Exploring gender identity through a camera's lens: A literature review

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Exploring gender identity through a camera's lens: A literature review

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

Despite a growing number of individuals who identify as non-binary, there is still a lack of understanding, language and acceptance of their identity. Dominant narratives perpetuate the gender binary and often exclude individuals who identify outside of this narrative. With so little representation regarding non-binary identities (spelling), how can therapists support potential non-binary clients? Phototherapy may be used as a viable intervention for non-binary individuals as they continue to explore their gender identity. Through a review of research and literature, this thesis attempts to gain information regarding gender identity development based on environmental factors such as dominant narratives and socialization.

Keywords: Non-binary, gender identity, phototherapy, dominant narratives
Exploring gender identity through a camera's lens: A literature review

Introduction

Looking back through old family photographs, through the pictures on my phone and social media, I can see major changes and fluctuations on how I present myself. I laugh and crack jokes with friends about how I used to straighten my hair every night in middle school so I would be presentable for school the next day. I look at my old outfits, the clothes my mom bought me that I wore because they were all I had. The worst was the entire process of getting dressed each morning; I gave myself at least an hour to get dressed because I would change at least three or four times. I remember the tears when I could not find an outfit that ‘felt right,’ but I felt pressured to look feminine. It would take years to figure out what the feeling of being out of place in my own clothes meant.

After the laughter, I started to remember the feeling of anxiety that underlined the whole process. I look back at the long, straight hair and feel uncomfortable. I look back at the tight fitted shirts and the feminizing outfits I wore, all in an effort to look as a young girl should. Many of these old photos act as a harsh reminder of the confusion I felt and did not have a name for.

Viewing old photographs can be painful. I no longer feel like the person in them; they do not reflect my internal state. I still experience this discomfort at times. I now recognize this feeling as gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria refers to feelings of discomfort and “psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one’s sex assigned at birth and one’s gender identity” (Turban, 2020, para. 1)

Gender dysphoria is a unique experience for each individual. Some may experience discomfort with their existing body features, or as Mihran Nersesyan (2019) explains their own
experience with androgyny: “What I experience is a profound sense that certain attributes are missing from my body” (para. 2). It is important to note that not every transgender or non-binary individual experiences gender dysphoria (Chen, 2016). Some transgender individuals may also still identify within the binary narrative of gender, and “clinical definitions of gender dysphoria have centered primarily on a binary conceptualization of gender” (Galupo, 2020, p. 3). As non-binary individuals identify outside of the gender binary, their identity, expression, and even dysphoria is experienced and expressed differently than transgender individuals who identify within the binary.

For many who experience gender dysphoria, there are ways of addressing the discomfort. This could be through therapy, gender affirming surgeries and hormone treatments, or simply through an individual wearing clothes and/or make-up that feels gender affirming for them. Other ways of coping with these feelings may be finding or building a community of others with similar identities, expressing your feelings and prioritizing your emotional well-being, and engaging in creative pursuits (Nersesyan, 2019).

Knowing that not every non-binary person wants to, or has the means to transition, I began thinking of ways to address gender dysphoria with my clients and support them in finding ways to cope with it. As an artist, engaging in artmaking to process emotions is natural for me. Through my artwork, I can create an image that is a true reflection of the self and my gender identity. This literature review will support my own self-exploration while allowing me to gain perspective and insight in how to best serve my clients. How can artmaking promote exploration of gender identity? The first barrier to answering this question was how to navigate the cultural norms that are pervasive in developing gender identity.
In adolescence, we begin to establish roles within larger systems such as our community and culture, and smaller systems like school and family. This exploration of identity is part of a formative stage of development, which is important for an individual to feel secure within their system. As Erikson (1959) theorized in his stages of development, failing to develop a secure identity in this stage of adolescence may lead to a sense of role confusion. An individual’s developing identity requires support from their environment, as the “individual and society are intricately woven” (p. 114), the two are “dynamically related in continual change”. An individual may have a very secure sense of their identity, but if society is dismissive of their identity, then there is conflict regarding the individual’s self-image.

**Literature Review Preamble**

Terms for identities in the LGBTQIA+ community are changing rapidly, and it is important for this thesis to be as up to date as possible in the terms used. Although a quick Google search could bring up a definition for any term, a crowd sourced LGBTQIA+ dictionary used for this thesis was Queer Undefined (Goldstein-Weiss, 2018). This website is a database for the evolving language used in the LGBTQIA+ community. Part of the challenge with engaging in best practices and gender affirming therapy is staying up to date with the most current and respectful terminology, as these terms are “fluid and continue to evolve over time” (Morgan, 2020, p. 2). My hope in using Queer Undefined as a resource is to bring awareness to the fluid and ever-changing language used within the non-binary and LGBTQ+ community. The site’s goal is to “decrease barriers to conversation and understanding by opening a space of learning and knowledge-sharing, where we can collaboratively make meaning as a community” (Goldstein-Weiss, 2018, para. 1). Each definition is submitted by individuals, meaning there is no ‘official’ definition for any one term. This has been incredibly useful in clarifying some
nuances in certain labels or identities, as some individuals even include their own experience of relating to a specific identity.

