man; Schulz, 2012), and intentionally, as individuals searched for ways to understand their identity, and figure out exactly why they felt different ("I started to research online and I mean, a lot of people that I know think that Tumblr has helped them a lot, which is a blog, and I felt like that definitely helped me.", non-binary; Balius, 2018). Some individuals reported having a passive understanding of the existence of diverse gender identities (often in the form of transgender women) due to pop-culture or media saturation but had not yet accepted that they themselves might be gender diverse. Complicating matters further, exposure may have to happen many times, and through many different sources (gender studies classes, meeting gender diverse people) for a person to realise that gender diversity may qualify as an explanation for their own feelings.

However, while exposure may act as a catalyst, the developmental processes are ones of realisation and acceptance: realisation that diverse gender identity might exist as a possible explanation for previously undefined internal feelings, and a commensurate acceptance that these identities fit with personal experience. Among the individuals represented in these studies, there was evidence of three possible outcomes to this developmental challenge: subtheme 2.1, *light bulb moment*, wherein personal identity was suddenly and very obviously clarified, subtheme 2.2, *a slow burn*, wherein fit with diverse gender identity was interrogated and thoroughly explored before initial acceptance, and subtheme 2.3, *rejection*, wherein individuals temporarily or permanently rejected the idea that they might be gender diverse.

The Light Bulb Moment The light bulb moment was described relatively frequently in studies and was often described as an epiphany: after years, perhaps decades, of feeling different and/or alone in their struggles, individuals had a very sudden awakening to the idea that they are not cisgender ("The lightbulb when off and I went 'Wait a minute. This isn't really about clothes; it's about who I am.' And a lot of pieces just fell into place for me. I had realized I was miserable with life in general and I couldn't quite pinpoint why, but I knew I didn't feel right about who I was.", trans woman; Katz-Wise & Budge, 2015). This may happen due to exposure to media, intervention by mental health or support staff, or even in conversation. This moment was often described as a relief, or empowering, as individuals finally had words to apply to their personal experiences, and usually led directly into a more substantial period of self-education and identity negotiation.

The Slow Burn By contrast, the slow burn described individuals who did not commit to the understanding that they possessed diverse gender identity immediately. Instead, these individuals described a process of thoroughly auditing what is known of diverse gender identity against personal experience, usually occurring simultaneously with processes outlined in Theme 3 (Active Gender Negotiation). Some described this process as having been gradual, occurring organically until accepting that they have a diverse gender identity seemed the natural answer to their unresolved or growing sense of difference ("So it was a slow, over about two years, going from thinking I was cis-gender [sic] to being, 'Yeah, I'm a dude.'"; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018). Others described a period of research and reflection, learning about diverse gender identities online or in-person before finally accepting that they were not cisgender ("It's the deepest of personal searches, because it totally goes against what is reflected everywhere-everywhere."; McCarthy, 2003). Reflecting the role of socialisation and power of societal narratives, some of these individuals – especially those who did

not experience early awareness – struggled with how their personal identity reflected normative ideas of what having a diverse gender identity meant ("Like when you have these shows and these studies on transgender people, and it's like 'yeah I've always known since I was a kid'. It's like I don't understand that, I just cannot conceive of how I could have ever reached that conclusion so young."; le Roux, 2013).

Rejection Described least often in these studies was rejection of diverse gender identity. Due to the nature of these studies this was often described as being a temporary state as many individuals talked about their rejection in retrospective terms. Temporary could be relative, however: while some repressed their diverse gender identity for only months, or years, some individuals reported rejecting or repressing their gender diversity for decades. In these cases, individuals would often describe conforming to the expectations of their sex at birth, sometimes marrying or having children, to overcome their feelings ("I thought that maybe, if I get married, then I will be a responsible husband: it will make everything go away.", trans woman; Baker, 2014). Few individuals reported that these conforming behaviours provided any relief.

