The Lived Experience of Identity Development for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Individuals Who Have Survived Complex Trauma

by

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Abstract

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological framework to examine the lived experiences of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals who have experienced complex trauma. Participants completed semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences of identity development and what interaction if any, complex trauma had with their development. Seven participants completed interviews, and phenomenological reduction of interview transcripts and inductive coding resulted in seven emergent themes making up the essence of the experience: (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. The implications of research findings, limitations, and directions for further inquiry are discussed.

Acknowledgments

The journey that has culminated in the completion of this study and manuscript began with trauma, and the scared boy who desperately sought some way to experience himself as something other than broken and worthless. There are countless people who have contributed to my development into a man capable of seeing the good in the world, feeling connected to it, and realizing that leaving it just a little better than he found it would be the only way to truly pay forward what so many had done for him.

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List of Abbreviations

AFAB	Assigned Female at Birth
AMAB	Assigned Male at Birth
CT	Complex Trauma
HRT	Hormone Replacement Therapy
LGB	Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer +
TG	Transgender
TGNC	Transgender and Gender Nonconforming

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

The growing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues within the counseling field has generated a need to identify the population's risk factors better and understand the unique interpersonal and intrapersonal processes that make up their experience. As a result, practitioners are more likely to engage in the work of counseling transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals (TGNC) than ever before (Heck et al., 2015). However, research has not managed to keep up with this rise in service usage and often continues to examine the needs and experiences of a population whose identities exist on a spectrum, and as such, have perpetuated conceptualization and theory along the lines of an outdated gender binary (Fiani & Han, 2019). To do so, we must have a firmer grasp and understanding of this population's lived experience and reality. Research within the last decade establishes significant disparities in mental health outcomes between the LGBTQ+ and heteronormative populations (James et al., 2016). Within the LGBTQ+ population, transgender (TG) individuals present and contend with higher levels of risk and adverse outcomes related to mental health (Connolly et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mustanski et al., 2010).

Within the LGTBQ+ population, TGNC are at elevated risk for exposure to trauma and the subsequent psychological impacts (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Connolly et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2013; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2010; Shipherd et al., 2011). Of significance to this study is the high prevalence of multiple traumatic experiences endorsed by TGNC in the literature, which include physical/sexual/emotional abuse, physical/emotional neglect, exposure to household dysfunction and domestic abuse, and loss of attachment figures (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al.,

2014; Shipherd et al., 2011). These experiences fall within the conceptual understanding of complex trauma (CT) (Cloitre et al., 2012; Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2019). While CT is not unique to the TGNC population, the high rate of exposure suggests the presence of symptomatological impact to self-concept and relational function or capacity that is common to CT experience (Cloitre et al., 2012; Courtois, 2008). This presents significant challenges to a population already identified as being at elevated risk for adverse mental health outcomes.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) multicultural and social justice counseling competencies require counselors to develop awareness, knowledge, skills, and an action-oriented approach to four critical elements of working with diverse clients: (1) self-awareness; (2) client worldview; (3) the counseling relationship; (4) counseling and advocacy interventions (Ratts et al., 2016). More specifically, the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) competencies for counseling TG clients (accepted by the ACA) assert that counselors "Understand the biological, familial, social, cultural, socio-economic and psychological factors that influence the course of development of transgender identities (ALGBTIC, 2009, pp. 5)." ALGBTIC competencies also expect counselors to know salient developmental tasks and how developmental experiences impact present functioning and the counseling relationship (ACA, 2013; ALGBTIC, 2009).

Literature Review

Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Identity Development

Research on the TGNC population has identified identity development as an area in which the TGNC experience is unique and needs further exploration and understanding (Diamond et al., 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). There are currently no models for TGNC identity development exclusive to the population, but rather

several that nest TGNC under the label of transgender. Devor (2004) put forth an early model of transexual identity development consisting of 14 stages by building upon models of gay identity development. The individual, from this model, moves from initial confusion, to discovery, to acceptance, to medical transition, to a sense of pride in the new gender identity (though Devor notes that all stages may not be present in the development of strictly transgender individuals) (Devor, 2004). A model for butch lesbian identity development was proposed by Hiestand and Levitt (2005) that also featured stages of distress, confusion, and integration. However, the exploration of gender is only emphasized in the fifth (of six) stages. Though referenced as foundational (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), this model is limited. It attends only to gender presentation for a specific subset of the LGBTQ+ population and does not explicitly address gender identity. Adapted from a model of coming-out for gay men and lesbians, Bockting and Coleman's (2007) model of transgender identity development includes five stages with identified developmental tasks. In this model, we also see that stages of distress and integration are present. However, there is a greater emphasis on interpersonal processes and an acceptance of certain ambiguities of identity, which set this model apart.

There are criticisms to be made and limitations to be acknowledged in applying these development models to the experience of TGNC. Attempting to integrate TGNC experience into existing models of identity development among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (LGB) and emphasizing transition as a necessary element prescribes a narrow view of transgender experience while excluding gender-nonconforming individuals completely (Diamond et al., 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Within the TGNC population there exists a spectrum of gender identification that presents with varied levels of fluidity from individual to individual, and this has been reinforced in studies where numerous gender identities were endorsed by participants

who nested their gender identity under the broader term “transgender” (Kuper et al., 2012; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) or where they endorsed a more fluid gender identity that shifted depending on several contextual factors (Kuper et al., 2018). This fluidity creates limitations when conceptualizing TGNC identity development through clearly defined stages or developmental tasks which are not relevant to or salient in the experience of TGNC (Diamond et al., 2011; Rahilly, 2015).

Another significant limitation of these models is that many were not developed with input from TGNC youth or members of the caregiving system (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Thus, our understanding of identity development's intra/interpersonal experience during critical developmental periods and within relational contexts lacks valuable insight and perspective from a qualitative standpoint. For example, the processes of witnessing and mirroring were integral aspects of Devor’s (2004) model as interpersonal elements that aided the transgender individual’s progression through these stages. Likewise, the Hiestand and Levitt (2005) stage model of butch lesbian identity development also incorporates interpersonal processes, specifically developing comfort with sexual orientation and initiating gender exploration after being exposed to other butch lesbians.

Recent research has offered models that have attended to the spectrum of TGNC identity and shifted the focus of identity development from a series of stages with fixed elements to complex inter and intrapersonal processes and contexts (societal, relational, familial). This complexity emerges when comparing the more limited definitions of the population in earlier models to the identified variance in gender expression and population identification. A plethora of fluctuating gender identities is necessary to represent the full spectrum of the trans or TGNC population (Kuper et al., 2012; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) and attend to

inclusive conceptualization and theory. Earlier models tended to stress transsexualism or the desire for medical transition as defining or limiting factors (Bockting et al., 2014). Here, the complexity of gender identity and representation necessitates an inclusive exploration of the spectrum of identities in the TGNC population to include non-binary, agender, genderfluid, and identifying as male or female at different times and in different contexts.

These more recent models of TGNC identity development assert that the processes involved are non-linear and not fixed, though there is some support for aspects of certain stages identified by earlier researchers within the salient themes (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Morgan and Stevens (2012) took a narrative approach to examine TGNC identity development. They uncovered three common themes: a sense of dissonance between the body and mind, the negotiation and management of identities, and transition. This study, however, was of limited sample size and included only six white individuals who predominantly identified as male-to-female (five out of the six participants) and one identifying as a crossdresser (Morgan & Stevens, 2012). A grounded theory study conducted by Levitt and Ippolito (2014) included more diversity of gender identities and identified three prominent themes in TGNC identity development: mechanisms for authentic representation of one's gender, communicating gender and being seen by others, and balancing the needs for expression and communication with the need to survive in oppressive systems. Their findings stress that affirming or stigmatizing communities and contexts can significantly impact one's gender presentation and ability to feel safe and secure in that presentation and identification (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

A narrative study by Katz-Wise et al. (2018) examined TGNC identity development caregiving/family system context in childhood and adolescence. Their work outlined

developmental pathways in the experience of TGNC youth. It provided needed insight into the early experiences and systems in which the process occurs and may be positively and negatively impacted by affirming and stigmatizing contexts. They developed a conceptual model of the process represented by seven themes emphasizing intrapersonal experience, the impacts of societal discourse and cisnormativity, biological factors, adjustment within the family/caregiving system, support and resources, and the affirmation/actualization of gender identity (Katz-Wise, 2018).

Kuper et al. (2018) conducted a grounded theory study that utilized an intersectional perspective to encompass their participants' spectrum of TGNC and racial/ethnic identities. Their results determined that TGNC identity development involves four dimensions of gender-related experience (gender identity, physical self-image, gender presentation, and gender expression) and four intrapersonal processes (awareness, exploration, meaning-making, and integration) (Kuper et al., 2018). These elements overlap and interact to support the development of a secure sense of self (Kuper et al., 2018). Gender-related experience dimensions encompass internal senses of self, the perceptions of the self one desires to be received from others, awareness of the physical self in relation to self-image, the desire to present and express one's gender authentically, and to have these elements both affirmed and received effectively by others (Kuper et al., 2018). The intrapersonal processes they identified include awareness developed through exposure to similar identities and the use of affirming language, exploration of one's identity in affirming contexts/environments, making meaning of one's experiences with gender (including the confrontation/processing of internalized stigma and negative self-concept), and the integration of these elements into a consistent sense of self that is facilitated by affirmation and accurate reflection of one's identity (Kuper et al., 2018). As the most inclusive model identified

by the researcher, this model's emphasis on affirming interpersonal contexts, self-concept informed by interpersonal experience, potential internalization of stigmatization and negative self-appraisal, and integration of experience into a sense of self serves to help explain potential pathways through which stressors may impact TGNC identity development. As such, the proposed study utilizes this model to reinforce the need to explore lived experience in the presence of CT, which can have a significant impact on inter and intrapersonal processes and perceptions (Cloitre, 2008; Cloitre et al., 2013; Ford & Courtois, 2020; Shevlin et al., 2017, 2018), and conceptualize the processes involved in TGNC identity development.

Complex Trauma

Understanding CT as a distinct concept of prolonged or repeated trauma began with Herman's (1992) first proposal of complex PTSD. The modern understanding of CT is that of chronic or prolonged experience of severe stress occurring within a closed system (Courtois, 2008). Though this may occur in adulthood (captivity, sex-trafficking, armed conflict), it is more typically found in the caregiving system and involves harmful acts or forms of abandonment by caregiving or attachment figures seen as responsible for one's wellbeing during critical developmental periods in an individual's life (e.g., childhood or adolescence) (Courtois, 2008; Cloitre et al., 2011; Ford & Courtois, 2020; van der Kolk, 2005). Ford and Courtois (2020) further elaborate on this definition by outlining five essential elements of CT:

> (1) Interpersonal experiences and events that often involve relational betrayal; (2) repetitive, prolonged, pervasive, and in some cases, ongoing events; (3) involvement of direct attack, harm, and/or neglect and abandonment by caregivers or other adults who are responsible for responding to or protecting children and adolescents—this may extend to organizations and cultures that are disbelieving of the victim and deny the occurrence

> of the traumatic circumstance and so are unresponsive or that support or provide a safe haven for perpetrators; (4) occurrence at developmentally vulnerable times in the victim's life, often beginning in early childhood (and sometimes in utero and in infancy); and (5) have great potential to compromise a child's physical and psychological maturation severely and development and to undermine or even reverse significant developmental attainments at any point in the lifespan. (p. 9)

The elevated rates of exposure to the identified elements of CT within the TGNC population (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Shipherd et al., 2011) suggest that CT presents as a significant risk factor and salient element of TGNC experience that requires attention and research focus.

There is no diagnosis specific to CT, nor is CT an associated feature in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Complex Trauma Taskforce has determined a diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) with unique distinguishing features and treatment recommendations which has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the International Classification of Diseases 11 (WHO, 2019). Diagnostic criteria for CPTSD include the presence of not only PTSD symptoms (avoidance, hypervigilance, re-experiencing) but also symptoms categorized as disturbances in self-organization (DSO) (WHO, 2019). These DSOs consist of (a) affective dysregulation, (b) negative self-concept, and (c) disturbances in relationships (Cloitre et al., 2018) and present as a lack of coping, chaotic or avoidant relational dynamics, and the conceptualization of the self as contaminated and irreparably damaged (Cloitre et al., 2013; Ford & Courtois, 2020; Shevlin et al., 2017, 2018). This disturbance in the conceptualization can be seen in research associating childhood maltreatment and abuse falling within the operational

definition of CT with adolescents' negative and diffuse sense of self (Penner et al., 2019). When occurring in developmentally significant periods, there is potential for the traumatic experience to become the system through which the elements of identity are perceived and constructed (Muldoon et al., 2019).

Negative Internalizations

Individuals in the TGNC population are more likely to have experiences putting them at risk of internalizing negative views, appraisals, and attributions through CT exposure, and the potential self-stigmatization presented by minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress is chronic additive stress individuals experience due to having a minoritized identity (racial, ethnic, sexual, etc.) (Meyer, 2003). Identity-related discrimination and prejudice result in increased negative mental health experiences/outcomes for those who experience it (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003), and minority stress has been one mechanism through which these internalizations have been conceptualized. Additionally, it increases exposure to distal stressors (rejection, prejudice, discrimination) and proximal stressors (concealing identity, anxiety about discrimination, internalized negative emotions, and self-appraisal) (Carter et al., 2018; Pascoe & Richman, 2009). These stressors are potentially impactful to processes in TGNC identity development identified by Kuper et al. (2018). Repeated exposure to minority stress can be internalized and lead to a negative self-concept manifested in a self-stigmatizing value system and internalized transphobia (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Hereks et al., 2015; Meyer, 2003).

In applying the concept of minority stress to children and adolescents with emerging TGNC identities, it is crucial to consider the perceptions of the underlying cause of traumatic experiences in caregiving systems. One study of transfeminine participants produced a 90.7%

endorsement of multiple traumatic events throughout participants' lives (Shipherd et al., 2011), and of those, 42% reported that the potentially traumatic events were directly related to their TG identity. This perception of trauma as orientation or identity-based is an example of the more extreme ways minority stress may manifest. Minority stress helps manifest a felt pressure for gender compatibility, a belief that it is vitally essential to avoid cross-gender behavior and conform to gender stereotypes (Egan & Perry, 2001). Felt pressure for gender compatibility has been shown to have an association with attachment insecurity as early as preadolescence (Cooper et al., 2013), which can enable the establishment of maladaptive interpersonal patterns and further affect one's beliefs about the self and others (D'Andrea et al., 2012; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011).