Using Queer Undefined as a resource is particularly helpful for a few reasons, one reason being that you gain insight from multiple individual experiences and this can broaden a narrow label and shine light on the nuances of queer identities. Another reason is with many similar but nuanced definitions, someone who is questioning their identity may feel less pressure to force themselves to ‘fit’ into a label as they may have felt with their originally assigned gender. Reading others’ interpretations and experiences of gender identity is a part of exploring different identities and is a vital part of developing a personal identity. Gaining perspective from multiple viewpoints broadens one’s experience of the world and allows space for individuals to build upon their own identity.

I will begin by clarifying the difference between sex and gender. Sex or biological sex is a label (male or female) that an individual is assigned at birth based on the genitals that individual is born with and the chromosomes they have. Gender refers to the “socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men” (Newman, 2018, para. 14). These roles and norms vary from culture to culture and can change over time. Gender identity is an individual’s internal sense of being male, female, both, neither and/or another gender. A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth would be considered cisgender. The term transgender refers to an individual who identifies as a gender other than the sex one was assigned at birth. Transgender may be used as a personal identity, but it also serves as an umbrella term for other identities. Under the transgender umbrella are the identities non-binary, genderfluid, agender, genderqueer, demigirl, demiboy and many others. So, an individual may identify as both
transgender and non-binary, as they may not identify with their assigned gender however, they do not feel that they are the ‘opposite’ of their assigned gender. Gender expression is the external expression of your gender identity, typically through their appearance, dress, and behavior (e.g. a girl may feel comfortable wearing a dress for a stereotypically feminine appearance). Some individuals feel more comfortable presenting as androgynous, which is the combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics to a more ambiguous form. Gender non-conforming and queer also may be used as a general term to describe an individual who does not conform to the current gender binary.

For the sake of consistency in this thesis, I will be using the term non-binary to refer to individuals who identify as a gender other than exclusively male or female. Within this definition of non-binary there are many nuanced ways of identifying; qualitative research on this topic will be explored to help gain perspective on the distinctly individualized experience of gender identity and expression. A list of gender identities and other terms referenced in this paper will be included with their definitions at the end of this paper for the reader’s reference. It should be noted that the glossary of terms is not an exhaustive list of identities. Each definition will be slightly different based on an individual’s experience and way of experiencing their gender.

While not explored in this thesis, another term worth distinguishing is sexual orientation. This refers to how a person identifies their sexual attraction to another person. It is important to acknowledge that sexual orientation and gender identity are not the same, though can be related. Gender may or may not play a role in someone’s sexual attraction towards another person.
Literature Review

Identity Development

Viewing gender identity development through both a stage model of development and systems model is helpful to provide a full picture of the nuanced experience of identity development. This thesis is informed by both Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development and Brofenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as frameworks in understanding gender identity development. Though they are helpful frameworks and may serve as a starting point, both theories are outdated and should be looked at critically.

Though the stage of adolescence is well known for being the prime for identity formation and role development, gender identity development begins much earlier than in the teen years. Diamond (2020) reviews cognitive development in early childhood. By the age of two, most children begin to understand the physical differences between males and females. By age three, they have developed the understanding and vocabulary to label a person by gender, and can easily identify themselves as either a boy or a girl. At this time, children also begin to develop a sense of self and search their environment for feedback on how they should behave (Diamond, 2020, p. 111). From this feedback, people are socialized and begin to develop their own way of expressing their gender identity. As Gilbert (2009) points out, some individuals learn that there are multiple ways to express gender, while a majority of people grow up in environments that only offer two expressions of gender: man and woman. By age four, children typically have developed a stable internal sense of their gender. However, this does not always mean that the sex they have been assigned matches their internal understanding of their gender.