In other cases, this rejection was due to a belief that, if they were to accept gender diverse identity, that they would never 'pass', or look enough like the opposite sex that their gender diverse identity would go unremarked upon in public ("I didn't have unrealistic expectations, but given that I've been through all the puberty changes, I wasn't sure that I would pass very successfully", androgynous male; le Roux, 2013). This motivation reflects two separate considerations: primarily, many binary-identified people truly desire for their appearance (and by extension, identity) to be unremarkable, to go 'stealth'. To achieve this, visually passing for a member of one's identified gender without qualifiers is often paramount. Secondly, and relatedly, passing is often perceived as being necessary for safety, with some individuals reporting that they feel passing allows them to avoid discrimination and harassment ("I often think about challenging these ideas of gender roles and expectations, but often take the setting and situation into consideration for my safety.", trans man; Lambrou, 2018). Rejecting diverse gender identity with this motivation seems to be reflective of a lack of confidence in both personal ability to pass and societal tolerance for those who do not strictly adhere to binary gender norms. Individuals who reported these motivations for rejection were rarely living openly as a gender diverse person and had few plans to do so.

Theme 3: Active Gender Negotiation

The third theme identified was labelled active gender negotiation. Having resonated with the concept of gender diverse identity wholly or in part, individuals would then begin an

exploratory process of questioning what committing to taking on a gender diverse identity might mean. Negotiation was found to comprise three potential enmeshed processes: subtheme 3.1, *exploration*, which described processes of exploring gender diverse possibilities, subtheme 3.2, *experimentation*, which described a period or periods of actively trying on the identities represented by those possibilities, and subtheme 3.3, *emulation*, which described efforts to learn or align the self to new normative expectations of respective diverse gender identities. This was rarely a discrete period, however, and the processes represented by this theme were often visited and revisited across the lifespan, as contextual factors in individuals' lives altered their personal relationship with gender.

Exploration Many individuals reported that a process of actively exploring the possibilities of diverse gender identity was integral in their personal development. As noted earlier, for some this occurred prior to internalisation of identity, during the slow burn, where exploring possibilities was a component of negotiating an individual's personal relationship with diverse gender identity. For others, this began after the lightbulb moment, or epiphany, and represented finding one's place in the universe of possibilities that gender diverse identity represents and articulating one's emerging identity in more concrete terms. For many people this was ongoing, although it was noted that individuals revisited these negotiation processes less often over time, as the centrality of their gender identity comparatively diminished ("I think the entire, my entire story about gender as it is right now is just... focusing on who I am past gender... as more of a whole person.", trans/queer; Bradford et al., 2019).

The ways in which people explored these possibilities were as varied and idiosyncratic as the people themselves. For some, this was a social process, as gender identity was clarified through discussion with trusted others ("I'll go in bursts and think, talk a lot... I need to bounce ideas off so many other people. Not necessarily to emulate someone, but say 'Okay, I understand how you identify and that's not me.' And just find myself."; Evans, 2010). For others this meant re-evaluating personal identity on a more global level, especially when an emerging gender identity might conflict with strongly held values (for example, transitioning to a masculine gender role and social identities while maintaining identity as a feminist). Explicit educational processes were often described, most often online but also in more formal contexts, such as gender studies or feminist post-secondary classes.

Experimentation For many, exploring possibilities meant some level of experimentation. Again, this often happened online, experimenting with names, pronouns, or expression in digital spaces perceived to be safe and supportive ("Before I was out with a lot of people, I was completely

out online...", trans woman; Laljer, 2017). Experimentation happened just as often offline, however. Individuals described experimenting with gender expression by participating in counter cultures that tolerated or celebrated gender non-conformity ("Well there's this cosplayer, and he's trans. Look at his YouTube stuff, 'cause he has all these transition videos, and that's how I [realized] 'Oh, there's a word for how I'm feeling and there's people like me and I'm not just ridiculous.'"; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018), or by seizing opportunities to redefine and experiment with their identity when entering new social spaces ("[...] I ended up joining a queer collective that was led by a lot of trans people and I think being around other trans people, made me you know, it educated me first of all and also allowed me to find things in myself that other people experienced and I was able to connect the dots in that regard.", a woman who is trans; Valle, 2020). Having found a way to connect with their identity, however, many would then embark on the secondary task of learning the expectations of an identity.