This felt pressure is particularly salient when conceptualizing the experiences of TGNC youth for whom the risk of internalizing self-stigma and transphobia are heightened by the negative self-appraisal and self-stigmatization found in those who've experienced CT and minority stress. There is, again, the potential for disruption in the processes related to self-awareness, meaning-making, authentic expression, exploration, and reception of one's identity present in the model offered by Kuper et al. (2018). Thus, the conjunction of developmentally vulnerable life stages and trauma resulting from disapproval or invalidation of a nascent TGNC identity could potentially interrupt critical developmental processes along CT pathways while reinforcing negative self-attribution and self-stigmatization. Exploration of lived experience is necessary to identify whether these elements are salient experiential risk factors in TGNC identity development. Insight into the identity development of TGNC individuals at higher risk for negative self-concept and stigmatization can aid in identifying inter and intrapersonal contexts and processes that may require focus when counseling this population.

Significance of Study

As identified, there is a need for a greater understanding of the experience of TGNC individuals in their identity development through inter and intrapersonal processes. There is a significantly higher likelihood for TGNC individuals to experience CT than for either the heteronormative population or gender-conforming LGB individuals (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Shipherd et al., 2011). There is also a need to understand the identity development of TGNC at risk for disturbances in self-organization and concept resultant from CT and potential self-stigmatization presented by perceived identity-related stress/trauma. This study provides insight into the identity development within this population by identifying the essence of that experience through their own words and perceptions. Improved understanding informs further research into significant themes/experiences/perceptions identified in the study and inform practice by identifying inter and intrapersonal processes and contexts that practitioners may find beneficial for exploration and processing.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and explore commonalities of experience in the identity development of TGNC who have experienced complex trauma within the family/caregiving system. The existing literature indicates that supportive interpersonal bonds and caregivers significantly impact TGNC youth's well-being (Bockting et al., 2013). Current literature suggests a necessity to examine the interpersonal processes between TGNC individuals and their families in the identity development process (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Complex trauma indicated by several recurring adverse childhood experiences is more prevalent in the TGNC population than in the heteronormative or cisgender LGBTQ+ population. The nature of the

experience is tied directly to interpersonal processes within the family/caregiving system. Thus, CT poses a significant risk to the TGNC population, which may already be affected by self-stigmatization. This study will provide insight into the identity development within this population by identifying the essence of that experience through their own words and perceptions. Improved understanding will inform further research into significant themes/experiences/perceptions identified in the study and inform practice by identifying inter and intrapersonal processes that practitioners may find beneficial for exploration and processing.

Research Question

The primary question for this study was: What is the lived experience of identity development for TGNC individuals who have experienced complex trauma within the caregiving/family system in childhood and adolescence?

Chapter 2: Methodology

Description and Rationale of Qualitative Design

There is a clear need for a greater understanding of the experiences in the identity development of individuals who do not identify or conform to the binary model of gender identity but instead find themselves inadequately represented by this prescription (Fiani & Han, 2019; Rahilly, 2015). This limitation is evident in adapting of identity development models that fall within a binary understanding of gender identity development and presentation (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Lewins, 1995). Gender identity and presentation are a spectrum, and the literature reinforces its fluid and nuanced nature (Bilodeau, 2005; Diamond et al., 2011). There is limited research into the experience of TGNC identity development. However, the support and reception of the family/caregiver system have been shown to impact the identity development process (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). The mirroring, acceptance, affirmation, and accurate reflection of identity by others are indicated as elements of stage models and conceptualizations of TGNC identity (Bilodeau, 2005; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004; Nuttbrock et al., 2002). Complex trauma often results in a perception that one cannot rely on or look to caregivers or other relationships for support and security, and the individual sees themselves as not worthy or deserving of social connectedness throughout their lives (Cloitre, 2008; Courtois, 2008; Courtois, 2012).

With the increased risk of complex trauma experience among TGNC, the natural question of how the interpersonal experience and effects of complex trauma impact a process that is aided by the presence of supportive and affirming social connections and perceived resources (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018) arises. The research indicates that our understanding of TGNC identity development is still limited. The central phenomenological questions – what is

being experienced and how is it being experienced (Moustakas, 1994) – remain for this population. This study sought to understand the essence of this experience in TGNC individuals who have navigated the identity development process with the presence of a CT experience.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology has its roots in the work of Edmund Husserl and his proposition that true meaning could be derived from subjective experience via thorough examination and the use of methodological language and logic (Welton, 1999). The phenomenological methodology was the most appropriate approach to this topic to attempt to identify the essence of the subjective lived experience of TGNC as they develop their gender identities because there is still much that is unknown about the process. The intent of phenomenological inquiry is that of determining the essence of an experience, or as van Manen (1990) expresses it, to have a "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (p. 177). Phenomenology does not emphasize the cause-and-effect nature of the topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) but instead explores lived experience to facilitate a deeper understanding and meaning of lived phenomena (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). To engage with the data without bias and predeterminations of the phenomenon being studied, the researcher must engage in the practice of epoche or bracketing, which are attempts to place one's own experience and personal understanding of a phenomenon aside to see it with a fresh and open perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In doing so, the researcher becomes open to the emergence of the phenomenon's essence in the description of experience as it has been understood via conscious engagement of the participant (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Current research has provided quantitative data to determine the risks for the population in this study (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014;

Shipherd et al., 2011). Qualitative studies have attempted to understand the process of TGNC identity development (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Morgan & Stevens, 2012). However, none of these studies have taken a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of TGNC. Additionally, none of these studies have considered the inter/intrapersonal elements resulting from CT experience. Phenomenology attempts to decipher the meaning of the lived experience for specific groups of people (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; van Manen, 1990), and such was the aim of this study. As a result, our grasp of the nature of TGNC identity development is lacking. The qualitative approach was necessary to identify elements of each individual's singular experience that appear more universal in theme or process. Complex trauma is intrinsically linked to one's concept of self and identity (Cloitre et al., 2009; Cloitre et al., 2018; Courtois, 2008). A phenomenological approach to the research question provided insight into the lived experience of identity development in TGNC with histories of CT.

Transcendental Phenomenology

The transcendental phenomenological tradition follows from the original works of Husserl (Welton, 1999). This approach to phenomenology does not offer presuppositions, predeterminations, or any preconceived ideas about the nature or meaning of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Matua & Van Der Wal, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). This was one of the primary justifications for the transcendental approach taken by this study. Another was that this methodology presupposes that all knowledge results from phenomena as the subject receives it via the beliefs and meanings ascribed to sensory perception and conscious awareness (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl asserts that we may only know what is within our direct conscious experience (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This philosophical position

coincides with the social constructivist position held by the researcher that we cannot determine truths from the experiences of others, though we may help identify them through the work we do with participants, seen as co-researchers, and we may invite them to explore their own meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

Philosophical Assumptions

A social-constructivist view is essential to the work of capturing the essence of individual lived experiences. We understand our experiences through the lens of our subjectivity, thus there is no objective and generalizable truth. The subjective meaning of the experience for individuals is the product of interaction with others, which is affected by social and historical contexts and norms (Creswell, 2014). The subjective perspective of each participant determines the reality of their experience. Everyone develops their understanding of the events they experience based on the unique factors of their lived experience (similar experiences may have vastly different interpretations dependent on the cultural backgrounds of those sharing the experience). The social-constructivist approach encourages understanding the phenomenon by identifying the commonalities or essence of the experience, distilled from multiple complex perspectives.

This position posits that we construct knowledge by interpreting experience through structures of understanding and concepts developed by our prior experience (Schwandt, 2015). Thus, data must come directly from participants' lived experiences in their language, and the researcher must “set aside all knowledge not being presented directly to consciousness” (Giorgi et al., 2017, p. 180) via epoché. It must be understood and explored in their language and through the lens of their meaning-making systems. This work requires the researcher to recognize and assess the influence of their own experience with the phenomenon and any other factors which may impact how they engage with the content of the study. This allows the researcher to achieve

a position of "transcendental subjectivity," or the ability to use awareness to neutralize or negate any biases or preconceptions, and a sense of "subjective openness" to the truth of another's experience (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). To this end, bracketing is a necessary process and was utilized to support the credibility and trustworthiness of this study.

Epoché

I approached this study as a survivor of complex trauma (CT). Thus, I was positioned close to my participants in relation to a meaningful and identity-informing life experience. However, my experience with complex trauma and identity development was as a cisgender heterosexual white male. We were positioned far from each other regarding privilege, societal acceptance, and power in a heteronormative patriarchal society. Within the LGBTQ+ population, TGNCs are the most likely to have multiple forms of traumatic childhood experiences (Giovanardi et al., 2018). One study resulted in 42% of their TGNC participants reporting that their trauma was directly related to their gender identity (Shipherd et al., 2011). As a cisgender heterosexual white man, fundamental elements of my identity have never been a source of derision or victimhood. My experience of identity development did not have the added complexity of navigating exposure to minority stress (Meyer, 2003) or an internalized phobia of my own gender identity (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Herek et al., 2015). My experience concerning TGNC identity development has been as that of a practitioner, helper, and ally. As a college counselor, I have worked long-term with numerous TGNC individuals with CT in various places along their identity development journey.

My practical framework informed my approach to qualitative research as a therapist. Existentialism is a foundational element of that framework, and much effort is put into making meaning of experience and engendering authentic engagement that welcomes the whole person

into the therapeutic frame. Meaning-making from this perspective occurs in both the past and the present, and often involving constructing new meanings for our past experiences. My approach to qualitative work extends that perspective, and my interpretive framework is that of a social constructivist. However, that interpretive framework is set aside in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). From this perspective, reality and truth result from interpreting our subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). I conceptualized CT as an intersubjective experience with a lasting impact on the interpretive systems used to conceptualize oneself and one's worth. So, I engaged with the content of this study aware of my own experience of CT and identity development and cognizant that universality could not be applied to conceptually congruous experiences.

Procedures

Participant Selection

This study utilized purposeful sampling of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals who have experienced complex trauma within the caregiving/family system in childhood and adolescence to meet optimal agreement of criteria. It has been suggested that phenomenological research requires between 3-25 participants for efficacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, this study aimed to include enough participants to reach data saturation and encompass the diverse identities represented within the TGNC population. The literature has indicated an early sense of mind-body dissonance negotiated in adolescence/young adulthood (Devor, 2004; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Morgan & Stevens, 2012). Emerging adulthood is a life stage proposed by Arnett (2000, 2004, 2007) wherein identity development and self-exploration are important developmental foci that occur between 18-25 (Arnett, 2000). This study determined that participants would be between the ages of 18-

40 to coincide with the completion of Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood, adequate distance from early dissonance, and to engage with participants no more than one developmental stage past this completion as it fits into Erikson's eight stages of development (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2007).

This research study sought to find the essence of identity development in the lived experience of TGNC identifying individuals who have experienced CT during childhood and adolescence. Participants for this study met the following criteria: (1) self-identified as TGNC (transgender, gender non-conforming or non-binary, agender, gender-fluid, or other non-conforming identity); (2) were between the ages of 18-40; (3) had experienced complex trauma in childhood and/or adolescence (physical/sexual/emotional abuse, physical/emotional neglect, exposure to household dysfunction and/or domestic abuse occurring over a prolonged period of time [at least 6 six months] within the caregiving system) by endorsing two or more adverse childhood experiences using the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire for Adults (ACE-Q) (Felitti et al., 1998); (4) endorsed experience (current or past) of complex trauma-related disturbances in self organization (affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, and relational dysfunction) as measured by the International Trauma Questionnaire (affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, and relational dysfunction as measured by the International Trauma Questionnaire [ITQ; Cloitre et al., 2018]).

Participant Recruitment

National, regional, and university-level organizations serving TGNC individuals (e.g., GLAAD, Georgia Equality, National Center for Transgender Equality, etc.) were sent recruitment emails and information about recruitment for distribution on their various listservs and social media accounts. The researcher also used social media to share recruitment

information (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn). Local and regional practitioners who specialize in or work with TGNC individuals were contacted to disseminate recruitment materials to clients who felt they fit within purposive sampling guidelines. All materials delineated the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, and provided contact information for those interested in participating. Those interested were encouraged to complete the screening tool delivered via Qualtrics online survey delivery software.

Data Collection

Data collection in phenomenological research typically occurs in interviews that utilize open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected via virtual interviews allowing the participants to express their understanding of their experiences in their own words. This study utilized thematic data saturation to determine the endpoint for data collection. *Thematic data saturation* can be defined as collecting data until there is no longer any new information being identified in the data (emergent themes, patterns, experiences, codes, etc.) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012) and any further efforts to collect additional data result in redundancy of identified themes, codes, phenomena (Kerr et al., 2010). The initial stage of phenomenological data analysis is the identification of emergent themes present in significant statements made by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This study determined the attainment of saturation when no new themes emerged from significant statements in analysis of two consecutive interviews. This occurred with seven participants.

Interview Process

The interviews took place via Zoom virtual meetings to account for the participants' time and effort, the ease of data storage, IRB COVID protocols, and the accommodation of participants in different geographic regions. Questions in phenomenological inquiry should

attempt to reveal essence and meaning, illuminate qualitative aspects of experience, avoid presuppositions of meaning or causal relationships, and prompt rich and comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By following these suggestions, each interview lasted between 45-75 minutes and focused on the following questions:

1. What is your lived experience with the development of your TGNC identity?
2. What were the meaningful interpersonal experiences that informed your TGNC identity development process?
3. What were the meaningful environments that informed your TGNC identity development process?
4. In what ways has your trauma experience influenced your experience of identity development?
5. Is there anything important that I haven't asked about?

The interviews were recorded and stored on password-protected secure cloud storage with strong encryption security until transcription was completed via a secure and encrypted automatic transcription service. At that point, the recordings were deleted. Transcriptions were then loaded into the Dedoose qualitative research cross-platform application for cleanup, coding, and analysis.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) offers a clear set of procedures for effective transcendental phenomenology. The initial data analysis stage was horizontalization, or the generation of themes that emerged from significant statements in the interview transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). When data saturation was reached (no new themes emergent from two consecutive interview analyses), significant statements were organized into clusters of meaning.

This process involved organizing these statements into groups that shared meaning or thematic similarity while attending to and eliminating statements that overlapped or were repetitive (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the textural and structural description described the underlying or invariant structure of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). These descriptions included the contexts/settings in which the participants experienced the phenomenon and the experience itself. These steps are collectively considered phenomenological reduction, which distilled the data to the commonalities and invariant components of experiencing the phenomenon. They represented the first steps of the analytical process (Moustakas, 1994).