Though children may develop and feel comfortable with their understanding of gender, it is not uncommon for individuals to begin questioning their identity later on in life. Children
often will explore other genders by dressing up and wearing makeup and trying on opposite roles throughout their late childhood (8-12 years old). They may even revisit this exploration again in adolescence (Kuper, 2018, p.12). During adolescent development, there are both physiological and cognitive changes that occur that likely contribute to adolescents questioning their identity and place in society (Sokol, 2009). During this time there is a newfound sense of autonomy, and individuals begin to evaluate interpersonal relationships, values, and personal identity. It would make sense then that during this time many adolescents reevaluate their gender identity, and they may find that their internal identity does not match with society’s expectations. Erikson (1968) would have called this role confusion. During times of change and questioning, there is space for confusion. This confusion is not the fault of the individual, however, and instead is due to discrepancies between their identity and the dominant cultures’ and society’s expectation of gendered norms. Adolescents who are experiencing confusion regarding their gender identity should not be pathologized for their developing understanding of their identity. Most adolescents will go through some form of role confusion during their development, though many will resolve these feelings by emerging adulthood. For some, these feelings will continue on past their teen years, or they may begin to reflect on their gender identity and ultimately recognize that they gender non-conforming.

Role confusion inherently recognizes that the individual will be affected by their environment during their development, as their identity development is contingent on how society perceives and accepts that individual. The ecological systems theory describes human development as “A transactional process in which an individual’s development is influenced by his or her interactions with various aspects and spheres of their environment” (Patel, 2011). The major feature in Bronfenbrenner’s theory is the “person process-context model” (Darling, 2007,
p. 207), viewing the individual as the center of their development, not the environment. The environment has a direct impact on the individual, however the individual creates meaning and develops their identity through these interactions with their environment. Darling (2007) summarizes Brofenbrenner’s view on gender through socialization rather than biological differences; girls and boys are not inherently different, but their gender development differs because of the parenting style used and environmental factors. The dominant narrative is that boys and girls are raised differently due to differing social roles and places within society. For adolescents who are in the midst of identity exploration, “meaning was created by the developing person as a product of all their experiences” (Darling, 2007, p. 206). Darling (2007) goes on to explain that often differences in roles between men and women are not related to biological differences, but the meaning that the individual assigns to their experience (p. 206). Though an individual may be socialized as a boy, for instance, this individual may assign different meaning to how they experience being a boy or man, or they may not identify with this gender at all.

When one’s identity is acknowledged and supported by their family, friends and society, this support allows for the individual to find a place within society. Most importantly, developing a sense of identity that is authentic to the individual and supported by their environment, “provides one with a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home in one’s body, a sense of direction in one’s life, and a sense of mattering to those who count” (Sokol, 2009, p. 4). As an individual continues to grow and develop, they are constantly surrounded by narratives that either reinforce or dismiss their identity, influencing how they express and accept their identity.

Dominant Narratives and Gender Identity

It goes without question that there are norms and expectations within every culture regarding how one should dress, speak, and behave. The majority of the population often
determine and reflects these dominant narratives. Dominant narratives are “culturally shared stories that provide guidance for how to belong to, and be a good member of, a given culture” (McLean, 2017, p. 2), and these narratives are internalized and begin to shape individuals’ identity development. When these narratives are internalized, they can severely limit the ways in which an individual perceives themselves and others (Hadley, 2013). This can cause conflict if an individual does not align with the dominant narrative of their culture, and if they are consistently dismissed then they may even feel invisible. This has been the case with non-binary and gender nonconforming identities. Internalization of dominant narratives that do not reflect an individual’s gender identity may just end up causing the individual to repress or hide their feelings. Kuper’s (2018) study shares how several transgender participants “discussed an initial period of denial or change attempts, which were often influenced by interpersonal relationships, namely parents and peers” (p.12).

The dominant narrative being perpetuated within our culture is the concept of binary gender. This concept is also referred to as bigenderism, which “maintains there are only two genders, which correspond with the two sexes, male and female” (Gilbert, 2009, para. 1). The strictness of this model stigmatizes anyone who does not fit neatly into society’s perception of their sex and gender. Given that male and female are the only two gender identities that are generally accepted as the norm, this dominant narrative makes the process of identity development “...quite conscious, and challenging, as individuals seek alternative narratives to guide personal story construction” (McLean, 2017, p. 2). Robins (2016) acknowledges how difficult challenging gendered language is, as “one of the most concrete manifestations of the gender binary is also among the most resistant to change: the words we use to talk about gender and gender identity” (p.73). Given such a narrow view, gendered language creates a challenge
for individuals who do not fit the binary narrative as they consciously begin exploring their identity. Exploration is essential in the development of identity in any stage of life. This is especially true for individuals who are beginning to question (or reevaluate) their gender identity, though it could be argued that it is important for even cisgendered individuals to engage in some form of gender identity exploration, if only to challenge their own internalized biases and assumptions of gender. Self-reflection and ‘trying on’ different labels can be a useful tool in understanding your internal sense of self.