Emulation Described most often by people who aligned with binary notions of masculinity and femininity, these negotiation processes were less about exploring the inherent possibilities of gender diversity, but learning the typical attitudes, behaviours, and values of a different gender identity. Often, this entailed finding a role model, someone who the individual aspired to be or admired ("But, if it comes to how you sit and how you put your cufflinks on or open the door, I learned that from him and out of all the males that are around me, he calls me [chosen name], he says 'what's up man'.", trans man; Hawkins, 2009), but could also mean passive observation, or adherence to socially acceptable stereotypes of masculinity or femininity. Occasionally, finding a role model was instrumental in empowering individuals to move forward with coming out or transition, as many had never met or seen gender diverse people in real life. While knowing that others felt the way they did provided an intellectual understanding of diverse gender and personal identity, seeing strangers living, surviving, or thriving could act as the catalyst for change in a person's personal journey. Poor media representation of diverse gender identities often complicated individuals' attempts to find effective or inspiring role models, however, delaying or prematurely foreclosing identity development ("Everything I ever saw about transgender was on TV. And it was like in a bad way, like on 'Jerry Springer,' and it was really just put out there badly. So I didn't even think it was something that was real and could happen.", trans man; Baker, 2014).

Theme 4: Commitments to Gender Diverse Identity

The final theme identified was commitments to diverse gender identity. Having accepted that they are not cisgender and

begun to explore the universe of possibilities represented by diverse gender, this theme articulated how individuals then made personal, public, and medical commitments to their emerging gender identity. This generally occurred in three separate domains. Subtheme 4.1, *redefining personal identity*, concerned internal processes of redefining the self through language and labels; by contrast, subtheme 4.2, *expressing identity*, represented decisions surrounding disclosure and expression of gender identity. Finally, subtheme 4.3, *pursuing medical transitions*, articulated the choice to pursue medical interventions to affirm personal identity. Consequences of the decisions made during these commitment processes can, and often did, inspire new rounds of active gender negotiation.

Redefining Personal Identity The personal commitments made in this area largely concerned with how people came to redefine themselves after learning about and internalising their diverse gender identities. While the outcomes of these decision-making processes were often shared publicly, it was possible that individuals could keep these outcomes private, or secret (e.g., for safety). Though truly keeping these decisions secret was uncommon, doing so was described most often by non-binary individuals ("Sina rarely tells others of their non-binary identity: '9 out of 10 days I am really feminine.'", non-binary; Balius, 2018).

Decisions made at this juncture most often involved language: names and labels. Choosing names was often a very personal decision, but could also become social, with some individuals describing friends giving feedback on choice of name ("There were was [sic] a book of baby names that they went though on a semiregular basis, because for whatever reason nobody wanted me to name myself Michael.", trans man; Wright, 2011), or involving family in the renaming process ("I sent [my father] another letter saying I am going to change my name... You are a parent, and I respect you.", transsexual male; Sakai, 2003). Individuals placed a great deal of importance on their chosen names and the personal processes it took to decide upon them, and often considered intentional deadnaming (using one's birth name) to be a form of harassment ("Rory expressed frustration with [encounters not respecting their name]: 'Do you know how hard it is to name yourself? Can you shut up? It is so hard to be like, [t]his name is now me and represents me.'", non-binary; Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). To some extent this is unsurprising, as choosing one's own name, at least in Western contexts, is a relatively unique process with little precedent. Intentionally disregarding the gravity of that decision then, can be perceived as a highly confrontational and dismissive act.

Finding a label for gender identity was also described as highly important, both to better understand the self and to connect to others by employing common language or vernacular. For non-binary people this could become a potentially

complicated process, often involving experimentation and renegotiation with emerging and existing labels over time. Additionally, it was not uncommon for people to adopt multiple labels, to better reflect their own multi-faceted gender experience. The importance of labels seemed to exist upon a spectrum for non-binary people however: some individuals reported ambivalence toward labels in general ("it's not that I don't care, it's more that, I don't have the effort or the want to label it at the moment", agender; Boddington, 2016), others adopted labels out of convenience ("non-binary isn't something that I would really identify with as such ... it's just that I fall into that category", non-binary; Losty & O'Connor, 2018), while others placed a great deal of weight upon accurately labelling their experience, especially as that experience evolved and they became exposed to more personally-accurate terminology ("After exposure to what agender was, I'd slowly come to more and more identify with it, though I still felt the exact term didn't quite match my feelings as a whole. [...] Once I'd found 'genderless' as a more or less separate term, I resonated with it much more. It, sort of, completed my feelings", genderless; Laljer, 2017).

