Transgender Identity and the Experience of Transition

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**Important Terminology**

**Gender** - the essence of what it means to be a man or a woman.

**Transgender** - the experience of identifying as a gender other than one’s assigned gender at birth.

**Transition** - a process representing a shift from presenting according to one’s assigned gender to an authentic expression or presentation of identity.
Transgender individuals face significant occupational barriers. These barriers become especially pronounced during transition. In occupational therapy and science literature, research has not focused on the transition process. (Beagan et. al., 2012; Jauk, 2013; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014)
Research Question

Central Question
● What is the experience of transition for transgender persons?

Sub questions
● What is the meaning and significance of changing one’s presentation to match one’s inward identity?
● Which occupations are employed to facilitate transitioning?
● Which environmental aspects support and which inhibit the transition process?
● What are the social implications of transition?
Method

Transcendental phenomenology

- Views phenomena as a transaction between one’s personal meanings and external world
- Describes the lived experience of phenomena
- Emphasizes textured description and limited researcher interpretation

(Turpin, 2014)
Participants

Female to Male
- Samuel
  - 48 yrs old

Third Gender
- Dapo
  - 28 yrs old

Gender Neutral
- Adrian
  - 18 yrs old

Male to Female
- Laurie
  - 51 yrs old

James
- 47 yrs old

Tessa
- 48 yrs old
Data Collection & Analysis

Collection:
- Semi-structured in-person interviews (1-2 hours in length)
- Member checking (follow-up interviews)
- All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim

Analysis:
- Horizontalization of significant statements
- Significant statements $\rightarrow$ assigned meaning $\rightarrow$ clusters of meaning $\rightarrow$ essence
Results

The Essence of Transition

- Requires reconsideration of the gender binary
- Essential to authentic expression of identity
- Characterized by inherent risk
Transition is a reconsideration of the gender binary

I’m gender neutral. Maybe that means that I don’t have a gender, maybe that means I have more than one. Self-acceptance was just allowing myself to be that individual.

- Adrian

I was in that awkward transitional phase of being in-between and my insurance assigned me to a place that had binary bathrooms. I really didn’t know which one to use.

- Samuel
Transition is inherently risky

[Once you transition] the way that people then behave...it’s entirely different, and it’s sort of like going from having lunches at the yacht club and meeting congressmen by first name...to being sort of like the dog shit on the bottom of society’s shoe.

- Laurie
Transition is inherently risky

It’s very hard to break your mother’s heart. To have your own mother basically saying ‘I’d rather have you dead as a girl than living as a guy.’

- Samuel

There’s always this anxiety and fear...the scariest part for me is taking [public transportation], especially if I’m really dressed up.

- Dapo
Transition is necessary to enable the expression of an authentic identity

To transition for me is just basically matching my body closer to who I really am; the way I would want the world to see me because that’s how I see me.

-James

Transitioning meant being able to live my truth...it was more liberating...I became happier. I find that I’m actually able to share more with people because I don’t have to filter myself anymore.

-Tessa
Transition is necessary to enable the expression of an authentic identity

When I got my first legal document with M (male) on it instead of F (female)...It was the first time that I’d ever see that in writing...it wasn’t just in my own head anymore. I had this official piece of paper to say that someone else can finally see me and I’m not invisible anymore.

-Samuel
Discussion

Strengths:

- Detailed personal histories situated in context
- Diversity of gender expressions
- Documents multifactored impact of transition on participation in meaningful activities

Limitations:

- Small sample size
Discussion

Making Space Beyond the Gender Binary

- Consultation to promote gender-neutral restrooms
- Revision of current medical forms

Occupational Justice

- Increasing social participation
  - Group therapy
Conclusion

- Transition is:
  1. a reconsideration of the gender binary
  2. inherently risky
  3. necessary to enable the expression of an authentic identity

- Occupational therapists and health care practitioners should be attuned to the complex nature of gender identity and the risks and steps involved in pursuing a more authentic self-expression

- Most importantly, this education should lead to client-centered care and advocacy
If you have any questions or would like a copy of our resources, please e-mail:

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