Though there are labels to describe one's gender that falls beyond male and female, the language used is inherently based on the binary. For instance, there are many terms to describe and label gender identity, however they tend to use ‘gender’ as the base word and add an adjective or suffix to the label (genderfluid, polygender, third gender etc.). Other cultures do have a history of a third gender (Scobey-Thal, 2014), which is typically described to be a mix of both male and female characteristics. Through my research I have found no English word for a third gender. There is a lack of language, understanding and visibility within the non-binary gender community. This is important because dominant narratives can become restrictive internal monologues that dictate individuals’ perceptions of the world.

With a growing number of people who identify as non-binary, there needs to be more acknowledgement of their identity. English vernacular often defaults to male or female, even with seemingly insignificant things such as dating sites, applications, or surveys that require the individual state their gender; many do not have options outside of male or female. Though there is occasionally an option for ‘other.’ Even the 2020 US Census only gives the option for respondents to answer with male or female (Schmid, 2020). It is estimated that 1.4 million Americans identify as transgender (Flores, 2016). Given that about a third of transgender
individuals identify as nonbinary (Matsuno, 2017), that is a large portion of the population who are not represented by the language used in the Census and other publications, research, or day-to-day interactions. Considering that non-binary and transgender identities are more prevalent especially among young people, it can be assumed that the overall number of Americans who identify as non-binary or transgender has grown. This shines light on a large gap in mainstream visibility of these identities, and only further adds to the need to challenge this binary narrative.

Though non-binary genders have been recorded in many cultures throughout history, only recently have non-binary genders become a well-known identity. The dominant culture narrates that there are two genders, but as more knowledge is gained on the experience of non-binary people, the research asserts that gender is much more complex than previously thought. With increasing access to the internet and exposure to a diverse experience of gender, more adolescents are questioning or challenging the rigid dominant narrative that there are only two genders. Sharing perspectives and alternative narratives to the dominant binary opens individuals up to alternative personal narratives in defining their gender identity.

**Considerations for Therapy with Non-binary Clients**

Non-binary individuals are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, bullying (as adolescents), suicidal ideation and self-harm, as well as other mental health concerns (Newcomb et al., 2020). This is due largely to the lack of acceptance of non-binary identities within family systems and society as a whole (Diamond, 2020, p. 111). With a disproportionate amount of individuals experiencing this dismissal of their identity, a major part of treatment needs to be gender affirming. Therapists involved with non-binary clients should be knowledgeable of the unique stressors that non-binary individuals face.
Clients should feel comfortable, seen and supported in a therapeutic environment. Part of a therapist’s job is to create an inclusive and client-centered practice. This is why training to work with a variety of individuals from differing cultural or ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientation or gender identity is increasingly important. In their longitudinal study, Budge et al. (2020) examined the importance of therapy tailored towards minorities and targeting the specific stressors that these populations face. Their study specifically looked at transgender individuals’ experiences within a therapeutic environment.

Participants were split into two subgroups: the TA (transgender affirmative) treatment group and the BAMS (building awareness of minority stressors) + TA treatment group. The group that received TA treatment engaged with therapists that received training to be transgender affirmative. This included how to ask about pronouns, how to discuss therapist gender identity with clients, and basic knowledge of transgender health. The BAMS + TA group received the same TA therapy as the rest, with the added element of addressing specific stressors that transgender and non-binary individuals face. Results showed that participants in the BAMS group “experienced a reduction in internalized transphobia and non-affirmation experiences” (Budge, 2020, p. 8). All of these factors help to create a stronger client-therapist relationship, by showing the client that they are seen and validating their experience. Even with special considerations taken, it may still be that some clients are not as forthcoming about their gender identity. The first step in making space for clients to share this part of their identity may be as simple as introducing yourself (the therapist) with your pronouns.

Budge (2020) addresses the differing psychological distress experienced by non-binary individuals compared to their cis-gendered counterparts. Interventions should be tailored to the individual client. Their study also addresses the concern that much of mainstream research
categorizes sexual orientation, transgender and genderqueer peoples together, risking conflating sexual orientation with gender and vice versa. Other studies focused on gender non-conforming populations still typically use binary language (trans woman and trans man), which still leaves out those who do not identify within the binary perspective of gender.

As stated in an earlier section, some non-binary individuals may experience gender identity and dysphoria differently than their binary transgender counterparts. Galupo (2020) outlines the findings of their studying, acknowledging these differences:

1) not all trans and nonbinary individuals desire a feminine or masculine presentation, 2) androgyny or gender fluidity may be regarded by some as the ideal presentation, 3) gender dysphoria is not static, and 4) traditional gender affirmation interventions may not address the unique concerns of nonbinary individuals (p.16).