For binary-aligned individuals, labelling was often comparatively straightforward, and identity was generally articulated for these people in much more concrete terms: (trans) male/masculine or female/feminine, with few qualifiers. However, the way these labels was used varied, with some employing trans identities as a descriptor ("So transsexual woman, to me, is just an adjective. Rather than an actual gender. My gender is female.", woman; Mullen & Moane, 2013), while others identified themselves as explicitly trans, with a sense of pride ("I have to work a lot to make our queerness a visible part of our lives, so, to me, using the abolition transman as opposed to just man, is a way that I can recognize the specificity of that experience in myself.", trans man; Schulz, 2012). These incompatible perspectives seemed dependant on individual's personal feelings about the visibility of their diverse gender identity: those who highly valued passing or stealth were more likely to consider trans an adjective, while those who wished for their identity and experience to be recognised (even when they passed) were more likely to centralise their personal trans identity through language.

Expressing Identity In contrast to redefining personal identity, expressing identity explicitly involved interaction with others, either via intentional coming out to others or by passively expressing gender identity through appearance and dress. Coming out decisions, in particular, were often highly salient for individuals, as the consequences for doing so were generally very immediate and were often described as something the individual had to do, to be true to both themselves or others ("I just grew to a point where I was sick of hiding being transgender. I hated lying to people and felt it wasn't fair to them", trans man; Baker, 2014).

Coming out decisions were not arrived at lightly, however. People tended to pick their moments carefully, often to avoid anticipated discrimination or fallout ("Angelo recounted how he timed his coming out to his mother to coincide with his parents' divorce", trans man; Tan, 2019), or when they felt the reality of their changing outlooks or body rendered not coming out increasingly unfeasible ("She wore baggy coats at work for months even in very hot weather to hide her developing breasts. Eventually she had to transition at work, living fulltime as a woman to access surgery", trans woman; Beagan et al., 2012). For some, this meant coming out might be deferred until they felt that the conditions to do so were safe ("By about 12 was when I sort of knew I was trans but I was afraid of coming out, I was afraid of coming out and afraid how people would react so I was really... it was out of the question to pursue it...", trans woman; Kennedy, 2022).

Who to come out to was also a factor. The first person to know was often somebody that the individual perceived to be potentially sympathetic and supportive, but just as often was a person's parents. Coming out to parents specifically was described as a significant moment by most and was often met with distress on the part of parents ("I told my mother, she's one of the first people I told before I decided to transition. She didn't want me to, it was quite obvious but she's come to accept me", woman; Ward, 2019). Reflecting changing attitudes, however, many found that their parents were supportive when they came out, though there may be a period of adjustment ("I was really scared of my father. I always said to my mother, he's going to kill me. He didn't want it. [...] But after a discussion with my mother, you could say that he's understood a little, he's accepted more and now he treats me like a girl and he tries to understand and be nice to me", woman; Medico et al., 2020). Unfortunately, for some, anticipated rejection subsequently became a harsh reality ("Deedee's family kicked her out of the house when she told them she was transitioning, and she says she has not looked back", trans woman; Wright, 2011). For a small minority, fear of these poor reactions was sometimes powerful enough that individuals might consider never telling their parents, choosing, instead, to cut them out of their lives entirely rather than risk discrimination or hurt ("What I had always thought about doing is, rather than tell my family, I was just gonna move out here and just leave them back there. Just cut off all ties, just leave 'em. And I was prepared to do that. Because I didn't want to hurt them, and I didn't want to answer any questions", transsexual man; Sakai, 2003).

In contrast to these highly considered, intimate decisions about coming out and disclosure, how an individual chose to express their gender represented more visible and on-going decision-making processes. Though many availed themselves of medical interventions to more accurately embody gender, clothes and hair were regularly cited as ways to express

gender identity ("I still had long hair at that point, and although I dressed androgynous, and I got to a point where I decided I didn't like the clothes that I wore, I didn't like my hair, so I got my hair cut short, I started shopping in the men's department, which felt so liberating to embrace my masculine self", trans guy; Schulz, 2012), as were non-medical forms of body modification, such as dieting ("Seri reported a similar response, discussing how they starved themselves for a large portion of their life to minimise their curves", non-binary; Penklis, 2020) and binding ("Before I got my tits cut off, I was binding since age 14, but I didn't have language for it then", trans male; Hawkins, 2009). Many individuals made conscious efforts to change how they moved or expressed themselves, to align better with masculine or feminine norms ("I also consciously try to adapt male speech intonation and body language", non-gender-identified; Wright, 2011).