The data analysis then moved to imaginative variation, in which "a structural description of the essences of the experience is derived, presenting a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This required the construction of both individual and composite structural descriptions, of which the aim was to uncover the conditions required for the phenomenon to occur by entertaining the various possibilities of the "how" of the phenomenon (the facilitative contexts and relationships) across the presented experiences (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1990). The four steps of this process included

- Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings;
- Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;
- Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts concerning the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others;

- Searching for exemplifications vividly illustrates the consistent structural themes and facilitates the development of a structural description of the phenomenon. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98)

Once imaginative variation resulted in clear structural descriptions, synthesizing meanings and essences took place. This final step resulted in the identification of an essential essence without which the phenomenon would not exist as the phenomenon it is (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). The data analysis then culminated in written expression illuminating the essential essence of the phenomenon. This written expression encompasses the "what" (identity development) and the "how" (that which leads to the emergence of the phenomenon) required for effective and thorough phenomenological inquiry (Cresswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness in qualitative research arises from the presence of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Sound inquiry, then, should provide the reader with confidence in the truth of the findings, the applicability of findings to other contexts, the consistency and repeatability of results, and the degree to which the findings result from data obtained by participants and not the bias or presuppositions of the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Levitt et al. (2017) suggest that integrity in qualitative research stems from methodological integrity understood as a synergy between fidelity to the subject and utility in achieving the study's goals. To obtain such integrity, research requires adequate data, transparency of perspective, findings grounded in the data, contextualization of the data, meaningful contribution, coherence, and the ability from the data to

serve as a catalyst for insight into the phenomenon being studied (Levitt et al., 2017). This study implemented several strategies to meet these expectations of effective qualitative research.

Member checking, providing participants with the outcome of analysis for feedback and agreement on what was found (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2010), is an important practice in establishing the accuracy of what has been determined of data gathered in inquiry (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tracy, 2010). As such, member checking was used in this study to ensure that what was found by the researcher accurately reflected the meaning and content offered by participants and attended to any bias or perspective of the researcher. Thick description attended to rich detail in the descriptions of contexts, experiences, and behaviors being offered by participant responses such that an outsider would be able to find a meaningful understanding of the content while recognizing the transferability of what was found (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tracy, 2010). The use of an external auditor with a background in qualitative research attended to the groundedness of analysis, accurate contextualization, coherence of findings, and ensured that thick description was used to delineate the themes and process involved in analysis adequately. To address dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was used to offer transparency in data collection and analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To further lend credibility and trustworthiness to the study, the researcher kept a detailed reflexive diary to help manage and identify biases, presuppositions, and perspectives that may have impacted data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Levitt et al., 2017).

Chapter 3: Findings

"Pretend that you're going to a circus for the first time, and you're looking around. You're seeing new people. You're seeing new things you're seeing like weird oddities like there's like a billion bunch of lights flying in your face, and you're distracted by all of them, and you can't focus on which way another and then you go into the maze, the mirror maze, and you're constantly looking at reflections of yourself and you're not only in a mirror maze, but the mirrors are all warped so it's even more difficult to find your way out. You're looking at different perspectives of yourself. And you're looking at different things, and you're bumping into things, running into mirrors, and you're just constantly bumping into your own reflection. It's warped. You don't look like you, and there's no true essence of you being reflected back at you, and you're just bumbling through this. You're bumping into things, and you're going left and right until you finally break out of that. And at the very end there's one mirror that's not warped, but it's covered, and you have to remove it yourself, and when you do, it's just you" – Peony, Participant, Genderfluid

During this study, seven participants who identified as gender nonconforming took part in semi-structured interviews ranging between 43 and 67 minutes to express their subjective understandings of their experiences of gender identity development and the relationship that process had to their complex trauma experience. Participants were predominantly white, middle class, and grew up in the United States southeast region. Additionally, all but two participants identified growing up in environments influenced by a strong presence of Christian religious practice. Table 1 (*Participant Demographics)* provides a breakdown of the participants' personal information relevant to the focus of this study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race/ Ethnicity	Assignation at Birth	Pronouns
Peony	21	Genderfluid	White/ Caucasian	AFAB	They/Them
Duckweed	21	Trans Man	Southeast Asian	AFAB	He/Him
Marty	33	Genderfluid	Biracial (Black/ Caucasian)	AFAB	
Hydrangea	19	Genderfluid	White/ Caucasian	AFAB	
Rose	19	Trans Masculine	White/ Caucasian	AFAB	He/Him
Morel	20	Trans Woman	White/ Caucasian	AMAB	She/Her
Basil	25	Trans Woman	White/ Caucasian	AMAB	She/Her

Themes

Upon completion of the participant interviews, data was analyzed using phenomenological reduction with a focus on answering the primary question: What is the lived experience of identity development for TGNC individuals who have experienced complex

trauma within the caregiving/family system in childhood and/or adolescence? Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of emergent themes and subthemes. At the same time, a review of the coding process, researcher notes, and attention to bias or interpretation was discussed and reviewed via engagement with a peer auditor through the entirety of the analytical process to maintain credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2010). The resulting analysis produced seven emergent themes: (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. Additionally, two subthemes emerged within Developing Individual Perspective (Entering Ambiguity and Defining Personal Understanding).

Disconnection

The first theme to emerge was "Disconnection." Participants reported a lack of connectedness to their bodies, environments, others, and a general sense of existing somewhere outside of normal experience. There was also an expressed ever-present fear of rejection from significant individuals in their caregiving and social contexts. Isolation emerged in environments described as lacking support for exploration, traumatic, or prescriptive of identity expectations. A lack of experiential references or vocabulary to facilitate understanding created an internal sense of being out of place. Duckweed, in reflecting on this feeling early in the identity development process encapsulates what was echoed by other participants regarding the general sense of distress and disconnect, as well as their reflective insight into the experience:

> It's just always feeling out of place and not knowing why. There are so many different reasons that could be happening for a kid or anyone. When it's something that's so integral to who you are as a person, it kind of seeps its way into everything. So, there's

> just like this general doom of like, “I hate my skin.” Except you don't know that you hate your skin.

The sense of disconnect between mind and body was a common experiential component. Peony described feeling that “I didn't want to be a man. I really just hated the features of my body that identified me as a woman” after they began to experience puberty at an early age and further offered this statement illustrative of the sense of distress it generated:

> I had more feminine features than I wanted, and I couldn't take them away. I really just hated the features of my body that identified me as a woman. I think I wanted to be faceless. I wanted to be that person where you walk down a street, and you look at them, and they're like “I can't tell. Is that a man or woman? I can't tell.” I wanted that desperately.

However, for most participants the identifying the disconnect was more ambiguous. Rose reported that lacking vocabulary for the experience led to his understanding it in terms of “Part of me never felt right. Like, I'm not who I'm supposed to be.” Morel noted that the capacity to make sense of the distress was limited because she “didn’t have a name for it.” This is further evidenced by Basil relaying the thought, “Something about me feels inherently wrong, right? Like something about my existence just ain't right?” A lack of experiential vocabulary contributed to the vague sense of distress identified in the interviews, and participants connected this to the lack of supportive environments where they could better engage with their experience. Duckweed provided insight and clarity into this internal struggle grapple with the sense of disconnection, “It's kind of difficult to describe. It's not pressure from anyone but yourself. It's just again that feeling of “I'm not comfortable. I hate this, and I want it to go away.”

Prescriptive behavior expectations and presentation from caregiving figures significantly created confusion and a sense of isolation reported by participants. The lack of support to process or discuss internal distress created by expectations contributed to the impact of traumatic environments. Basil elaborated that without the traumatic environment and lack of support, she would have "figured this out a lot sooner." Participants expressed that their experience in these environments caused them to turn inwards to attempt understanding and coping. As Duckweed stated, it was "much more of an internal experience than external experience." Prescriptive expectations incongruous with the undefined internal self-experience of participants created a tumultuous internal world that was described as engendering "depression," "rage," "hate," "sadness," and "dissatisfaction" with oneself. This distress generated by the struggle to reconcile internal experience with external expectations was summarized by Hydrangea:

> I looked at myself, and I was like "I'm depressed." You know, "I absolutely hate my life." I was not happy with really most of the things about myself, and a lot of it was because I was trying too hard to fit into my parents' box of what they expected from me.

Rose provided two statements that outlined the dynamic between the inter and intrapersonal components of this experience: "there was this alienation from the outside. I felt alienated and I didn't understand why," and "I felt very like closed in myself. If I didn't feel comfortable in a space, I was more thinking introspectively." For Marty, this was compounded by their mixed racial identity, which caused them to "already felt like an *other*." Though environmental factors contributing to feelings of isolation varied, existing as an *other* both within interpersonal and intrapersonal contexts was a universal experience.

Further ingraining the sense of otherness was the fear of rejection participants expressed as existing across relational contexts. For example, Rose likened the experience to "tiptoeing"

around family members “because I didn’t want them to not like me. I didn’t want my family to reject me because of this.” Likewise, Basil expressed the fear and distress of sharing her growing awareness of internal dissonance with others:

> It was tough because I was like, “Ok. This is this thing that I'm going through.” But I don't know if it's ok for me to talk about it, because I don't know if they're going to be ok with it or not. I don't know if they're just going to be like “Oh, no, we don't want to interact with you.” Are they going to not want to be involved with me in any way because of it?

The risk of rejection created a greater sense of distance from others and further internalized a sense of otherness. All but one participant expressed that their home environment was not conducive to or supportive of branching outside of strictly established roles which reinforced the need for conformity and a fear of rejection by important caregiving figures. Peony described this dynamic:

> My brother, he was ruining clothes left and right, and he was, you know, playing in the mud all day long, and if I so much as glanced at the window to want to go outside with them, I immediately would be shut down.

The struggle to fit within a prescribed identity that didn’t align with internal experience generated more significant internal discord, isolation, and restriction of any authentic connection to others.

Suppressing Awareness

The second emergent theme was “suppressing awareness.” Avoidance presented consciously and unconsciously in participant experience and took both passive and active forms. Many of the participants expressed avoidance as an act of denial. Duckweed put forth a common

experience of “not being very open with myself about it” and elaborated on the reasons for this “I spent years being scared just because it’s such a heavy thing to deal with, especially as a kid.” Participants described questions that occasionally emerged from preconscious awareness which drew their attention. Peony spoke of not knowing where to start in processing or confronting these questions as they entered awareness and intentionally avoiding them with the reasoning “If I did know where to start, then I didn’t want to because I knew that it would lead me to answers I didn’t like.”

For many participants, there were apparent indicators about which they built internal defenses. For example, in discussing how the possibility of a gender nonconforming identity began making its way into conscious awareness, Basil recounted a common reaction when the topic was broached internally and interpersonally with her therapist as such:

> I guess I would say, looking back in hindsight, it was obvious for much longer, but I would say I spent maybe three years in denial about everything, not even wanting to think about it. Internally, I was sort of thinking all the time like, “Oh, no, there's no way that this could possibly be it.” Every time we would bring it up. I would just refuse to even think about it. It was like, “Oh, no, there's, like, come on. It couldn't be me.”

Peony provided insight into the complexity of denial in the presence of growing awareness. Their experience was that of recognizing how they had attempted to live according to the expectations and prescriptions of others while knowing that a nascent desire to live authentically was present:

> I think the denial of myself was more than anything just going and looking in the mirror and being like, “that's not you. That's not the person you have cultivated. You are the amalgamation of everybody else that has put you into a box.” Going into that and seeing

that I think was more of my denial, my denial of my own self in the face of other things. I was trying to accept what was being put on me, while at the same time denying it because I constantly had this thought in the back of my head that was "I'm not going to do that. But maybe one day I'll just finally give in and accept it. One day I'll be different."

Peony further offered, "If I did know where to start, then I didn't want to, because I knew it would lead me to answers I didn't like." Other participants echoed these experiences and offered various reasons for actively denying the possibility of their identity, which included factors such as environments with strict gender expectations ("I think my environment pushed me to the rejection that I felt towards my own self, and the rejection to what I would eventually want in life." – Peony) and the discomfort of having to confront the upheaval of one's established existence ("The denial really came in because it's much easier to keep doing what you've been doing than to completely uproot your life." – Duckweed).

The desire to avoid conflict and unknown reactions to the expression of one's true understanding and expression of oneself contributed to avoidance the of outward signs of gender nonconforming which often took the form of adherence to prescribed gender expectations. Rose stated that their father's attitude toward gender roles and sexuality led to suppression. Morel attributed the need to mask her growing identity to the presence of constrictive gender roles and the conflict that would ensue if they were challenged, "It gave me a decent poker face. It was always covert. It was always a hidden part of me. I act the way they want until I'm gone, and that's exactly what I did." Leaning into expectations of behavior and presentation and suppressing gender nonconforming tendencies were predominantly present in the experiences of AMAB participants who attempted to make their nonconforming identity less visible, and both stated that a key motivator was their own safety, one of the invariant constituents present in

theme seven: Adverse Reactions. In contrast, most AFAB participants expressed that early behavior that didn't conform to gender expectations was written off as them being a tomboy until they reached puberty. Though, Duckweed did offer that safety was a factor for him with the statement "Basically, there was the sense of danger and not feeling safe enough to even explore. That made repression a lot easier."

Leaning In

"Leaning in," the third theme, emerged from the data as it became clear that each participant shared experiences of ways they actively "tried on" ways of being that resonated more with their internal experience of self. These experiences were intentional but also unconscious and only truly came into participant awareness once reflection took place. Participants also indicated that these took place throughout life and weren't solely present post-realization that their identity did not conform to a gender binary. Adopting behaviors in childhood was a recurring example provided by participants. Rose noted a significant experience that demonstrated a shift into behaving more congruently with the expressed expectations of their father they felt aligned with their inner world:

> My dad would say that boys don't cry. Stuff like that. There was a period where I wasn't crying. I tried to stop crying, and it was around that time and I remember there was this conversation like "what am I?" I can't remember exactly who the conversation was with, but they were like "why're you like this?" Because I used to be a very emotional kid. I would cry a lot, but there was a period where I tried to stop. And they asked me why I wasn't crying and I was like, "well boys don't cry," and they said "you're not a boy."

Hydrangea also had an experience of adopting what was presented to them as masculine and male ways of being:

> The male figures in my own life, my dad, my uncles, those kinds of people, wherever it was in society that I saw like those depicted, I immediately was like, “well, that's something that should be the man's role, I guess.” So, I guess for me it was like, “well, I can never feel the woman's role. I have to feel like in my head. I have to fill the man's role.”

This leaning into ways of being could also be heightened by a more intentional rejection of the prescribed identity put on participants. Duckweed illuminated this when discussing his identification with the more negative aspects of masculinity in rejecting femininity:

> Toxic masculinity is a very real thing, and it’s so easy to fall into that as a trans man. Just the whole idea of anything that is slightly feminine, it's disgusting, and I cannot associate that with myself. I identified real heavy.