Gender-affirming surgeries and hormone treatment may not be a viable or desirable option for every non-binary individual, as these gender affirming “options may address some aspects of their gender dysphoria, they would necessarily give rise to other troubling aspects of distress” (Galupo, 2020, p.15). For instance, hormones may help to shift their body shape to be more androgenous, but their voice and hair distribution may be affected in ways that could be perceived as more masculine or feminine. Considering gender affirming hormone treatments or surgeries is not always an easy decision for non-binary individuals, and clients should be supported by their therapist in their exploration and process of making a decision if they feel it is an option they would like to pursue. Though research on treatment for transgender youth has grown, there is still a gap in research regarding best practices with non-binary individuals. Those who view gender as a binary tend to incorrectly assume that all transgender and/or non-binary individuals desire to undergo a full transition (Diamond, 2020).
Therapists working with non-binary clients, particularly adolescents, should be aware that those who identify as non-binary are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation and self-harm (Diamond, 2020). Given this information, therapists should be aware that these individuals may require extra support and safety planning in order to provide the best care for their clients. Due to particular minority stressors faced by both transgender and non-binary clients, it is also important to approach treatment with these particular minority stressors in mind. Though not a small task, it is essential for therapists to “provide alternative narratives that will minimize or even eradicate the damage that these oppressive dominant narratives do for people who are not in the advantaged groups” (Hadley, 2013, p. 380), such as those non-binary individuals who do not feel they are represented in the larger population.

**Non-binary and Gender Non-Conforming Photography**

An important part of this literature review has been finding artists and photographers who identify as non-binary or who are exploring gender through their artwork. Viewing their artwork and reading their stories provides unique insight into their own experience with gender.

Non-binary artist Laurence Philomene utilizes color theory to explore gender binaries and photograph non-binary individuals “as they wish to be seen” (Persson, 2018, para. 2). Philomene draws on their own experience as inspiration to explore themes such as the emotional effects of colors, identity and femininity. Philomene explains the inspiration for their series, *Non-Binary Portraits*:

I started this series in 2016, when I was starting to see a rise in trans representation in the media. However, the representation I was seeing was still very set in binary ideas of gender and didn’t really reflect the reality of the trans community I exist in, so I wanted
to create images that showed another side of trans lives and trans bodies (Persson, 2018, para. 8).

By projecting their own feelings of gender onto others with the combination of bold, vibrant colors and composition, Philomene creates beautiful images to represent a community that they feel is underrepresented.

When asked why the representation of trans, intersex, gender-fluid and non-binary individuals is important to them, Philomene responded, “I create these images because I’m trying to make sense of myself, and hopefully it helps other people feel validated along the way!” (Persson, 2018, para. 11). Philomene uses photography as a way to create a space for them to explore their own identity by projecting these feelings onto others who feel similarly. Through their photographs, Philomene is building awareness of a community that lacks the language to fully describe their experience as non-binary and creating a visual language for others to identify with.

I feel it was important to include artists who are exploring themes of gender identity. Philomene is using their art to share their own and others’ unique experiences with identity development; their process can be used to help inform developing treatment goals and art therapy directives. As someone who identifies as non-binary, it is also incredibly gratifying to find representation of my identity within the art community. It was not until I began seeing representation of non-binary individuals on social media that I even knew there were alternatives to the gender binary. Finally having knowledge of different identities allows my own exploration to begin. For many children and adolescents that are experiencing feelings of confusion or dysphoria regarding their gender, representation can be immensely beneficial to their gender identity development.
Phototherapy

Photography has been used as a form of artistic expression since the first camera was developed. As an artistic medium, photography is able to capture a moment unlike drawings or paintings. Photographs freeze the exact moment, preserving them in a more immediate way than other art mediums. So, “in this sense, it can easily be seen how a camera's lens always focuses inward at least as much as it does outward toward the subject of the photographer's gaze” (Weiser, 2001, para. 3), revealing a more intimate and honest product once developed. One of the first psychologists to begin exploring the therapeutic use of photography, Weiser defines phototherapy as “the use of photography and personal snapshots within the framework of therapeutic practice, where trained mental health professionals use these techniques when counseling clients” (Weiser, 2001, para. 29).

There is also an important distinction to be made between phototherapy and therapeutic photography, that is “self-initiated rather than therapist-precipitated, done by individuals by and for themselves for the purpose of their own personal growth, self-discovery or broader uses of the camera as an agent of social change or for personal/political artistic statements” (Weiser, 2001, para. 29). Both practices are important and can be supportive in the therapeutic and healing process, however when addressing phototherapy with clients, this thesis is referring to the former definition.