The power of these normative expectations cannot be overstated, especially for trans individuals who align more strongly with gender binaries. Individuals often described expressing their gender in highly feminine or masculine ways upon coming out, sometimes feeling intense pressure to do so from both external ("In the NHS services you've got a voice- a speech therapist [...] I've went in jeans and she's been very much like you should be wearing a pretty dress", woman; Ward, 2019) and internal sources ("As I grew older, as I psychically developed, I shied away [from] things that immediately identified me as female"; Wright, 2011). This was often driven by a desire for validation: by rejecting any of the potential trappings of their birth sex, the authenticity of emerging gender identity was affirmed. This drive could be temporary, however, with many describing the compulsion toward hyper-femininity or hyper-masculinity fading as they became more comfortable in their new roles, often organically reintegrating interests, hobbies, and modes of self-expression they may have held before coming out over time ("You think that you have to get rid of all these parts to be male or seen as male or something, but now I'm kind of integrating them back in", trans man; Sakai, 2003). For some, this reintegration process could even result in re-evaluation of identity entirely, moving from binary identification toward non-binary identities wherein gender non-conforming expressions or interests might be more tolerated.

Non-binary individuals tended to not discuss gender expression in normative terms very often, deferring instead to narratives of authenticity and flexibility. Yet, it is interesting to note that they often positioned their gender expression in relation to their assigned sex nonetheless; assigned female at birth individuals often spoke of intentionally assuming masculine dress or characteristics to not be coded as women ("Though zi would prefer to dress "gender-neutral," Stevi instead dresses like a 'boy' to 'override' hir physical appearance", genderqueer; McCarthy, 2003), for example. Additionally, non-binary individuals sometimes spoke of

temporarily presenting as a cisgender member of their birth sex, especially in situations where they believed their identity may not be understood ("It's too much of a hassle to get them to try to actually recognize [my gender]; for the most part, I'm not even going to bring it up. So I'll dress more feminine when I'm going to see family"; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). This level of expressional flexibility was generally unavailable to individuals (binary or non-binary) who had undergone medical interventions, due to the permanent – often highly visible – outcomes of many of those interventions. As such, transitional decisions about if, or when, to undergo surgeries represented important considerations for many gender diverse people.

Pursuing Medical Transition Whether to commit to medical transition, such as by pursuing hormone replacement therapies or gender-affirming surgeries, were questions ever-present in the minds of many gender diverse people. These commitments were not made lightly, as the outcomes of such decisions were often highly visible, irreversible, and expensive. Further, the ability to pursue medical interventions was rarely entirely in the individual's hands, being dependant on both legislative requirements and medical policies that functioned as gatekeepers to gender affirming care.

Gatekeepers were usually present in the form of doctors or therapists, practitioners who are tasked with assessing a gender diverse person's appropriateness for medical intervention within WPATH guidelines (Coleman et al., 2022). These guidelines suggest that gender diverse people have to undergo assessment before being allowed to begin hormonal or surgical treatments, often with an implicit assumption that the patient has experienced persistent or life-long gender dysphoria. However, such guidelines are contentious, and gender diverse patients sometimes found it difficult to satisfy the requirements of such guidelines in an authentic way. This often led to the manufacture of false histories to become eligible ("I took hormones for a year and other trans-people were like, 'If you wanna take hormones, you need to lie to your therapist and pretend you're totally sure that you wanna be a man.'", genderqueer; Evans, 2010), negative experiences with practitioners who did not grasp the complexity of an individual's gender identity ("My therapist had some very old school ideas, was totally not on board with gender queer at all, was like, 'You either need to be a man or a woman.'", trans man; Schulz, 2012), or at worst, illegal use of hormones or other substances ("I found out how to write my own prescriptions, which is illegal. I mean you're talking to someone who's square, with a college degree who works, who's never stolen, but you're just so hopeless ... and insurance doesn't cover almost anything, of course", trans woman; Brown et al., 2013).