He goes on to describe how his awareness of his internal identity drove his intensity in shifting his presentation and rejection of femininity:

> I remember whenever I got my first laptop, the first thing I immediately did was, “Oh, my god! Football!” Looking up the rules for American football and being like, “I could be interested in this. I'm a guy, one of the boys.” Then I became very obsessed with changing my posture in middle school. So, I hit seventh grade and started man spreading like that would convince everyone. I've just always had a rejection of like a female identity, and I leaned into that real heavy.

Outward presentation of one’s true self was a component of this theme repeatedly touched upon. Participants recounted how powerful it was to explore ways of presenting themselves that impacted their realizations and perceptions of identity. A momentous moment that helped spark Peony’s development was just such an experience:

> One day I was shuffling around in my brother's closet because he had left for college, and I was just cleaning out stuff and moving things, and I found his prom suit. I was like, "you know what? I'm here. I got time to kill." I put on his suit, and I had really long hair at the time, and I kind of did a thing where I put up my hair and kind of styled it in a way that made it look like my hair was shorter than it was. I looked in the mirror, and I didn't feel ashamed. I didn't feel the need to hide. I didn't feel pressed upon, and I think that's really where it started.

Peony described this as the first of a series of "small victories" related to presenting as they were and not as they were prescribed. A particular moment of satisfaction and success in asserting their identity came when their family "gave up" trying to thrust femininity on Peony and they were able to wear the same suit to their uncle's wedding. Peony also indicated that these victories led to other explorations of outward presentation like hair styles, binding, and "everything that would make me try to understand myself a bit more." However, they also reported "leaning into masculine traits over the next, I would say three years," and staunchly rejected "any piece of feminine clothing during those entire years." So, much like Duckweed, a strong rejection of the prescribed identity was a considerable aspect of Peony's experience as well. Morel, living in a much stricter environment related to gender presentation, reported not having many opportunities to express herself so freely and "didn't have an opportunity to access things on [my] own" that would afford expression. To this end, she described how she more covertly came to an important realization:

> I think eighth grade, sneaking into where my mom's underwear. I didn't like that I did things like that. But I look back on it as like, yeah, I did that not randomly. It's not a fetish. At the end of the day I don't get my rocks off on the idea. And then that makes

> sense. And that's when we say it wasn't a sexual thing. It was "What is this like? Does this make sense when I do this? To me, does something feel right inside?" Was it something like that? Yeah. It just clicked. It felt good. I guess at the end of the day it's like, "I like to be pretty."

As they described, these experiences enabled crucial insight and realization regarding an authentic sense of self and how to align outward presentation with their inner world and self-concept.

For Basil, however, the journey into outwardly presenting the self in a manner congruous to internal concept took more time. Her aforementioned safety concerns were tied to this delay in exploration, and her initial efforts may have been more understated than some other participants. Again, though, she described the experience as equally impactful for her as it was for other participants.

> I would try to allow my appearance to like, look more feminine in terms of just like dressing slightly less masculine, presenting myself slightly less masculine. Things like that, like pretty quickly. When I started doing that I was like, "Wait a minute. This feels correct. What the heck?"

Unique to her own experience was that she had already begun hormone replacement therapy (HRT) prior to this exploration of outward presentation. Here, she explains how beginning HRT was a significant confirmatory factor in her identity development and a catalyst for leaning into a more feminine presentation:

> Once I had started [HRT], my mental state was the best it had been in years. I guess this was correct. Once I got into that that mindset of "Yeah, this is exactly what I needed," I was starting to be more comfortable with taking slightly more drastic changes to myself

> in terms of appearance and behavior. It gave me the kick in the pants I needed to actually start doing some things.

Morel had a similar lived experience, considering that she had just begun HRT at the time of the interview, and expressed, much as Basil did, that being AMAB meant she often considered safety over expression in more public spaces.

Adversity

The fourth theme of "adversity" encompasses the negative experiences of nonconforming identity development primarily expressed as various forms of invalidation and trauma-related. However, trauma was not always perceived as being directly related to a nonconforming identity, though it was frequently connected with invalidation and doubt reported by participants. For example, Morel categorized it as "an uphill battle" and linked trauma with intense fear for her safety:

> It gave me terrible anxiety. I don't trust anybody, any motherfucker out there. You're probably transphobic and probably want to kill me. That's just how I feel about every person right now. I'm still working through that, but having grown up in that type of environment that was a hostile environment. It brought about a lot of shame and doubt. It puts you directly into survival mode.

She also touched on how she felt it directly impacted her capacity to develop her identity:

> Had I had a different environment, one that had been like, "I am okay with who you are. You do what you want." I think I might have a felt a little differently about myself, and who I am and felt a bit less hesitant to do things.

Rose shared much the same sentiment saying, "If I had been instilled with more confidence that wasn't instilled in me because of this trauma, then maybe I would have come to

some realizations sooner. It's an ongoing process to undo things." Marty experienced an intense doubt embedded in their capacity to connect with an identity inextricably linked to the root of their traumatic experience:

> Being in those traumatic situations with all of my relatives, it was just really hard for me to come to terms with the masculine traits and my personality. For me to actually want to identify as a man ever, It's still almost uncomfortable for me.

The essence of these statements was distilled in one of Basil's recurrent questions, "Am I even allowed to feel this way?" The instillation of doubt was experienced by participants as consistently being a factor in the delay of reflection described by Duckweed here:

> The trauma was where a lot of the doubt came from. There was this sense of danger and not feeling safe enough to explore. That made repression a lot easier, which is why it took me so long to get out of denial.

Doubt was also expressed as linked with invalidations of both perception, emotional experience, and outward presentation. For example, Hydrangea expressed questioning perceptions as the following:

> It was important to learn that what I was feeling was what I was feeling as opposed to a parent or someone else telling me that what I was feeling was not the correct perception. I think a lot of it is a constant cycle of invalidation.

Morel compared invalidation as "a bit of indoctrination to work through." Basil elaborated on this concept in more detail. She gave this description of her experience:

> I think I had been taught there shouldn't be something "wrong" with me. I think it was just more of an impact on how I thought about my identity in terms of just an "am I even allowed to feel this way?"

Invalidation was also conveyed as being linked to one's presentation. Peony had an experience in which the invalidation came externally, but also with an internalized sense of frustration with their own body:

> The first thing you want to do is to tell people your pronouns. "Please call me this and this," and in a perfect world I would be called they/them. I can't do that, because I don't look like a they/them and I'll never look like a they/them. I look like a she/they and I look like she/her, even though I feel like a they/them and that's my own personal trauma that I have to work with.

Regardless of the context's unique factors, participants expressed that trauma touched their development experience.

Establishing Consistency

The fifth theme, "establishing consistency," was rooted in reflecting on the constancy of subjective self-experience and determination of identity markers or indicators. For most of the participants, this began with the solidification of their sexual identity. Determining sexual orientation was a significant first step toward conceptualizing oneself as something outside of a binary understanding of the self in relation to gender and provided a solid foundation for contextualizing other experiences. Hydrangea explained how the exploration of sexual identity ushered them into the process:

> The first part of kind of my whole experience was figuring out my sexuality. After I kind of figured out my sexuality, I got on like a journey with my ex, it was a very toxic relationship, and in the process I kind of found myself dealing with a lot of my journey into finding my gender identity.

Basil more specifically indicated how the development of sexual identity opened the doors to new possibilities of expression and ways of being:

> It kind of coincides with me figuring out sexuality, because I figured out I was bisexual when I was like fourteen. I think that kind of planted an idea in my head that, like Ok, maybe I can not be this just tough dude that my parents and my peers say that I need to be.

For Marty, clarity in sexual identification was a pathway for greater awareness and comfort in identifying with the masculine aspects of their identity:

> I sexually sometimes identify as a man, and before I thought maybe it was leaning more on a fetish end of the spectrum. But then I realized that even in our day-to-day lives I was really comfortable with [my partner] calling me her boyfriend, saying things to me that identified me with he/him/his pronouns sometimes.

Thus, the exploration of sexual identity broadened internal horizons for experience and exploration and provided relational experiences that brought about awareness and comfort with the concept of existing outside of the gender binary.

Reflection was a significant component of this theme as participants repeatedly spoke of "looking back" on the internal and external consistency of their experiences. This reflection facilitated a throughline of identity for Morel and allowed her to make sense of ways she had previously seen herself as different:

> I started to grow up and really started to become aware of my identity as I got older. I got older and the concept started to cross me in many contexts, and it immediately clicked in a way that in retrospect I look back, and I'm like "No, a cis person wouldn't do that." But at the time it was just some weird thing that I did.

This connective tissue of identity was also present for Rose when reflecting:

> I would hang out with those [nonconforming] people and in comparison to all these like cis people that I got with I felt more at home and I didn't like it. It was one of those like dots that I had to connect.

Connecting these "dots" created a more secure footing in participants' subjective understanding of their experiences in the face of prescriptive environments. Hydrangea offered a statement to explain how that realization materialized in their experience:

> Once I came to be able to see myself and say, "Yeah, it's something I've been doing since I was four, five. It's something I've always felt in myself, but I've always been told wasn't me." Now I finally trust myself to be able to say, "Yeah, this is me."

This result for Hydrangea was "reliance on my own perception," which opened the door to further exploration of their self in relation to gender expression and acknowledged their truth of experience.

Attempting to find labels for one's experience and self was also significant to the experience of identity development for five of the seven participants. Overlap between the reflection on consistency and the desire for an accurate label is demonstrated by Duckweed and his reflection on the discomfort of not having a name that accurately represented his internal identity:

> The stuff that I did lean into in the social situations that I felt comfortable in were not feminine in any way whatsoever. A lot of the interests that I had like science and robotics, and being a nerd aren't predominantly female oriented children's subjects. But it was also just addressing the part of a female. I was never comfortable like that. I think,

> honestly looking back, I never liked my dead name. I had always been uncomfortable with it.

The desire for accurate descriptors or labels led to Peony having "tried on different labels to see if one would stick." They also describe frustration at this process and how, ultimately, one's own subjectivity is at the core of the process of finding accuracy:

> I tried fully to immerse myself as a transgender person. It didn't exactly work because while I did feel more inclined to be masculine at times, there was no thing in me that really was like, "I am a man." There was nothing in me that really said that I had to come to terms with that. I wanted to label myself so badly as one thing or the other, but I found out that I can't, because I don't identify with that. And if I don't identify with that, I'm not being true to myself.

Peony's statement speaks to the need to rely on one's perception which was crucial for Hydrangea. Others supported the importance of this reliance in establishing a foundational view of oneself, such as when Morel made the point that her identity was "a self-defined one, but it also made it more true." To this point, Marty offered "a lot of this has been truly thinking about who I am outside of other people and coming to the conclusion of who I experience myself as is very genderfluid." While not all participants described seeking labels for experience, the trust in individual perception as foundational to further identity development was unanimously endorsed as a significant aspect of the overall experience.

Interactive Growth and Development

The sixth theme that emerged from the analysis was "interactive growth and development." This theme was characterized by experiential learning and recognition within interpersonal dynamics. Interaction with other gender nonconforming individuals was endorsed

by all participants as important sources of discovery, exploration, and validation. Though interactional contexts varied for participants, entering new spaces that provided a welcoming, accepting, or mirroring environment was a universal experience. Witnessing others, noted by Devor as a critical element in his stage model (2004), was described as impactful for participants. Rose explained how the first time meeting a trans individual created a reference for experience:

> My stepfather, one of his previous coworkers on the project had transitioned to being male and so I met him very early on and that was my introduction to being trans. My stepdad was really struggling with changing the name and everything, but to me, whenever I heard it, I was like "okay, yeah, that makes sense." My brain was like "I can see how that happened," and the reason I could see it was because I felt like that.

Rose elaborated that when reflecting on this moment, "I didn't question it at all," and that "it made sense instantly," and they referred back to this moment as a pivotal point in which their understanding of self began to make sense. For Duckweed, who grew up in a small rural town without much representation or awareness of LGBTQIA+ identities, witnessing was a vital experience further in their identity development experience that was profoundly normalizing and validating:

> The first time that I went to pride was around the time that I was beginning to explore gender identity and be more comfortable with not with being outside of the binary in the first place. Seeing a lot of people who were comfortable and confident and still regular humans, they just didn't identify with what they were given, was kind of eye-opening for me in a way. It was just kind of confirmation that just because I don't see it in my daily life doesn't mean that it doesn't happen.

Basil and Morel stressed the importance of trans and nonconforming visibility in online spaces. Basil said that these online spaces provided visibility of mirrored identities that she "never would have been able to have in person," while Morel stated that being able to witness these identities online "was a big part of bringing things into my awareness making you go 'Ok. Alright. Things make sense now. I do relate to that." Thus, participants expressed witnessing as a necessary normalizing and validating experience with the capacity to create a more expansive and inclusive view of experiential possibilities.

Discourse, through direct engagement and more passive reception, was also a critical aspect of the developmental experience. For Hydrangea, having a friend who was open to discussing all possibilities and encouraging exploration was critical in situating themselves conceptually in multiple lived contexts:

> Having someone who's able to take you to the far, far extreme of everything you feel kind of helps you say, "Well, I feel this way, this way, and this way." It kind of helps you pick out the level of greyness you are. I suppose the best way to explain it is it helps you find where you are on the wide spectrum of life.

Though one individual was important, they added that "just being able to have contact with so many different people who had so many different perspectives or lived something, that helped me piece together things." The discourse around lived experiences and perspectives also helped Basil come to a significant realization:

> There was a case where a group of friends and I were just talking about our past experiences with relationships, and it was just really eye-opening to me. How in comparing my relationships with people of different genders with theirs, I realized that how I felt in relationships as the male in a relationship just didn't feel correct.

Morel and Peony both spoke about how following discourse in online spaces also provided knowledge to make sense of experience. Morel felt that this expanded her view of how trans identities were accepted and that trans spaces online were predominantly filled with support and "hyping each other up," which was reassuring to her growing understanding of herself and provided availability of trans identities not present in her local environment. Similarly, exposure to online discourse was critical for Peony's growing understanding of existing outside of the gender binary by providing access to nonconforming identities:

> You have people left and right going "Oh, I'm transgender! Oh, I am a person who does not identify with this. I have these pronouns." I have this understanding, and if I hadn't been exposed to that, I don't think I would have eventually come to the understanding that I came to.

Interpersonal interaction provided opportunities for learning and discovery and for participants to develop an authentic sense of self in how they experienced being received by others. In addition, this interaction facilitated Marty in accepting the more masculine aspects of their identity as their partner reflected them. As Marty explained it:

> I think I feel a stronger connection to my partner when I'm identifying masculinely than I do when I'm identifying femininely, which is really interesting, and I never expected it before. I think that is what informed it more than anything. I've been with like bisexual women in the past, and I think I clung to the idea of my womanhood more in those relationships than I do with my partner, because she does very much self-identify as lesbian, as I do. So, to know that she identifies that way, but also can see me as man sometimes, and as more masculine and identify with those traits, and still like be extremely attracted to me and love me, I think, caused me to accept it more.