Phototherapy is an offshoot of art therapy, though with its own unique qualities. Phototherapy is not a rigid practice, it is “a collection of flexible techniques, rather than fixed directives” (para. 11), and as it is not based in any one theoretical framework, “it can be used by any kind of trained counselor or therapist” (Weiser, 2001). Phototherapy and art therapy share similar goals in that art is used as a medium for expression and communication in a therapeutic
setting. Phototherapy is unique in that photography is more accessible to those who may feel intimidated by art making such as drawing or painting. Both therapies are able to communicate a client’s internal world through artwork but unlike art therapy, which externalizes internal subjects, phototherapy is dependent on internalized external subjects. While art therapy can help a client to make sense of their inner experience, phototherapy can help clients to organize and make sense of the external world by processing photographs as a reflection of their reality. As a projective process, photography can be “that we take photos of what is important in our lives, often at an unconscious level, and that in many ways all photographs we take are to some extent also self-portraits” (Loewenthal, 2013, p. 6).

In her book Phototherapy Techniques Judy Weiser (1999) explores how photography can be used as a therapeutic tool by examining five different techniques that support the therapeutic process:

- The projective process, which is about ‘using photographic images to explore clients’ perceptions, values and expectations’
- Working with self-portraits in order to enable clients to understand the images they make of themselves.
- Seeing other perspectives, which enable clients to examine photographs taken of them by others.
- Metaphors of self-construction, which is looking at ways of reflecting on photographs taken or collected by the client.
- Photo systems, which are ways of reviewing family albums and photo-biographical collections.
Out of all the techniques above, the most notable for this thesis is regarding working with self-portraits “in order to enable clients to understand the images they make of themselves” (Weiser, 1999). Though there are many forms and styles of photography, self-portraits seem the most appropriate form to support gender identity development. For anyone questioning their identity, it is well known how easy it is to question your own judgment and insight. Loewenthal (2013) points out how “photographs and taking photographs help people to perceive events and to realise their importance at a non-verbal level” (p. 28). Those who identify as non-binary often do not have the language available to describe their experience, so to engage in this non-verbal form of expression may be a step towards developing that internal feeling and externalizing it in the form of images and artwork.

Given this idea of photographs reflecting the unconscious internal world, it is not unreasonable to assume that engaging in artmaking through photography may bring clarity and insight to your inner world after viewing and processing the images. Photographer Jo Spence stumbled upon the therapeutic use of photography in this way. Spence started her career as a commercial photographer, but in the 1970s began pushing the medium to use it for social activism, challenging barriers to female artists and battling harmful stereotypes of women at the time. After she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1982, Spence began using photography as a therapeutic tool. Using photography as a tool for healing, “she found she could integrate what she saw with what she felt internally” (Loewenthal, 2013, p.32). Through her photographs, Spence was able to create images that represented her internal world, sharing a part of herself that may escape words.

Weiser’s (1999) techniques listed above also address the metaphor of self-construction by collecting and reflecting on the client’s photographs in therapy. Spence used her photography as
a tool to challenge stereotypical notions of the ideal female form, specifically using self-portraits during her time battling breast cancer to reconstruct the dominating perception of what her body ‘should’ look like.

An important photo methodology to acknowledge in this literature review is Photovoice. Founded by Anna Blackman and Tiffany Fairey, Photovoice is a methodology “by which people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang & Burris 1997, p. 369). This process is an accessible way for individuals to capture the reality of their communities and lives in an instant.

By utilizing photography, Photovoice is a form of activism that can “describe realities, communicate perspectives, and raise awareness of social and global issues” (About Photovoice, 2019, para. 5). Photovoice can be used as a catalyst for exploring personal or societal issues, making it a possible intervention to be used for individuals questioning or wishing to deepen their understanding of their gender identity. By posing questions related to a group or individual’s experience with gender, Photovoice could be used as a form of empowerment and within social campaigns, and to share the experience of those who may be oppressed or overlooked. This process could be utilized within a community or group setting for individuals who identify as non-binary as a way to share their experience and build awareness within their community.

As this paper addresses the lack of language regarding, and larger societal acceptance of, non-binary individuals, utilizing the artistic language of phototherapy seems natural. Phototherapy may be described to be “about photography-as-communication, rather than photography-as-art” (Weiser, 2001, para. 11). Using photography-as-communication can bridge the gap between the individual’s understanding of their internal experience, and help the
therapist to understand non-binary clients’ experience in a world that often fails to affirm their existence.

**Discussion**

**Arts-Based Research**

Arts-based research (ABR) is an important aspect of understanding the impact expressive therapies have on our clients. Engaging in research through art practices can provide unique insight and data into psychological interventions that scientific studies just cannot obtain (Rolling, 2010). Unlike a scientific method, utilizing arts based research within this thesis was helpful in developing my own understanding of the individualized impact that engaging in art making may have on clients. Arts-based research is “capable of yielding outcomes taking researchers in directions the sciences cannot go” (Rolling, 2010, p.110), including the intuitive and creative nature of the arts.