The willingness to endure these processes or break the law to begin transition speaks to how important these steps

can be for affirming diverse gender identity. For some, these medical interventions were perceived as the only way to truly embody personal gender identity, both internally and in public ("I decided that I was so sick of the 'she's' and the 'ma'am's' and I was becoming more and more depressed so I was like, 'I gotta do this.' For my life's sake you...I'd pass off on the world as a man, which is what I feel like I am, so why not?", trans man; Pollock & Eyre, 2012). For others the seeming necessity to transition was perceived as an externally enforced norm ("When I first started off [living as a female] I thought well I would need to have the operation and stuff like that, I felt a bit pressured, but now that I've decided I don't need it I feel better for it. I like to live as a woman, I feel like a woman, but I don't need an operation to make me into a woman.", trans woman; le Roux, 2013). Even if a desire to transition was present, however, there did not seem to be evidence of a single path through transition; rather, the medical interventions individuals tended to decide upon were both highly personal and context dependant.

For example, the perceived efficacy of interventions was regularly cited as a consideration (especially for those assigned female-at-birth: "I know I would certainly not want a phalloplasty. I don't think they're very attractive and I don't want to pay that much money for a penis that doesn't work", transsexual man; Sakai, 2003), as were safety concerns ("A lot of trans people, like, taking hormones and stuff like that is a very recent thing. We don't know what will happen to people, you know, like when they're eighty!"; Downing, 2013). A desire to avoid harassment by more effectively passing was often a powerful motivator ("After some time, it became apparent that I was not able to pass without medically transitioning. As I tried to pass and was unable, I became more convinced that this path was necessary for me", trans male; Schulz, 2012); so too was a desire to align the outer body with the internal self, sometimes with highly selective interventions ("For me, I don't have a prescribed body image for the gender that I am. Other than the physical body that I've allowed myself to create. Which for me, did include top surgery, and having that made me feel like my body is finally whole", trans guy; McCarthy, 2003). Unfortunately, however, many felt that their options were limited, both due to the high cost of gender affirming treatments ("I wouldn't mind a metoidioplasty. But money for that is huge. I don't see it happening anytime soon", transsexual male; Sakai, 2003), and aforementioned gatekeepers.

Regardless of the specificities of the interventions pursued, individuals often found that the outcomes were life-changing, often in surprising ways. Improving mental health was a highly cited outcome ("Now, I feel much better than in my previous life", trans woman; Schneider et al., 2019), but so too was a change in social role or identity ("I went to Starbucks with my girlfriend, you know, I had my arm around her and being all lovey-dovey and some guy was standing behind us

and he was like, 'Oh, isn't that nice. How long have you been together?' And I was like, if we were two lesbians, this would not be happening", transsexual man; Sakai, 2003). The accumulated effects of these outcomes often inspired a new round of gender negotiation, as individuals sought to better understand the consequences for themselves and others that their changing bodies, identities, or social perspectives represented.

Discussion

In this study we synthesised the evidence from the qualitative literature on the experiences of gender diverse individuals and developed the Diverse Gender Identity Framework (DGIF), a contemporary integrative framework that represents the identity development experiences of gender diverse individuals. Our combined sample included in this review represents the perspectives of many binary and non-binary individuals at different stages in life. In taking a systematic approach to reviewing the qualitative literature we were able to capture the experiences of a much broader sample than would otherwise be possible from any single research study. By synthesising four decades of research, key commonalities in people's experiences could be identified, while linking to existing research exploring both gender development and identity development across the lifespan.

Reflecting developmental theory, for instance, the early emergence of a sense of difference seems to reflect gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). As children develop, they are exposed to the expectations of highly stereotypical gender roles by the people around them and are expected to rigidly conform to those expectations. Over time they become aware of what is considered appropriate for someone of their birth sex, and what is not. However, for gender diverse children there seems to exist a common, inherent mismatch between these external expectations and their developing sense of self. Rather than emerging gender identity aligning with their birth sex during this early developmental period, gender diverse children instead begin to become aware of a difference between themselves and others. Often, they lack the language or experience to articulate this difference, however.

Despite the presence of these feelings, gender expression or interests may begin to align with their birth sex regardless, as the social consequences of gender non-conformity are made clear by parental disapproval, or even punishment. This finding is very much in line with dual pathway models (e.g., Weisgram, 2016), which describes gender development for gender typical and gender atypical children. Contemporarily, a small (but growing) cohort of children are enjoying support for gender diverse behaviours and expression in early childhood, experiencing a developmental trajectory Medico and colleagues (2020) would categorise as the affirmed child. Our synthesis suggests that many of the individuals who professed

early feelings of gender anxiety seemed to instead follow Medico and colleague's silent child pathway, however. They were aware of their inherent difference but did not feel safe or supported in their environment to express that difference.