In a similar dynamic, Duckweed found that it was his friends who were more aware of the changes in his development than he himself was capable of recognizing. He recounted this experience:

> My friends picked up on it before I did, and they were the ones to switch pronouns first. They asked me, “Hey, we've noticed you're doing this thing. We want to respect you. Can we do this?” And said, yes, because I didn't think I would care. Then it ended up being really nice. So, having that kind of support and like, “Hey! It's okay to be questioning things. We'll help you figure it out.” I think the most important part of my discovery and journey for me.

Likewise, Basil’s experience with having her shifts toward her true identity received by a supportive group were pivotal in her process:

> A couple of really close friends, who I didn't I didn't actually confide in or come out to them for a long time after this, they were kind of like going along with my very subtle changes that I would make to myself in like presentation or behavior. Who didn't question it. Who didn't call me out on it or anything. Just kind of went with it. And then as I started actually getting a confirmation with it, with myself and coming out to people like close friends, were extremely helpful getting myself situated.

Developing Individual Perspective

The seventh theme to emerge was “developing individual perspective,” and within it, two subthemes: entering ambiguity and defining personal understanding. Overall, this theme speaks to the experience shared by all participants in developing and applying insight and internal awareness to a personal understanding and conceptualization of their individual identity in relation to the concept of gender, the self, and the world. Peony summarized this process as “all

you're thinking about is yourself and trying to understand everything that's happened to you at that point in time," and further added that this part of their development was "insanely difficult." In line with this, all participants expressed that this was a prolonged and intentional period in their development spent honestly examining themselves.

Four of the seven participants identified that there was a significant realization that they needed to "unwind the previous beliefs I had about myself," as Hydrangea put it. At the same time, Basil and Marty referred more specifically to "breaking down internalized biases." These perspectives were expressed as being tied to deconstructing gender concepts informed by prescriptive and traumatic internalizations. Collectively, the participants agreed that this deconstruction, breaking down, or unwinding constituted entering a space of internal ambiguity, which specifically captures the experience of addressing the discomfort involved with being uncertain, the development of internal awareness, the confrontation of internalized biases, and the acceptance of existing with an undefined self. To this end, Peony offered a recurrent sentiment present in how participants looked at moving through this ambiguity, the questions they asked themselves to step into it, and their expectations for the outcome:

> When I finally took a leap of faith and looked at myself for the first time and was like, "Okay. What do I want? What do you want to do?" It was hard, because I didn't know I how to approach it. I didn't know how to do any of the work, because the work I had done previously was just following in people's footsteps, and I had to basically retrace my own. The work I had to do wasn't going to be easy, but it was going to be very rewarding.

Their unique experiences drove each participant's journey into this space of ambiguity. Basil was spurred into action by a need to confront and find an underlying reason for the denial they had clung to for so long, saying, "I got to a point where I was like, 'Clearly, I don't want to

think about this for a reason. I need to figure out what that reason is.'" The more I deal with, it the better it gets." Rose's realization that "who I was wasn't who I grew up as" generated their need to enter exploration. Hydrangea entered ambiguity via therapy and confronting the impacts of their trauma. Though the catalysts for this developmental experience varied, accepting the unavoidable confrontation of internal ambiguity was a universal aspect that was seen as critical in taking steps toward authentically defining oneself. Another universal sentiment about this part of the experience was summarized in Duckweed's statement, "I really just grew more comfortable with not being comfortable. The more I deal with it, the better it gets."

Once in the ambiguous space, participants spoke of deconstructing their trauma and the prescriptions that previously made up their concept of self. Basil recounted her experience in this space as such:

> It was just a lot of sitting and thinking of all the stuff that I'd been taught about gender and identity, and things like that from my parents and from even high school in that regard. You know it's nothing. It's not legit right.

Marty spoke of the need to reconstruct their understanding of masculinity in order to come to grips with the masculine parts of theirself:

> I just didn't have any idea of what masculinity was for most of my life outside of what my brothers and my father showed me. I didn't give me like a very positive opinion in general. If I were like not in such like suffocating environment when it comes to just like who men are, it'd be different. Most of my informed experiences were from that trauma.

Similarly, Peony mentioned "confronting the idea of femininity that was pushed on me to create my own idea of it." For these participants, ambiguity resulted from eliminating prior biases and

conceptualizations, engaging with undefined aspects of the self, and acknowledging the work needed to fill that space with self-determined understanding.

The second subtheme, defining personal understanding, focuses on the work done to determine what took the place of ambiguity of self and perspective. Participants discussed this process as an intentional and directed reframing of experience, redefinition of old perceptions, and integrating awareness into their personal contexts to move forward with a greater understanding of their journey. Making sense of past experiences with new understanding was important and was often expressed as a study in contrasts. For example, Rose spent time coming to terms with the drastic shift in his relationship with his father as his developing identity impacted it:

> My dad was my favorite of my parents. It was just that I looked up to him more than my mom and then I realized that he was homophobic and racist and all that. It's just this weird having a 180 opinion, a slow dawn of realizing. It's one of the things that was really hard about saying, "Ok. I'm a guy. I'm not gender fluid. I'm going to say I'm going to live as a dude for the rest of my life."

For Duckweed, that contrast was connected to reframing the past through a very different lens and integrating the duality of that experience:

> Reframing who I was as a person in my mind was helpful with reframing who I was as a kid. Something that I've struggled with early on in my identity was still staying connected to the little girl that I was, because I was. Just being able to find comfort within that still, and mesh that into my identity, it's one of the things that people don't really talk about a lot. You either completely remove yourself from your childhood, or you just fight and

> accept it, but it's still not truly a part of who you are, because deep down I still would prefer to think of my younger self as male. But that's not accurate.

Basil's understanding of her experience was informed by examining how gender presentation was related to her trauma:

> A lot of it stemmed from the fact that my father very desperately wanted a son, because I have two older sisters. A lot of the trauma comes, for me, from not being the kind of son that he wanted. So, when I look back on it, it's just striking how masculinity, specifically my masculinity, played into some of it.

In order for Marty to move forward, they needed to confront the toxic idea of masculinity internalized by trauma:

> It's returning for me, to truly accept that masculine side of myself. Mostly because most of the masculinity I've been exposed to throughout my life has been so toxic. I had to kind of redefine what masculinity in a man would mean to me in a non-toxic way. When I started doing that, it became a more comfortable description and identity for me over time.

Each participant offered a unique set of beliefs or internalized views connected with their pre-nonconforming identity they expressed having to integrate into their new perspective. While it required reflection on external factors, the result was a more settled internal experience participants universally reported, in Rose's words, was "something that I needed to figure out within myself."

Summary

The results shared in this chapter emerged as consistent elements in the lived experience of participants via phenomenological reduction. The essence of the lived experience of identity

development for TGNC individuals who've survived complex trauma was distilled into seven themes: (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. Participants' intentional reflection on experience enabled vivid descriptions of lived experiences of dissonance, denial, exploration, fear, and security. Participants also identified how reflection was significant across themes and how trauma affects trust in one's perception of both internal and external experiences. They expressed the essence of situating oneself both internally and externally in the presence of doubt. Across the reported experiences, there was a consistent refrain centered on the internal drive to have congruence in one's internal and external worlds.

Chapter 4: Discussion

This study's findings provide insight and understanding into the lived experience of TGNC individuals who've survived complex trauma. This study sought to gain insight into a population that, despite its vulnerability, has not explored the full depth of its experiences and uniqueness. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using inductive coding to determine the horizons or invariant constituents of experience before completing imaginative variation and theme construction consistent with phenomenological tradition (Moustakas, 1994). This reduction resulted in the emergence of seven themes present in the experiences of identity development among participants. The themes that emerged were confirmed with participants via member checking and consisted of (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. In this chapter, the findings related to each theme will be discussed as they relate to the consistency between existing models and experience, new insights, connections between constructs of identity and experience, and unique experiences within the study sample. There is also the examination of implications for future research and identification of the limitations on the generalizability of this study.

Discussion of Research Findings

The impetus behind this study was to fill the gap in research related to the lived experience of gender nonconforming individuals. Researchers have noted a need to consider more identities across the spectrum of gender than have previously been explored (Diamond et al., 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2017). However, very few studies have made identity development a research focus for this population. Recent qualitative research has made an intentional effort to include numerous identities in studies built around narrative inquiry (Katz-Wise et al., 2017;

Morgan & Stevens, 2012) and grounded theory (Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), however, there has been no phenomenological inquiry to identify the essence of the lived experience for this population. The high rate of traumatization and victimization (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Connolly et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2013; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2010; Shipherd et al., 2011) and prevalence of mental health conditions (Connolly et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mustanski et al., 2010) present an imperative in developing a greater understanding of lived experience as it relates to these risk factors. The results of this study help inform our understanding of previous and future research and provide insight into salient themes that may be of use in developing and focusing treatment for a population at high risk.

Disconnection

There seems to be some consistency between TG identity development stage models and the described experiences of TGNC individuals encapsulated in this theme. Several existing models of TG identity development identify mind-body dissonance as a major developmental stage or experience (Devor, 2004; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Morgan & Stevens, 2012), and this dissonance early in the identity development process was corroborated by participants. However, participants in this study expressed a disconnect between their inner experience and physical body and a lack of experiential vocabulary to facilitate meaning-making, which appears to have resulted in the sense of disconnect from their overall experience. Hiestand and Levitt (2005) suggested this disconnect was rooted in comparison to other children of the same assigned gender, but none of the participants expressed any experience of comparing; instead, there was a vague and unidentifiable internal sense of dissonance. Morgan and Stevens (2012) have suggested this dissonance manifests from an

incongruence between the mind and the "physical realities" (p. 303) of individuals, while Devor's (2004) first stage of "abiding anxiety" also considers prescribed social roles. The statements made by participants seem to support these, though there appears to be some overall sense of difference that is inherently present. Participants all described this general questioning.

Isolation is another element of the experience in prior research (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005) and identified in the participants' experience. Again, though, we see that the existing model sees this isolation emerging from awareness of contrasts between the individual and others rather than from internal or relational factors. Participants offered a fear of rejection as a salient factor in the capacity to feel connection to critical relational figures. They also described how prescriptive roles generated discomfort in-line with Devor's (2004) model, though the links they describe between fear of rejection and this isolation are newly identified in this study. Anticipation of negative responses or attachment insecurity could mediate this experienced isolation.

Suppressing Awareness

The denial and avoidance of grappling with a nonconforming identity appear unique when considered alongside existing research, though several models identify struggle with emerging identity as an element of experience (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). For example, Kuper et al. (2018) briefly mentions denial or change attempts made by their participants to avoid their nonconforming identity, but it isn't emphasized as a critical factor in their model. Likewise, avoidance of a growing awareness of one's nonconforming identity has not been indicated in previous studies, though Morgan and Stevens (2012) did identify hiding and compensating in a manner reflective of what was reported by participant. Most participants reported experiences in which both active and passive defenses for awareness were present. Some of these defenses were expressed as introjections, some as protective responses to

perceived threats to safety, and some as intentional suppression. Levitt and Ippolito (2014) also found safety a recurring theme in their research and a significant element in the third cluster of their model that categorizes TG identity development as an "ongoing process of balancing authenticity and necessity" (p. 1743). However, safety in their model is a consideration of presentation that takes place post-awareness of nonconforming identity rather than a consideration of exploration taking place predominantly pre-awareness of nonconforming identity.

The research behind our understanding of complex trauma identifies a compromised sense of identity as a feature of symptom complexity (Briere & Spinnazola, 2005; Briere et al., 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020). The negative self-appraisal and negative self-attribution distinct to complex PTSD as recognized by the ICD-11 (Cloitre et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2018) could be areas in which practitioners may need more knowledge to develop treatment in this population. This brings up questions about the potential role trauma plays in developing gender awareness or identity and provides direction for future inquiry. Participants suggested that their perception of what was possible or "allowed" for themselves was impacted by the doubt instilled in their subjective perceptions and experience. This questioning of perception is indicated as a feature of complex trauma in existing research (Cloitre et al., 2009; Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020; Weindl & Lueger-Schuster, 2018), and there is no current research examining the contrast in the experience of identity development between TGNC individuals who are survivors of complex trauma and those who are not.

Leaning In

This theme and "interactive growth and discovery," were the most consistent with prior research. Exploration of presentation and ways of being is a consistent theme or stage across

developmental models (Devor, 2004; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Morgan & Stevens, 2012) and was described as an essential aspect of the identity development experience. This theme encompasses a wide array of subtle and overt expressions of gender that varied according to the contexts in which participants lived. Both AMAB participants described how their efforts to explore identity were covert or delayed due to the hostile attitudes toward gender expression outside of a prescribed norm present in their environments. Participants who were AFAB had fewer barriers present, as being a "tomboy" was expressed as universally accepted to a certain point. This suggests a significantly different experience for AMAB and AFAB individuals in developing a nonconforming identity. Questions arise as to how much concerns for safety impact the willingness with which AMAB individuals engage in exploratory behavior and expression, as well as how trauma may interact with those concerns. Both participants in this study identified fear of physical safety as a limiting factor in their early attempts or consideration of presenting with more feminine-identified characteristics or behaviors. With exploration so universally acknowledged as a critical aspect of identity development, there is a need to look deeper into the factors that may prevent individuals from engaging in this process. Considering the trauma experienced by participants, there are also questions about the possible impact it has on one's willingness to explore or the conceptualization of whether exploration is possible to begin with.

One of the common criticisms of stage models for identity development has been that transition was seen as an endpoint (Bockting et al., 2014; Diamond et al., 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2017). This study uncovered exciting results that may lend some support for transition as an important stage or element, if not an endpoint in the identity development process. Three of the participants who identified with a trans identity had begun HRT before the study, while two of

those identifying as genderfluid expressed a desire for top surgery to align their outward presentation with their felt sense of gender identity. Levitt and Ippolito (2014) determined an understanding of transition much more congruous to that expressed by participants in this study, namely that it is the process of determining a "body-gender identity combination that best fit them with social, legal, and financial considerations" (p. 1744). This definition of transition is like what participants in Kuper et al.'s (2018) study offered as "an individual process of finding 'what fits' for [oneself]" (p. 442). None of the participants in this study expressed sex reassignment or gender affirming surgery as something they had experienced or had planned on pursuing yet.