Throughout this research process, I engaged in my own arts-based research, broken up into three separate sessions. Personally, I find exploring my identity through the same method that I am arguing to be beneficial for others will bring in valuable knowledge and personal reflection. It is important to know firsthand what your client may be feeling, or what may come up for them. I needed to investigate some of the limitations, considerations and precautions that need to be thought out before using self-portraiture to explore gender identity within a therapeutic context.

I have gone through my own exploration of my gender identity, creating artwork and expressing my internal experience, thoughts and feelings through my drawings, but not photographs. The first barrier I knew I would face was the medium of photography, which is unfamiliar to me. Upon reflection, my assumption of photography was the process is not as
expressive as my usual art making practice. This assumption was based mainly on my feelings of discomfort with the process. This was an important reflection even before I began the actual arts-based research.

An important practical consideration that I almost immediately encountered was how to set up my phone camera to take the photographs. At the time, I did not have a tripod and needed to improvise. I used a cup to stand my phone in, though it did make the process of framing my images difficult. It is important to note that most clients who may engage in this activity may not have access to a tripod and so offering alternatives or adaptations may be beneficial to supporting the client’s process. I also decided to utilize a white sheet as a prop in the first session. Though it was originally an aesthetic choice, this prop became very important in the process of my first session as I will explain.

I began my first session with the goal of just exploring photography. This first process was less about exploring my gender identity and more about engaging in the process of intuitive art making. Towards the end of my first session of ABR, I became very emotional and had to step away from the camera. I was shocked at the emotional reaction I had to the process and viewing the photographs as I was engaged. I needed space from the process. At this point, the sheet I used as a prop became an important and supportive barrier. I wrapped myself in the sheet I had used for a prop and allowed myself time to process the emotional reaction before finishing the session and reviewing the final photographs.

The prop ended up being a container for my process, holding the wave of emotions that I had not been expecting. I was surprised at the reaction I had to a medium that I originally felt was not going to be as expressive as my typical artmaking process. In the first photo (see Appendix, Fig. 1) one of the most notable features is that the viewer is unable to see my face and
therefore has no idea what my emotional reaction may be. This is telling, as much of my gender identity is an internal experience. From an outside perspective, no one would know the struggle I was feeling during my exploration in this session. From an outside perspective, no one would know my internal experience of gender. The external expression of my gender is also covered by the prop.

I engaged the next two sessions with a clearer goal, which I believed helped to ground the emotional aspect of the process. For the second session I also used my Polaroid camera, which created a physical copy of my photographs. My goal for this session was to find a different setting, in this case a wooded area near my house, and to express my feelings of existing in the world as a non-binary individual. I feel the most connected to the second photograph (see Appendix, Fig. 2) taken in the second session because I see it as the most accurate symbolic representation of my experience. This image is also a physical copy as I took the image on a Polaroid. Though I was alone in the process and a lone figure in the photo, holding that photograph in my hand was so affirming; I felt seen, if by no one else but myself.

I decided my third session would be more intimate and personal, and therefore I did not share the images in this thesis. A personal trigger for dysphoria is my hair. About a month before taking the images for the third session, I shaved part of my head, and experienced euphoria surrounding my hair for the first time. The day I engaged in the third session had been challenging, and I decided to mitigate feelings of dysphoria by reminding myself of the euphoria I originally felt when changing my hairstyle.

The following are some of my take-aways from my ABR process. When using phototherapy with a client, as in any therapeutic process, it is extremely important that the client feel safe and supported during this process. This can be achieved through the use of props,
developing a safety plan if the client will be working on these photographs outside of session, and allowing the client space both during and after the photography session to process their experience and images.

Self-portraits were an important choice in this process, as I was able to insert myself into the narrative. Though initially uncomfortable with taking photographs of myself, I realized quickly how much more personal the images were compared to other artwork I have created. Though my face is not visible in any of the photographs, there is no doubting that these images are of myself.

Though much of my ABR was personal, I shared the details in hopes that it shines light on the individual experience that is gender identity. My experience will not be yours, and it is important to address this fluid, unique instance that I have captured in these images I share with you. I found engaging in this process to be supportive of my own continued processing of gender identity and dysphoria.

**Challenging Dominant Narratives with Phototherapy**

As more individuals begin to bring awareness to the non-binary community, many have become critical of the binary gender narrative. Beginning to talk about gender identity and expression, bringing awareness to the topic, is the first step to creating more gender-inclusive and safe communities for non-binary (and any gender non-conforming) individuals. Actively working to change the narrative will shape this supportive community. Even if you identify as cisgender, it is important for you to normalize sharing pronouns and inviting others to share their own. Therapists looking to create a safe and inclusive therapeutic environment should be thoughtful about the language used and critical when reflecting on their assumptions and biases.
regarding gender. Therapists who are educated in gender-affirming therapy are more likely to build a stronger therapeutic alliance with their client (Budge, 2020).