Beyond acknowledging these early developmental experiences, the DGIF also reflects a contemporary understanding regarding identity development. That is, it conceives the processes of achieving diverse gender identity in terms of negotiation and commitment, as opposed to identification of discrete milestones (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Within DGIF, negotiation and commitment processes instead resemble concepts of identity moratorium; active engagement with the possibilities of identity, without commitment (Marcia, 1966). However, while Marcia described this as a largely adolescent process, these identity processes can occur for gender diverse people at any age, depending on when they come understand that they are not cisgender.

Further, consequences of making commitments to diverse gender identity can lead to renegotiation of personal relationship to gender. For example, reactions to coming out, physical or mental changes brought about by medical transition, and even changing societal attitudes can alter how individuals interact with the world and experiences gender. While many gender diverse people do commit to a stable gender identity and expression eventually, the processes described within DGIF may be revisited many times. As a result, some gender diverse people may never achieve identity achievement in the classic sense, but instead come to a place of 'searching moratorium' (Crocetti et al., 2008). This type of moratorium is characterised by high levels of commitment to identity after extensive exploration, while remaining open to reconsidering aspects of identity throughout life.

It is during these processes of active gender negotiation and commitment making that binary and non-binary experiences begin to diverge within the DGIF. For example, binary-aligned individuals were more likely to adhere to normative expressions of masculinity and femininity and tended to express making specific efforts to learn or adopt these social roles more often than non-binary individuals. Relatedly, attitudes toward personal diverse gender identity were often much more polarised within binary-aligned participants. That is, binary-aligned participants either tended to embrace identity as a gender diverse person explicitly or minimise their identity as a gender diverse person entirely. This may reflect their personal reactions to broader societal norms, which tend to connote being gender diverse as inherently negative (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Rood et al., 2017). These norms may prompt binary-aligned people to choose to deemphasise their gender diverse identity to avoid stigma or harassment (especially when safety is concerned) or represent internalised transphobia. However, our findings suggest that these societal norms just as likely inspire gender diverse people to centralise their identity as an explicitly gender diverse person, as an act of defiance against these norms.

By contrast, non-binary individuals expressed and articulated their gender identities in more nuanced terms based on our synthesis. This is arguably attributable to the inherent ambiguity they have already surmounted in articulating their personal gender beyond society's binary norms. Here, the act of accurately labelling personal gender experience was a common concern for non-binary individuals, especially as language itself evolved in describing the gender experiences of people beyond the binary. Reflecting Levitt's work (2019), the act of defining and redefining gender was often expressed as ongoing. Participants articulated making space for themselves within gender diverse or queer communities through shared, evolving language, and being open to renegotiating those labels over time. More so than binary-aligned individuals, non-binary individuals were also more likely to reengage with active gender negotiation. The nuanced possibilities represented by non-binary identification may even inspire binary-aligned people come to identify as non-binary as they personally renegotiate their relationship with gender. Within our findings, this was particularly likely because of frustrations with having to conform to masculine or feminine expectations.

In contrast to binary individuals' efforts to fit masculine or feminine ideals, gender expression among non-binary individuals often involved considerations of alignment to an authentic inner self. That is, across our findings, non-binary individuals expressed seeking to align their gender expression with their "true" identity, rather than external ideals. That said, persistent marginalisation of non-binary identity from inside and outside of the broader gender diverse community sometimes influenced non-binary gender expression. For example, some participants spoke of dressing in a more masculine way to reduce misgendering despite a desire to appear androgynous, while others spoke of suppressing personal identity as a non-binary person when they felt they would be misgendered or electing to not share their gender identity at all. Notably, this finding was also reflected within Matsuno and colleagues (2022) work with non-binary youth, suggesting a countervailing force against identity development that resonates as authentic. The degree to which non-binary individuals felt compelled to suppress or distort their identity in these ways seemed to be driven by ever-present concerns regarding personal safety, and the centrality of identity. These safety concerns also reflected binary-aligned individuals' relationship with visibility of identity versus achievement of stealth.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the process of synthesis provided a rich and diverse corpus of data from which to draw interpretations, it is nonetheless constrained to the themes developed by the original authors of the studies, and the quotes they considered

representative of their samples. As such, despite being representative of over 1,700 gender diverse individuals, minorities within the gender diverse community may still be poorly represented, including but not limited to the experience of minority gender identities (non-binary individuals assigned male-at-birth, for example) and ethnically diverse individuals. When unambiguously reported, over 70% of the sample identified as White or European, and almost all studies were performed in the Western world. It is likely that the intersectional influence of ethnicity on diverse gender identity is better explored with in depth exploration of these processes through a lens of cultural psychology. This would be especially important in non-Western contexts which have their own rich traditions of gender diverse identification, such as India (Kalra, 2012).