Adversity

The elevated risk of adverse experiences for TGNC identities has been widely acknowledged in research (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Connolly et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2013; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2010; Shipherd et al., 2011). The breadth of adversity experienced by participants is not surprising. A question then emerges around whether these experiences are unique to members of this population who have experienced complex trauma or to the population as a whole. Trauma as a significant factor in the experience of adversity was particularly impactful in the forms of invalidation and internalized doubt. Participants did not have the universal experience of trauma linked with the presentation of their nonconforming identity; however, the invalidation instilled via traumatic experience was recognized as something that delayed or obscured a reflective capacity. All participants expressed that their trauma prolonged their process of questioning identity and developing an awareness of nonconforming experience and orientations. Alterations in perception are common to the experience of complex trauma in childhood and adolescence

(Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020; van der Kolk, 2005), and could impact the instillation of doubt reported by participants.

Additionally, these invalidations could present as an additional risk factor for internalizing stigmatized views of the self, as identified by Meyer's (2003) model of minority stress. This could account for the dynamic interplay between external forces and internal doubt. Another recurring point made by participants was that trauma was perceived as a delaying factor in developing or realizing one's nonconforming identity. However, all but one participant reported that therapy was active in coming to terms with their traumatic experience.

Interestingly, there is a distinct difference in the experience of AMAB and AFAB participants. The fear, as mentioned earlier, for personal safety expressed by AMAB participants was a limiting factor in the exploration of presentation and expression. It was reinforced as a significant element of experience, while only two of the five AFAB participants expressed a fear for safety linked directly with their gender identity. One of those participants (Hydrangea) expressed that their more masculine presentation was actually more protective than presenting as feminine. AFAB participants expressed that trauma was informative of their safety considerations. For AMAB individuals, however, it appears that the fear for personal safety is present early in the process of identity development and remains a constant for a substantial amount of time.

Establishing Consistency

The reflection and anxiety present in this theme echo that which has been identified in previous research on TGNC identity development (Devor, 2004; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Morgan & Stevens, 2012) and were described as essential aspects of the identity development experience. What emerged to generate this theme were experiences consistent with

Bockting and Coleman's (2007) coming-out model, which emphasized acknowledging the nonconforming identity to self. While coming-out is recognized as a significant experiential component in TGNC identity development (Bockting, 2014), the development of a personal understanding of identity and the intrapersonal experience involved with that has only recently been something under examination (Kuper et al., 2018). Kuper et al. (2018) identified "meaning-making" as one of four intrapersonal processes key to TGNC identity development. This process consists of individuals reflecting on their experiences, confronting internalized prescriptions, and establishing a sense of self in the past and present contexts. This process encompasses aspects of both "establishing consistency" and "developing individual perspective" identified in this study. These themes were differentiated by where reflection was directed. A deep reflection and examination of the self over time, labels for one's own understanding, and the linking of behavioral and emotional indicators of identity were hallmarks of "establishing consistency." This theme was directed inward, whereas "developing individual perspective" was more directed at determining how one situated their perspective, view of the self, and concepts of gender in a social or political context.

Sexual identity played a role in this experiential component of development consistent with the butch lesbian identity development model by Hiestand and Levitt (2005). Their model identified sexuality as crucial to understanding the gender dynamics between butch and femme lesbians. The majority of participants in this study expressed how integral understanding one's sexuality, and sexuality in general, was to accurate reflection and labeling of experiences of gender. In addition, understanding of sexuality as a catalyst for a more authentic perception of one's gender by several participants both AFAB and AMAB. With determining sexual identity being such an essential part of the identity development process, it is important to consider the

impacts that stigmatizing environments might have on this critical development component. This could potentially be an additional component in the delayed realization present in “adversity.”

Interactive Growth and Discovery

Having one’s authentic identity reflected by others is a nearly ubiquitous element in the existing research on TGNC identity development (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Morgan & Stevens, 2012), and was also a significant experience for participants in this study. The emergence of online spaces as meaningful contexts and environments for having identity reflected is an interesting development to our understanding. Social connectedness is recognized as a buffer to the impacts of minority stress (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Meyer, 2003), and regardless of the level of interaction, online spaces were viewed as an opportunity for support. However, Duckweed expressed that some online communities were not open to exploration and were far more intolerant of those who had not yet fully defined their identity. He discussed how he had been harassed for “mis-stepping” in how he had been identifying himself:

> I had made the wrong choice, and those spaces made that hurt a lot more than it should have, because they basically bully you into admitting you were wrong. These are people that are just like, “you need to know immediately right now,” and that's not accurate to the experience at all.

A greater understanding of online spaces' impact on the identity development process as a social context could help inform clinical practice.

Learning from others and being supported in exploration are acknowledged as important identity development experiences for TGNC individuals (Bockting, 2014; Katz-Wise et al.,

2017). Participants reported experiences that were in-line with the previous research while also identifying multiple relational contexts in which learning took place primarily via exploratory discourse. Teachers, therapists, friends, and romantic partners were all identified as significant individuals who facilitated growth and learning by being supportive and willing to explore multiple possibilities from various perspectives. Several participants described relationships in which others would challenge them to reflect more intentionally and honestly. In these cases, knowledge, witnessing of the participants nonconforming behavior/expression, or personal experience were used to confront avoidance or doubt in participants. External pressure for authenticity and the acceptance of how others received one seemed to be catalysts for discovery and exploration.

Developing Individual Perspective

The presence of distress and integration characterized the experience of developing an individual perspective. Discomfort with one's framing or definitions of experience was a constant. Participants described having to upend their understanding of the world and how they fit into the various contexts of their lives. The work of integrating new ideas and perspectives is present in every model identified in this study. Discomfort or distress are noted experiences of several models of TGNC identity development (Devor, 2004; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) as well, though they are predominantly linked with mind-body dissonance, expression, or the result of external factors such as stigma. Internal distress related to the reconceptualization of how one navigates the world has not been examined on the whole but rather been mentioned in passing as it relates to elements of stages in development. What was expressed by participants was a prolonged experience of confronting ambiguity with only their own perception upon which to rely. Aside from Devor (2004), existing models do not thoroughly

address this ambiguity and redefinition of perceptions that governs one's understanding of the self in multiple contexts. The impact of complex trauma on perception (Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020; van der Kolk, 2005) could be a mediating factor in this process, though no research has yet explored this experience.

Implications for Clinicians

This study has identified several significant elements for clinicians working with TGNC individuals who have survived complex trauma. The seven themes that emerged in this study reinforce already established practices (universal positive regard, developing insight, therapeutic alliance, etc.) as well as identified key areas of exploration and attention: (a) self-awareness, (b) disconnect between self and the world, (c) doubt, (d) online communities, and (e) differences in AFAB and AMAB experience. With so many participants endorsing the significance of therapeutic relationships as facilitative in their identity development, the role of counselors cannot be overstated. Participants repeatedly expressed that counselors helped develop awareness, perspective, authenticity, and a broadening of emotional experience. The counseling process was particularly salient in the themes of "interactive growth and development" and "developing individual perspective." The breadth of experience offered by participants reinforces the point that counselors must be prepared to meet TGNC clients where they are in their own process and attend to a dynamic set of needs.

Self-awareness emerged as a crucial tool for clients in understanding their sense of disconnectedness, establishing self-consistency, processing doubt, and settling some ambiguity in developing perspective. Affective and interoceptive awareness is impacted by complex trauma experiences (Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020). Counselors working with clients developing their TGNC identity may want to spend time shifting this awareness to explore any

impact trauma has had on gender experience. Developing self-awareness could also benefit work in determining if disconnection experienced by participants is more related to traumatic dissociation. Counselors may determine where clients experience disconnect via trauma or incongruent internal and external experience. Exploring barriers to relational fulfilment could shed light on the nature of this disconnect. Helping clients develop self-awareness directed at internal defenses, unwanted feelings, and introjects can help identify the roots of doubt and anxiety that must be confronted and provide the client with a greater capacity to recognize negative self-appraisal and attribution stemming from complex trauma.

The disconnect felt by participants does not appear solely within the self. The fear of rejection participants described was significant in the concealment of authentic gender expression, and CT impacting perceived safety compounded this. Austin and Goodman (2017) found that social connectedness significantly benefits self-esteem in TG individuals, and other researchers have noted social connectedness as a protective factor against psychological distress in the population (Bockting et al., 2013; Scandurra et al., 2017). Counselors working with TGNC individuals must place an emphasis on helping clients develop this social connectedness while creating a strong working alliance grounded in an authentic reception and appreciation of the client's identity. Counselors must also be mindful of how this fear of rejection may create greater sensitivity to microaggressions or invalidations and the risk this creates for internalized stigmatization. Providing clients with the power to address these mistakes by the therapist, and the subsequent acceptance of accountability by the therapist, attend to rifts in the relationship while creating an opportunity to empower clients in asserting identity. Thus, establishing this sense of power for TGNC clients and accountability on behalf of the counselor at the outset of treatment is critical.

Participants universally understood their CT as a limiting or delaying factor in their identity development. Complex trauma significantly limits the capacity to see oneself accurately and without negative bias (Cloitre et al., 2018; Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020; World Health Organization, 2018). Alterations in self-perception and the suppression of awareness experienced by participants creates unique challenges for counselors. The degree to which an individual is aware of their own nonconforming tendencies should be assessed and explored to determine the level of suppression experienced by clients questioning identity. This exploration can provide the counselor with insight into whether a client is prepared to "connect the dots." This facilitates an accurate reflection of client identity at odds with their understanding of the self as viewed through the lens of traumatic experience. Counselors may attend to the broadening of how clients conceptualize what is "allowed" in their experience by accepting that which exists within the client but has been suppressed by trauma-altered perceptions and understanding. In this way, the counselor may attend to the unfulfilled expectations for attachment figures that prevented the client from feeling safe enough to explore the ambiguity they experience within.

Counselors should also be mindful of the capacity for online spaces to serve as a community for clients in environments unaccepting of gender nonconformity or with fears for personal safety. This was especially true for the AMAB participants. Both expressed those online spaces provided visibility, normalization, validation, community, and knowledge. Social connectedness is a protective factor in the impact of minority stress (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Meyer, 2003). Online spaces might help generate social connectedness, though further research would be beneficial in determining this. This also touches on the variation between AFAB and AMAB experiences. There were stark differences in the level of fear for personal safety expressed by AFAB and AMAB participants and the level to which nonconforming

presentation was tolerated in childhood. Counselors should consider that AMAB individuals may be reticent to explore gender if there is an intense fear for personal safety. To this end, counselors must receive clients with universal positive regard and educate themselves on how to deliver multiculturally competent trauma-informed care that provides a safe environment for exploration.

Limitations

This study attempted to incorporate as diverse a set of voices as possible. However, the participants who responded to recruitment were homogenous, making the generalizability of results difficult. Participants were primarily White, AFAB, middle-class, and from the southeast region of the United States. Considering the variation between AFAB and AMAB participants, a more extensive set of AMAB experiences would have been beneficial. A broader range of racial/ethnic identities and socioeconomic statuses may have generated reported experiences vastly different from those of participants with the means for counseling, education, and the benefit of not facing additional discrimination factors. All the participants were either in or had completed college. All seven shared a common propensity for reflection, insight development, and self-analysis. This could be due in part to their experiences with therapy. There may be marked differences in the experience of individuals who have not already integrated an understanding of how their trauma and identity interact. More racial/ethnic identity variance could also likely have broadened the scope of experiences and generated new emergent themes. Variability in the extent to which nonconforming identities are received across cultures has the potential to provide distinctly different experiences. As a result, there is little to suggest that the themes identified in this study hold true across cultural and racial/ethnic lines. This lack of demographic variability could also have impacted the low number of participants in this study. It

is not out of the question to assume that similar identities have similar experiences, and a wider variety of identities could have resulted in a much larger set of participants. Lastly, as will all qualitative research, despite the efforts taken to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, there is still the potential for researcher bias or interpretation to affect the results of this study. The researcher's work as a counselor for this population presents the potential for these themes to have some lens of experience through which they have been received.

Recommendations for Future Research

As noted, the population identified for this study needs further research to treat and conceptualize effectively. Differences in AFAB and AMAB experience appears to be significantly different, and further inquiry into where variance arises would be highly beneficial for practical application. Fear of personal safety was a constant for both AMAB participants, and there are questions as to whether this fear significantly impacts identity development among different identities. The supportive role played by online communities is a potential direction for inquiry and could provide counselors with additional resources to provide clients if these spaces are significantly impactful. Future researchers may also want to explore the potential interaction between internalized stigma or doubt and trauma, such as if there is an elevated risk for internalized stigma in TGNC trauma survivors compared to those without trauma experience. Many of the impacts and mechanisms of complex trauma were noted as delaying the process for participants, and there are opportunities to explore variation within the TGNC population. Follow-up studies may also emphasize the identity development experience for TGNC individuals with more diverse cultural backgrounds and a wider age range.

Conclusion

This study intended to provide a greater understanding of the lived experience of TGNC identity development in individuals with complex trauma experiences. Phenomenological reduction and analysis of semi-structured interviews with seven individuals resulted in seven emergent themes expressing the essence of their experience: (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. These themes represent the consistent experiential elements of a population needing a broader basis of research from which to inform clinical work and understanding. Interesting contrasts also emerged from participant descriptions, providing direction for future research and clinical considerations. While limitations may prevent the generalizability of these results, participants have provided valuable insight into the experience of an underserved population.

Chapter 5: Manuscript

Introduction

The growing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues within the counseling field has generated a necessity to better identify the risk factors faced by the population and a need to understand the unique interpersonal and intrapersonal processes that make up their experience. However, research has not managed to keep up with this rise in service usage and often continues to examine the needs and experiences of a population whose identities exist on a spectrum, and as such, have perpetuated conceptualization and theory along the lines of an outdated gender binary (Fiani & Han, 2019). Research within the last decade establishes significant disparities in mental health outcomes between the LGBTQ+ and heteronormative populations (James et al., 2016). Within the LGBTQ+ population, transgender (TG) individuals present and contend with higher levels of risk and adverse outcomes related to mental health (Connolly et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mustanski et al., 2010). Within the LGTBQ+ population, transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals are at elevated risk for exposure to trauma and the subsequent psychological impacts (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Connolly et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2013; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2010; Shipherd et al., 2011). The American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) have competency expectations for multicultural counseling that expect an understanding of experiential and developmental knowledge for effective counseling practice (ACA, 2013; ALGBTIC, 200).

Literature Review

Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Identity Development

Research on the TGNC population has identified identity development as an area in which TGNC experience is unique and needs further exploration and understanding (Diamond et al., 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). There are no current models that do not nest the wide ranch of nonconforming identities under the transgender label. Devor (2004) put forth an early model of transexual identity development consisting of 14 stages by building upon models of gay identity development moving from confusion to discovery, to acceptance, then to transition before arriving at a sense of pride in identity. A model for butch lesbian identity development was proposed by Hiestand and Levitt (2005) also identified confusion and integration as stage elements. Bockting and Coleman's (2007) model of transgender identity development includes five stages with identified developmental tasks. In this model, we also see that stages of distress and integration are present. These models are all, however, adapted from models for sexual identity development or coming out.

