Journeys Towards an Acceptable Gender Expression: Narratives of People Living with Gender Variance

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Context of the Research

• Research towards Doctoral Degree in clinical psychology
• Researcher’s interest in gender as a social construct
• Meeting people identifying as Gender Variant
• Interest in identity and the impact of sitting outside of a social norm has on one’s sense of self
Gender

- Ozar (2006) defines gender as having 4 major tenets:
  - There are two genders
  - We all belong to one
  - Gender is permanent
  - Gender is biological/not individual choice
Gender

- Gender Identity- An individual’s basic sense of being male or female
- Gender Role-behaviours, attitudes and characteristics appropriate for a specific gender
- Sex-The biological aspects of being male or female
- Transgender-Umbrella descriptor for anyone who believes their gender is different to their biological sex
Gender Variance

- Great variety between individuals
- A sense of being the opposite gender to the assigned gender at birth
- A sense of being neither male nor female-living between socially defined groups
- Gender as fluid-moving between defined groups (i.e. male and female) but static
- Gender as fluid-between male, female, third gender, non-gender, or other self defined category and constantly moving between genders
The history of Gender Variance

- Many of the theories (Biological, feminist, Queer) seeking to understand GV retain the basic premise of the gender binary; you are either male or female
- Transgender theory including the ideas of Roen (2001) and Ngoshi & Brzuzi (2012) offer the idea of a both/neither conceptualisation as well as GV not necessarily being about transition from one physically from one category to another
GVt Narratives

• Prior to 1960’s-GV as psychiatric condition-paranoia and delusions; *The Madness Narrative*

• By the 1960’s-The idea of sex-reassignment surgeries was being publicised and the notion of correcting ‘Biological mistakes’; *The Illness Narrative*

• In the 1980’s-DSM III-the maintenance of a two gender system-diagnosis necessary for SRS and psychotherapy recommended. Some didn’t fit neatly...
GVt Narratives

• Why are the social and political narratives relevant and important?
• What do they tell us about who we are, who we aren’t?
• The influence over the meaning we give to our experience and therefore the construction of our identity
So, who is it we are talking about?

- 1 in 4000 (DoH, 2008); 1500 per year (GIRES, 2009)
- Based on easiest measured group-those seeking gender transition
- Underestimation?
So, what happens next?

- World Professional Association for Transgender Health (2011) outline:
  - Primary care presentation
  - Referral- psychopathology ruled out as primary source of gender related distress
  - Consider options including counselling/ psychotherapy
  - Real life experience
  - Hormone therapy
  - Gender confirmation surgery
Identity

• In line with the stance of the research, narrative theories were drawn on:
  ▫ Each person narrates their own lives and this constitutes the construction of the self
  ▫ The interpretation and evaluation of the events in our lives
  ▫ Continuity over time
  ▫ Identity is the stories that a person tells about themselves
  ▫ Importance of context and culture
How do GVt individuals narrate their experiences?

- Identity is achieved through social interactions
- Identity formed in relation to the ideas that peers, families, social systems, legal systems, media and political systems—
  - *What if you fall between socially defined groups?*
  - *What ideas do you draw on?*
  - *How does identity construction take place?*
Key considerations for GVt identity

- Silencing and secrecy
- Additional formation work
- Decisions about physical changes
- Sharing one’s experiences with others
Aims of the current research

• Any person that experiences their gender in incompatible or incongruent ways face personal and social challenges
• The decision to live outside of the ‘binary’ is an important one and has implications for meaningful identity constructions
• But many people do it...wonderfully!
Key research questions

- How do GVt individuals story their lives?
- How to GVt individuals construct the changing nature of their experiences over time?
- How do the stories that GVt individuals tell about their lives reflect or resist the dominant social and medical narratives?
How to research these questions?

• The need to qualify rather than quantify
• The increasing interest in subjective experience
• Lots of detail from small numbers vs. little detail from large numbers
Narrative Inquiry

- We are all natural story tellers
- Narrative helps us link the past, present and future—it’s a meaning making function
- Untold and Unheard stories; the importance of understanding marginalisation
- Stories told by individuals are populated by those known to them as well as social and political narratives
- Local and wider contexts
Research Design

- Consultation
- Recruitment-7 people
- Recruited based on self identifying with the criteria:
  - Exclusions-non English speaking and those identifying as transsexual
- Interview 55-92 minutes
- Transcription
- Analysis
- Write up
- Disseminate
Interview Guide

- Gender
- Important parts of your life
- Physical body
- Help seeking
- Relationships with others
- Gender expression
- Future
- Invitation to ask questions
Who are the participants?

- People identifying and living outside of the gender binary
- People living in their preferred gender without surgical intervention
- People living without full transition to the ‘opposite’ gender
## Demographics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Preferred Gender Identity</th>
<th>Preferred Pro-noun</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Relationship status</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raphael</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male-identified</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>Fulltime student and volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>They (or don’t use one)</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajax</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
<td>They</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Tranny Boy</td>
<td>They</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alix</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>Prefer not to use one</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>White European</td>
<td>Divorced and single</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Global Impressions

- See Handouts
Key Findings

- The first experiences of understanding GV was important and lead to seeking ‘similar others’
- Sharing experiences with others was an anxiety provoking time and influenced decision making around ‘treatment’
- Relationships with other was important in identity construction but also typified some of the challenges faced
- Challenges were told as both historic and ongoing
- Important challenges were made to the dominant narratives of ‘isolation’ and loneliness
Two main storylines

• How I got here
  ▫ **Subplots:**
  ▫ - Where it all began
  ▫ - Is there anyone else like me?
  ▫ - What am I going to do about this?
  ▫ - Telling others who I am
Two main storylines

• It’s not always straightforward being me
  ▫ - Being the same AND being different
  ▫ - Day to day
  ▫ - The people I meet
Implications for clinical practice

• Providing individualised choice
  ▫ Belief in strength and resilience and meaning making

• Provisions for systems
  ▫ Where can we learn from?

• Community psychology and social responsibility
  ▫ Where do we direct energy in change?

• Collaboration
  ▫ Where are we best placed to learn from?
Where next?

- Further Narrative Inquiry with families of people choosing GVt identities
- Working with schools, communities and systems—we’re all part of lots of them
- Experiences of parents of people choosing GVt identities
Finally

• Let’s discuss any questions/ideas/thoughts!