Additionally, while the studies synthesised were extracted without reference to publication date, the visibility of gender diversity is increasing. It now receives extensive coverage within news media, politics, and is the subject of increasing scientific research (more than 80% of studies used in this analysis were published since 2010). The effects of this increased attention on the self-identification of gender diverse individuals is not yet understood, and represents an important topic for future research. Longitudinal research should centralise not just the meeting of milestones within potentially hostile social climates, but the processes of identity development that occurs between the meeting of those milestones, or even after them, particularly within fast-changing social and political landscapes.

Practice Implications

The DGIF offers a contemporary model of diverse gender identity development, informed by our integration of an expansive catalogue of qualitative findings, representing more than 1,700 participants. In doing so we have provided opportunities for researchers to immediately build upon these findings, without unintentionally duplicating existing works performed with this marginalised and difficult-to-access community. Notably, the DGIF affirms several of the processes highlighted in existing models, including: the presence of feelings of difference from a young age, the explicit role of experimentation and exploration, and the sheer psychic weight of the decision-making processes gender diverse people undergo as they learn how to articulate their gender identity (Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004). However, it also integrates the essential experience of a fast-growing population of non-binary individuals. In doing so, the DGIF more fully reflects contemporary findings regarding the intersection of visibility and stigma (Matsuno et al., 2022; Rood et al., 2017), especially the conditions under which gender diverse people feel empowered to express their authentic gender identity.

Importantly, DGIF explicitly removes medical transition as a discrete stage or milestone, treating this as neither necessary nor mandatory for the development and personal affirmation of gender diverse identity. Instead, the framework positions these decisions as choices that gender diverse individuals make for themselves, constrained or enabled by the context in which they are embedded. Specifically, medical transition should be considered with respect to the many individuals who either did not want to pursue medical transition (wholly, or in part), or experienced financial, social, or legislative barriers that rendered such interventions out of reach. By decentralising medical transition from the gender diverse narrative in this way and introducing the notion that developmental processes may be reciprocal or ongoing, the DGIF functions to introduce the more nuanced and fluid non-binary experiences into thinking about diverse gender identities.

Given this, DGIF has the potential to support education and competency building for psychological and medical practitioners (people who gender diverse individuals may be obligated to interact with in the course of their development). Here, it serves to helpfully deconstruct largely normative perspectives of what gender diverse identities ‘should’ look like (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Based on GDIF, practitioners would do well to regard gender diverse identity development not as staged, or mile-stoned, but as organic. Misperceptions of gender diversity as a mental health ‘syndrome’ with predictable origins and reproduceable steps to resolution may unfortunately close doors to necessary support for gender diverse people and inspire a lack of confidence in practitioners to respect lived experience and meet developmental needs for many more.

Conclusion

The current study introduced a new model of gender identity development, the DGIF, based on a systematic review of the qualitative literature, representing more than 1,700 participants. By centring the experience of identity development on exploration, information-gathering, and commitment-making, DGIF seeks to disentangle gender diverse identity development from existing procedural and milestone models (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Lev, 2004; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012), and presents a contemporary perspective diverse gender identity development, one that is more familiar to those who work within developmental contexts (Crocetti et al., 2008; Marcia, 1966). DGIF contrasts with prior models which articulate developmental stages as relatively discrete, occurring only once and being considered largely resolved thereafter (Lev, 2004), or focus upon the identification of milestones (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Instead, the DGIF conceptualises gender diverse identity – especially non-binary identity – as

a potentially lifelong process of internal and external gender negotiation that acknowledges the complexity and variability of gender diverse individuals’ identity development.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to participate Not applicable.

Human and Animal Ethics Not applicable.

Consent for publication All authors consent to publication of the manuscript.

Availability of supporting data All data analysed during this study are included in its supplementary information files.

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