A shared criticism of these models is that attempting to integrate TGNC experience into existing models of identity development among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (LGB) and emphasizing transition as a necessary element prescribes a narrow view of transgender experience while excluding gender-nonconforming individuals completely (Diamond et al., 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Recent research has developed models of experience or development that have attended to the spectrum of TGNC identity and shifted the focus of identity development and moved toward an understanding of identity development as more process than stage-oriented.

These more recent models of TGNC identity development assert that the processes involved are non-linear and not fixed, though there is some support for aspects of certain stages identified by earlier researchers within the salient themes (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al.,

2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Morgan and Stevens (2012) took a narrative approach that found three themes across a range of gender identities: a sense of dissonance between the body and mind, the negotiation and management of identities, and transition. A grounded theory study conducted by Levitt and Ippolito (2014) included more diversity of gender identities and determined a theory of identity development consisting of mechanisms for authentic representation of one's gender, communicating gender and being seen by others, and balancing the needs for expression and communication with the need to survive in oppressive systems. Katz-Wise et al. (2018) examined TGNC identity development within the context of the caregiving/family system in childhood and adolescence and outlined inter and intrapersonal developmental pathways in the experience of TGNC youth. Kuper et al. (2018) also looked at more interactive aspects and determined four dimension of gender-related experience and four interpersonal process that interacted in identity development.

Complex Trauma

Complex trauma (CT) was introduced by Herman (1992) as a layered or cumulative trauma. Contemporary understanding of CT is that it is prolonged, chronic, frequently occurs with attachment figures, and has a complex symptomatology (Courtois, 2008; Cloitre et al., 2011; Ford & Courtois, 2020). Ford and Courtois (2020) define complex trauma as:

> (1) Interpersonal experiences and events that often involve relational betrayal; (2) repetitive, prolonged, pervasive, and in some cases, ongoing events; (3) involvement of direct attack, harm, and/or neglect and abandonment by caregivers or other adults who are responsible for responding to or protecting children and adolescents—this may extend to organizations and cultures that are disbelieving of the victim and deny the occurrence of the traumatic circumstance and so are unresponsive or that support or provide a safe

> haven for perpetrators; (4) occurrence at developmentally vulnerable times in the victim's life, often beginning in early childhood (and sometimes in utero and in infancy); and (5) have great potential to compromise severely a child's physical and psychological maturation and development and to undermine or even reverse significant developmental attainments at any point in the lifespan. (p. 9)

While there is no DSM diagnosis for CT, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Complex Trauma Taskforce has developed a diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) with unique distinguishing features (affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, disturbances in relationshis) and treatment recommendations which have been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the International Classification of Diseases 11 (Cloitre et al., 2018; WHO, 2019). The elevated rates of exposure to the identified elements of CT within the TGNC population (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Shipherd et al., 2011) suggests that CT presents as a significant risk factor and salient element of TGNC experience that requires attention and research focus.

Negative Internalizations

Individuals in the TGNC population are more likely to have experiences putting them at risk of internalizing negative views, appraisals, and attributions through CT exposure as well as the potential self-stigmatization presented by minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress is chronic additive stress individuals experience due to having a minoritized identity (racial, ethnic, sexual, etc.) (Meyer, 2003). Identity-related discrimination and prejudice results in increased negative mental health experiences/outcomes for those who experience it (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003). It increases risk from exposure to distal stressors (rejection, prejudice, discrimination) and proximal stressors (concealing identity,

anxiety about discrimination, internalized negative emotions, and self-appraisal) (Carter et al., 2018; Pascoe & Richman, 2009) which are potentially impactful to processes in TGNC identity development identified by Kuper et al. (2018). Repeated exposure to minority stress can be internalized and lead to a negative self-concept manifested in a self-stigmatizing value system and internalized transphobia (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Herek et al., 2015; Meyer, 2003). Minority stress aids the manifestation of a felt pressure for gender compatibility, a belief that it is vitally essential to avoid cross-gender behavior and conform to gender stereotypes (Egan & Perry, 2001). Felt pressure for gender compatibility has been shown to have an association with attachment insecurity as early as preadolescence (Cooper et al., 2013), which can enable the establishment of maladaptive interpersonal patterns and further affect one's beliefs about the self and others (D'Andrea et al., 2012; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). This felt pressure is particularly salient when conceptualizing the experiences of TGNC youth for whom the risk of internalizing self-stigma and transphobia are heightened by the negative self-appraisal and self-stigmatization found in those who've experienced CT and minority stress.

Methods

This study intended to produce understanding of the experiences of individuals with identities existing outside the gender binary. The primary question for this research study: What is the lived experience of identity development for TGNC individuals who have experienced complex trauma within the caregiving/family system in childhood and/or adolescence? To uncover the essence of this experience, a transcendental phenomenological approach to inquiry was used to analyze and semi-structured individual interviews according to the traditions of the approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This approach to qualitative inquiry does not offer presuppositions, predeterminations, or any preconceived ideas about the nature or

meaning of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Matua & Van Der Wal, 2014; Moustakas, 1994) and requires the researcher to become open to the emergence of the phenomenon's essence in the description of experience as it has been understood via conscious engagement of the participant (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transcendental phenomenology offers us the opportunity to take a fresh and unbiased look at the experiences of the TGNC population. As counselors, understanding the lived experience of clients informs accurate empathy and mentalization in practice, and uncovering the essence of this lived experience in the words of those who have lived it informs salient themes for future research.

Procedures

Participant Recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants who identified as TGNC and endorsed complex trauma experience. Recruitment material was distributed to regional counselors and organizations serving the TGNC population, which was then disseminated directly to potential participants, through social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), and via listservs and newsletters for TGNC-focused organizations. Participants completed an online screener survey and were required to meet the following criteria: (1) self-identified as TGNC (transgender, gender non-conforming or non-binary, agender, gender-fluid, or other non-conforming identity); (2) were between the ages of 18-40; (3) had experienced complex trauma in childhood and/or adolescence (physical/sexual/emotional abuse, physical/emotional neglect, exposure to household dysfunction and/or domestic abuse occurring over a prolonged period of time [at least 6 six months] within the caregiving system) by endorsing two or more adverse childhood experiences using the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire for Adults

(ACE-Q) (Felitti et al., 1998); (4) endorsed experience (current or past) of complex trauma-related disturbances in self organization (affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, and relational dysfunction) as measured by the International Trauma Questionnaire (affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, and relational dysfunction as measured by the International Trauma Questionnaire [ITQ; Cloitre et al., 2018]).

Data Collection

Data collection in phenomenological research typically occurs in interviews that utilize open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), through written accounts (poetry, journals, music, art, etc.) and observation may be additional sources (van Manen, 1990). Transcendental phenomenology places a primacy on subjective experience (Moustakas, 1994). As such, this study did not collect data from sources that, by their nature, required an interpretive element (poetry, art, music, observation). Data was collected via virtual interviews allowing the participants to express their understanding of their experiences in their own words, and the interview questions are provided in Manuscript Table 1 (*Semi-Structured Interview Questions*). This study utilized thematic data saturation to determine the endpoint for data collection. Thematic data saturation can be defined as collecting data until there is no longer any new information being identified in the data (emergent themes, patterns, experiences, codes, etc.) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012), and any further efforts to collect additional data result in redundancy of identified themes, codes, phenomena (Kerr et al., 2010). The initial stage of phenomenological data analysis is the identification of emergent themes present in significant statements made by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), and this study determined the attainment of saturation when no new themes emerged from significant statements in analysis of two consecutive interviews. This occurred at seven participants.

Manuscript Table 1

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What is your lived experience with the development of your TGNC identity?
2. What were the meaningful interpersonal experiences that informed your TGNC identity development process?
3. What were the meaningful environments that informed your TGNC identity development process?
4. In what ways has your trauma experience influenced your experience of identity development?
5. Is there anything important that I haven't asked about?

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) offers a clear set of procedures for effective transcendental phenomenology. The initial data analysis stage was horizontalization, or the generation of themes that emerged from significant statements present in the interview transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). When saturation of the data was reached (no new themes emergent from two consecutive interview analyses), significant statements were organized into clusters of meaning. This process involved the researcher organizing these statements into groups that shared meaning or thematic similarity while attending to and eliminating statements that overlapped or were repetitive (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the textural and structural description described the underlying or invariant structure of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). These descriptions included the contexts/settings in which the participants experienced the phenomenon and the experience itself. These steps are collectively considered phenomenological reduction, which distilled the data to the commonalities and invariant components of experiencing the phenomenon. They represented the first steps of the analytical process (Moustakas, 1994).

The analysis of data then moved to imaginative variation, in which "a structural description of the essences of the experience is derived, presenting a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This required the construction of both individual and composite structural descriptions, of which the aim was to uncover the conditions required for the phenomenon to occur by entertaining the various possibilities of the "how" of the phenomenon (the facilitative contexts and relationships) across the presented experiences (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1990). Once imaginative variation resulted in clear structural descriptions, synthesizing meanings and essences took place. This final step resulted in the identification of an essential essence without which the phenomenon would not exist as the phenomenon it is (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis then culminated in written expression illuminating the essential essence of the phenomenon. This written expression encompasses the "what" (identity development) and the "how" (that which leads to the emergence of the phenomenon) required of effective and thorough phenomenological inquiry (Cresswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research requires adequate data, transparency of perspective, findings grounded in the data, contextualization of the data, meaningful contribution, coherence, and the ability of the data to serve as a catalyst for insight into the phenomenon being studied (Levitt et al., 2017). This study implemented several strategies to meet these expectations of effective qualitative research. Member checking is an important practice in establishing accuracy of what has been determined of data gathered in inquiry (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tracy, 2010). As such, member checking was used in this study to ensure that what was found by the researcher accurately reflected the meaning and content

offered by participants as well as attended to any bias or perspective of the researcher. Thick description attended to rich detail in the descriptions of contexts, experiences, and behaviors being offered by participant responses such that an outsider would be able to find meaningful understanding of the content while recognizing the transferability of what was found (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tracy, 2010). The use of an external auditor helped attend to groundedness of analysis, accurate contextualization, coherence of findings, and ensured that thick description was used to adequately delineate the themes and process involved in analysis. To address dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was used to offer transparency in the process of data collection and analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To further lend credibility and trustworthiness to the study, the researcher kept a detailed reflexive diary to help manage and identify biases, presuppositions, and perspectives that may have impacted analysis of data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Levitt et al., 2017).

Reflexivity Statement

I approached this study as a survivor of CT. However, my experience with complex trauma and identity development was as a cisgender heterosexual white male. As a cisgender heterosexual white man, fundamental elements of my identity have never been a source of derision or victimhood. My experience of identity development did not have the added complexity of navigating exposure to minority stress (Meyer, 2003) or an internalized phobia of my own gender identity (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Herek et al., 2015). My experience concerning TGNC identity development has been that of a practitioner, friend, and ally. As a college counselor, I have had the opportunity to work long-term with numerous TGNC individuals with CT in various places along their identity development journey, and my practical framework informed my approach to qualitative research as a therapist. Existentialism is a

foundational element of that framework, and much effort is put into making meaning of experience and engendering authentic engagement that welcomes the whole person into the therapeutic frame. My approach to qualitative work extends that perspective, and my interpretive framework is that of a social constructivist. As such, I conceptualized CT as an intersubjective experience with a lasting impact on the interpretive systems used to conceptualize oneself and one's worth.

Findings

During this study, seven participants who identified as gender nonconforming took part in semi-structured interviews ranging between 43 and 67 minutes to express their subjective understandings of their experiences of gender identity development and the relationship that process had to their complex trauma experience. Manuscript Table 2 (*Participant Demographics)* provides a breakdown of the participants' personal information relevant to the focus of this study. Analysis resulted in seven emergent themes: (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. Additionally, two subthemes emerged within Developing Individual Perspective (Confronting Ambiguity and Defining Personal Understanding).

Manuscript Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race/ Ethnicity	Assignation at Birth	Pronouns
Peony	21	Genderfluid	White/ Caucasian	AFAB	They/Them

Duckweed	21	Trans Man	Southeast Asian	AFAB	He/Him
Marty	33	Genderfluid	Biracial (Black/ Caucasian)	AFAB	She/He/They/ Her/Him/Them
Hydrangea	19	Genderfluid	White/ Caucasian	AFAB	He/They Him/Them
Rose	19	Trans Masculine	White/ Caucasian	AFAB	He/Him
Morel	20	Trans Woman	White/ Caucasian	AMAB	She/Her
Basil	25	Trans Woman	White/ Caucasian	AMAB	She/Her

Disconnection

The first theme to emerge was "Disconnection." Participants reported a lack of connectedness to their bodies, environments, others, and a general sense of existing somewhere outside of normal experience. There was also an expressed ever-present fear of rejection from significant individuals in their caregiving and social contexts. Isolation emerged in environments described as lacking support for exploration, traumatic, or prescriptive of identity expectations. A lack of experiential references or vocabulary to facilitate internal understanding created an internal sense of being out of place. Duckweed reflected that "It's just always feeling out of place and not knowing why," and that "There's just this general doom of like, 'I hate my skin.' Except you don't know that you hate your skin." The sense of disconnect between mind and body was a

common experiential component. Peony described feeling that “I didn't want to be a man. I really just hated the features of my body that identified me as a woman” after they began to experience puberty at an early age and further offered a story of wanting to be “faceless” to feel less estranged from their body.

However, for most participants the identification of the disconnect was more ambiguous. Rose reported that lacking vocabulary for the experience led to his understanding it in terms of “Part of me never felt right. Like, I'm not who I'm supposed to be.” Morel noted that the capacity to make sense of the distress was limited because she “didn’t have a name for it.” This is further evidenced by Basil relaying the thought, “Something about me feels inherently wrong, right? Like something about my existence just ain't right?” A lack of experiential vocabulary contributed to the ambiguous sense of distress identified in the interviews, and participants connected this to the lack of supportive environments where they could better engage with their experience. Duckweed provided insight and clarity into this internal struggle grapple with the sense disconnection, “It's kind of difficult to describe. It's not pressure from anyone but yourself. It's just again that feeling of “I'm not comfortable. I hate this, and I want it to go away.”