As Hadley (2013) discusses the politics behind therapy and research, they assert: “We need to ask ourselves in what ways we, as therapists, are complicit with the dominant narratives” (p. 379). Hadley (2013) also asks, in what ways are we as therapists perpetuating dominant narratives in our practices? How does research in our field reinforce these narratives of bigenderism? Particularly in their own practices, therapists should be actively seeking out oppressive dominant narratives and addressing the impact they may have on the clients they serve.

Creating new media, new images of non-binary individuals showcasing their experience can help to bring awareness to the community. Even if the portraits are done within a therapeutic setting and may never be shared with anyone but the client and therapist, the images still exist as a reminder to the individual that they are seen, and they are represented.

Using photography as a reflective process, I consider how phototherapy may be used with individuals who identify as non-binary. Using this process may serve a few purposes within the therapeutic setting: this process allows for cis-gender art therapists to gain a greater understanding of their non-binary clients, allows for questioning or non-binary clients to develop greater insight into their own identity, and it grants these clients a greater sense of self-worth. Regardless of where a client is in their understanding of gender identity, utilizing phototherapy and self-portraits can be a powerful way to visualize their experience and spark a dialogue between client and therapist.

An important part of art therapy and phototherapy is that the client has agency over their artmaking process. I wonder how many other non-binary individuals feel discomfort when
seeing older photographs of themselves and how creating new images and self-portraits may be helpful in healing the sense of self that may have been lost in their childhood or adolescence. Creating self-portraits of how they feel internally and would ideally like to present their gender externally could potentially be beneficial to their identity development and self-worth.

**Considerations for Future Research**

Through much of my research, a repeated theme was that there is simply not enough awareness, language and research regarding the experience of non-binary individuals. The dominant narrative upholding the gender binary should be questioned and addressed in all aspects of research and therapy. Thoughtful language should be considered when addressing and categorizing clients or participants in research settings. Researchers should consider the implications of conflating binary transgender individuals with non-binary individuals, as their experience is often different. It would be helpful to see more research on the nuanced experience of gender identity development, especially past adolescence and into adulthood.

Phototherapy and self-portraiture may be a supportive treatment for non-binary individuals. There is also little to no research on utilizing self-portraits with non-binary individuals. It would also be interesting to see research on the use of Photovoice with non-binary individuals as a form of community engagement. Overall, more research needs to acknowledge non-binary individuals and explicitly challenge the current gender binary.

**Summary**

Identity development begins once we are born as we interact with the environment, the culture that surrounds us, and our closest support network; these factors all have a part to play in shaping our identity. However, there are certain aspects of our identity that may not fit within these societal messages. The dominant narrative of our society is that there are two widely
accepted genders. Not every individual feels they can identify as a man or woman and find that they identify outside of this binary. The problem with this narrative is that society generally lacks the language to define and understand gender identity outside of the binary. Through the use of phototherapy and gender affirming therapy considerations, non-binary individuals may find support and representation while actively challenging the dominant narrative.
Appendix

Fig. 1. The first session
Fig. 2. The second session
Glossary of terms

*All definitions sourced/adapted from Queer Undefined (Goldenstein-Weiss, 2018)*

Agender – Without a gender; genderless

Biological sex – A label (male or female) that an individual is assigned by a doctor at birth based on the genitals that individual is born with and the chromosomes they have.

Demiboy – A person who feels partially or mostly male; a person who partially, but not wholly, identifies as a man, boy or otherwise masculine, whatever their assigned gender at birth.

Demigirl – A person who partially, but not wholly, identifies as a woman, girl or otherwise feminine, whatever their assigned gender at birth.

Gender dysphoria – Psychological distress that some transgender individuals may experience, resulting from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity.

Gender euphoria – A euphoric or happy feeling felt by one when referred to as their "true" gender.

Gender expression – The way in which a person expresses their gender identity, typically through their appearance, dress, and behavior.

Genderfluid – A person whose gender identity fluctuates.

Gender – Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.

Gender identity - One’s internal sense of identifying with a particular gender.

Gender non-conforming – An umbrella term for people who do not confirm to the traditional standards associated with their gender.
Genderqueer – Identifying as a gender other than what you were assigned at birth; often used as an umbrella term.

Non-binary – Identifies as a gender other than exclusively male or female; often used as an umbrella term.

Queer – An umbrella term that may be used to apply to a person who is not heterosexual, heteroromantic, and cisgender. Was historically used as a slur, but was reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community starting in the late 1980's.

Sexual Orientation – The orientation that describes an individual’s sexual attraction and desires; may or may not be influenced by gender.

Transgender – An individual who does not identify with the gender assigned to their sex; to identify as something other than your birth sex.
References