Prescriptive expectations of behavior and presentation from caregiving figures were significant in creating confusion and a sense of isolation reported by participants. The lack of support to process or discuss internal distress created by expectations contributed to the impact of traumatic environments. Basil elaborated that without the traumatic environment and lack of support therein, she would have “figured this out a lot sooner.” Participants expressed that their experience in these environments caused them to turn inwards to attempt understanding and coping. As Duckweed stated, it was “much more of an internal experience than external experience.” Prescriptive expectations incongruous with the undefined internal self-experience of

participants created a tumultuous internal world that was described as engendering "depression," "rage," "hate," "sadness," and "dissatisfaction" with oneself. Further ingraining the sense of otherness was the fear of rejection participants expressed as existing across relational contexts. Rose likened the experience to "tiptoeing" around family members "because I didn't want them to not like me. I didn't want my family to reject me because of this." The risk of rejection created a greater sense of distance from others as well as served to further internalize a sense of otherness. All but one participant expressed that their home environment was not conducive to or supportive of branching outside of strictly established roles which reinforced the need for conformity and a fear of rejection by important caregiving figures.

Suppressing Awareness

The second emergent theme was "suppressing awareness." Avoidance and suppression presented consciously and unconsciously in participant experience and took both passive and active forms. Many of the participants expressed avoidance as an act of denial. Duckweed put forth a common experience of "not being very open with myself about it" and elaborated on the reasons for this with "I spent years being scared just because it's such a heavy thing to deal with, especially as a kid." Participants described questions that occasionally emerged from preconscious awareness which pulled at their attention. Peony spoke of not knowing where to start in processing or confronting these questions as they entered awareness and intentionally avoiding them with the reasoning "If I did know where to start, then I didn't want to because I knew that it would lead me to answers I didn't like."

For many participants, there were obvious indicators about which they built internal defenses. In discussing how the possibility of a gender nonconforming identity began making its way into conscious awareness, Basil reported "not even wanting to think about it," and that she

would consistently tell herself “It couldn’t be me.” Peony provided insight into the complexity of denial in the presence of growing awareness. Their experience was that of recognizing how they had attempted to live according to the expectations and prescriptions of others while knowing that a nascent desire to live authentically was present and that this created “denial of my own self in the face of other things.” They further added, further offered, “If I did know where to start, then I didn’t want to, because I knew it would lead me to answers I didn’t like.” Other participants echoed these experiences and offered various reasons for actively denying the possibility of their identity which included factors such as environments with strict gender expectations (“I think my environment pushed me to the rejection that I felt towards my own self, and the rejection to what I would eventually want in life.” – Peony) and the discomfort of having to confront the upheaval of one’s established existence (“The denial really came in because it's much easier to keep doing what you've been doing than to completely uproot your life.” – Duckweed).

The desire to avoid conflict and unknown reactions to the expression of one’s true understanding and expression of self contributed to avoidance of outward signs of gender nonconforming which often took the form of adherence to prescribed gender expectations. Rose stated that their father’s attitude toward gender roles and sexuality led to suppression. Morel attributed the need to mask her growing identity to the presence of constrictive gender roles and the conflict that would ensue if they were challenged, “It gave me a decent poker face. It was always covert. It was always a hidden part of me. I act the way they want until I’m gone, and that’s exactly what I did.” However, this sentiment was not expressed by the majority of participants. Leaning into expectations of behavior and presentation and suppressing gender nonconforming tendencies were predominantly present in the experiences of AMAB participants

attempted to make their nonconforming identity less visible, and both stated that a key motivator was their own safety, one of the invariant constituents present in theme seven: Adverse Reactions. In contrast, most AFAB participants expressed that early behavior that didn't conform to gender expectations was written off as them simply being a tomboy until they reached puberty. Though, Duckweed did offer that safety was a factor for him with the statement "Basically, there was the sense of danger and not feeling safe enough to even explore. That made repression a lot easier."

Leaning In

"Leaning in," the third theme, emerged from the data as it became clear that each participant shared experiences of ways they actively "tried on" ways of being that resonated more with their internal experience of self. These experiences were intentional, but also unconscious and only truly came into participant awareness once reflection took place. Participants also indicated that these took place throughout life and weren't solely present post realization that their identity was not one that conformed to a gender binary. Adopting behaviors in childhood was a recurring example provided by participants. Rose noted a significant experience that demonstrated a shift into behaving more congruently with the expressed expectations of their father they felt aligned with their internal world by not crying because "boys don't cry." Hydrangea also adopted what was presented as "the man's role" because they could "never feel the woman's role." This leaning into ways of being could also be heightened by a more intentional rejection of the prescribed identity put on participants, such as how Duckweed felt that "the whole idea of anything that is slightly feminine, it's disgusting, and I cannot associate that with myself."

Outward presentation of one's true self was a component of this theme that was repeatedly touched upon. Participants recounted how powerful it was to explore ways of presenting themselves and the impact it had on their realizations and perceptions of identity. Peony described a series of "small victories" related to presenting as they were and not as they were prescribed. A particular moment of success in asserting their identity came when their family "gave up" on trying to thrust femininity on Peony and they insisted on wearing a suit to their uncle's wedding. Peony also indicated that these victories led to other explorations of outward presentation like hair styles, binding, and "everything that would make me try to understand myself a bit more." They also reported "leaning into masculine traits over the next, I would say three years," and that they staunchly rejected "any piece of feminine clothing during those entire years." So, much like Duckweed, a strong rejection of the prescribed identity was considerable aspect of Peony's experience as well.

Participants with AMAB identities expressed more restriction in how they were able to explore. Morel reported not having many opportunities to express herself so freely and "didn't have an opportunity to access things on [my] own" that would afford expression. She elaborated with a story about sneaking into her parents' room to try on her mother's underwear and that "I did that not randomly. It's not a fetish." She reported that it was more of a covert exploration to answer questions of "What is this like? Does this make sense when I do this?" She added that it helped her come to the realization that "I like to be pretty." For Basil, the journey was also covert, subtle, and somewhat prolonged. Her concerns for safety were tied to a delay in exploration and her initial efforts were more understated than other participants by "dressing slightly less masculine." Both Morel and Basil reported having started hormone replacement therapy (HRT) prior to more overt expressions of gender identity.

Adversity

The fourth theme of "adversity" encompasses the negative experiences of nonconforming identity development primarily expressed as various forms of invalidation and trauma-related. However, trauma was not always perceived as being directly related to a nonconforming identity, though it was frequently connected with invalidation and doubt reported by participants. Morel categorized it as "an uphill battle" and linked trauma with an intense fear for her safety:

> It gave me terrible anxiety. I don't trust anybody, any motherfucker out there. You're probably transphobic and probably want to kill me. That's just how I feel about every person right now. I'm Still, working through that, but having grown up in that type of environment that was a hostile environment. It brought about a lot of shame and doubt. It puts you directly into survival mode.

She also touched on how she felt it directly impacted her capacity to develop her identity:

> Had I had a different environment, one that had been like, "I am okay with who you are. You do what you want." I think I might have a felt a little differently about myself, and who I am and felt a bit less hesitant to do things.

Rose shared much the same sentiment saying, "If I had been instilled with more confidence that wasn't instilled in me because of this trauma, then maybe I would have come to some realizations sooner. It's an ongoing process to undo things." Marty experienced an intense doubt embedded in their capacity to connect with an identity inextricably linked to the root of their traumatic experience:

> Being in those traumatic situations with all of my relatives, it was just really hard for me to come to terms with the masculine traits and my personality. For me to actually want to identify as a man ever, It's still almost uncomfortable for me.

The essence of this experience was expressed as doubt and in one of Basil's recurrent questions, "Am I even allowed to feel this way?"

Establishing consistency

The fifth theme, "establishing consistency," was rooted in the reflection on constancy of subjective self-experience and determination of identity markers or indicators. For most of the participants, this began with the solidification of their sexual identity. Determining sexual orientation was a significant first step toward conceptualizing oneself as something outside of a binary understanding of the self in relation to gender and provided a solid foundation for contextualizing other experiences. Hydrangea explained how exploration of sexual identity ushered them into the process:

> The first part of kind of my whole experience was figuring out my sexuality. After I kind of figured out my sexuality, I got on like a journey with my ex, it was a very toxic relationship, and in the process I kind of found myself dealing with a lot of my journey into finding my gender identity.

For Marty, clarity in sexual identification was a pathway for greater awareness and comfort in identifying with the masculine aspects of their identity:

> I sexually sometimes identify as a man, and before I thought maybe it was leaning more on a fetish end of the spectrum. But then I realized that even in our day-to-day lives I was really comfortable with [my partner] calling me her boyfriend, saying things to me that identified me with he/him/his pronouns sometimes.

Thus, the exploration of sexual identity broadened internal horizons for experience and exploration as well as provided relational experiences which brought about awareness and comfort with the concept of existing outside of the gender binary.

Reflection was a major component of this theme as participants repeatedly spoke of "looking back" on the internal and external consistency of their experiences. Reflection facilitated a throughline of identity that, as Rose put it, helped identify "those dots that I had to connect." Connecting these "dots" created a more secure footing in participants' subjective understanding of their experiences in the face of prescriptive environments. Hydrangea offered a statement to explain how that realization materialized in their experience:

> Once I came to be able to see myself and say, "Yeah, it's something I've been doing since I was four, five. It's something I've always felt in myself, but I've always been told wasn't me." Now I finally trust myself to be able to say, "Yeah, this is me."

The result of this for Hydrangea was "reliance on my own perception," which opened the door to further exploration of their self in relation to gender expression and acknowledged their truth of experience. Others supported the importance of this reliance in the process of establishing a foundational view of oneself, such as when Morel made the point that her identity was "a self-defined one, but it also made it more true." To this point, Marty offered "a lot of this has been truly thinking about who I am outside of other people and coming to the conclusion of who I experience myself as is very genderfluid." While not all participants described seeking labels for experience, the trust in individual perception as foundational to further identity development was unanimously endorsed as a significant aspect of the overall experience.

Interactive Growth and Discovery

The sixth theme that emerged from analysis was "interactive growth and development." This theme was characterized by experiential learning and recognition within interpersonal dynamics. Interaction with other gender nonconforming individuals was endorsed by all participants as important sources of discovery, exploration, and validation. Though interactional

contexts varied for participants, entering new spaces that provided a welcoming, accepting, or mirroring environment was a universal experience. Witnessing others was described as impactful for participants. Rose told of how when first meeting a trans individual they were “didn’t question it at all” and were able to “see it because I felt like that.” For Duckweed, who grew up in a small rural town without much representation or awareness of LGBTQIA+ identities, witnessing was an important experience further in their identity development experience that was profoundly normalizing and validating:

> The first time that I went to pride was around the time that I was beginning to explore gender identity and be more comfortable with not with being outside of the binary in the first place. Seeing a lot of people who were comfortable and confident and still regular humans, they just didn't identify with what they were given, was kind of eye-opening for me in a way. It was just kind of confirmation that just because I don't see it in my daily life doesn't mean that it doesn't happen.

Basil and Morel stressed the importance of trans and nonconforming visibility in online spaces. Basil said that these online spaces provided visibility of mirrored identities that she “never would have been able to have in person,” while Morel stated that being able to witness these identities online “was a big part of bringing things into my awareness making you go ‘Ok. Alright. Things make sense now. I do relate to that.” Thus, participants expressed witnessing as an important normalizing and validating experience with the capacity to create a more expansive and inclusive view of experiential possibilities. Morel and Peony both spoke about how following discourse in online spaces provided knowledge to make sense of experience as well. Morel felt that this expanded her view of how trans identities were accepted and that trans spaces online were predominantly filled with support and “hyping each other up” that was reassuring to

her growing understanding of herself and provided an availability of trans identities not present in her local environment.

Interpersonal interaction provided not only opportunities for learning and discovery, but also for participants to develop an authentic sense of self in how they experienced being received by others. This interaction was facilitative for Marty in accepting the more masculine aspects of their identity as their partner reflected them. As Marty explained it:

> I think I feel a stronger connection to my partner when I'm identifying masculinely than I do when I'm identifying femininely, which is really interesting, and I never expected it before. I think that is what informed it more than anything. I've been with like bisexual women in the past, and I think I clung to the idea of my womanhood more in those relationships than I do with my partner, because she does very much self-identify as lesbian, as I do. So, to know that she identifies that way, but also can see me as man sometimes, and as more masculine and identify with those traits, and still like be extremely attracted to me and love me, I think, caused me to accept it more.

Duckweed and Basil both reported that it was those around them (friends, therapist) who were significant in bringing significant aspects of identity into awareness and facilitated an environment for exploration.

Developing Individual Perspective

The seventh theme to emerge was “developing individual perspective,” and within it, two subthemes: entering ambiguity and defining personal understanding. Overall, this theme speaks to the experience shared by all participants in developing and applying insight and internal awareness to a personal understanding and conceptualization of their individual identity in relation to the concept of gender, to the self, and to the world. Peony summarized this process as

"all you're thinking about is yourself and trying to understand everything that's happened to you at that point in time," and further added that this part of their development was "insanely difficult." In line with this, all participants expressed that this was a prolonged and intentional period in their development spent honestly examining themselves.

Four of the seven participants identified that there was a significant realization that they needed to "unwind the previous beliefs I had about myself," as Hydrangea put it, while Basil and Marty both referred more specifically to "breaking down internalized biases." Both of these perspectives were expressed as being tied to deconstructing gender concepts informed by prescriptive and traumatic internalizations. Collectively, the participants agreed that this deconstruction, breaking down, or unwinding constituted entering a space of internal ambiguity, which specifically captures the experience of addressing the discomfort involved with being uncertain, the development of internal awareness, the confrontation of internalized biases, and the acceptance of existing with an undefined self. To this end, Peony offered a recurrent sentiment that moving through ambiguity required self-direction because "the work I had done previously was just following in people's footsteps, and I had to basically retrace my own."

The second subtheme, defining personal understanding, focuses on the work done to determine what took the place of ambiguity of self and perspective. Participants discussed this process as an intentional and directed reframing of experience, redefinition of old perceptions, and integration of awareness into their personal contexts in order to move forward with a greater understanding of their personal journey. For Duckweed, it required reframing the past through a very different lens and integrating the duality of that experience:

> Reframing who I was as a person in my mind was helpful with reframing who I was as a kid. Something that I've struggled with early on in my identity was still staying connected

> to the little girl that I was, because I was. Just being able to find comfort within that still, and mesh that into my identity, it's one of the things that people don't really talk about a lot. You either completely remove yourself from your childhood, or you just fight and accept it, but it's still not truly a part of who you are, because deep down I still would prefer to think of my younger self as male. But that's not accurate.

Basil's understanding of her experience was informed by examining how gender presentation was related to her trauma of "not being the kind of son [dad] wanted." For Marty to move forward, they needed to confront the toxic idea of masculinity internalized by trauma:

> It's returning for me, to truly accept that masculine side of myself. Mostly because most of the masculinity I've been exposed to throughout my life has been so toxic. I had to kind of redefine what masculinity in a man would mean to me in a non-toxic way. When I started doing that, it became a more comfortable description and identity for me over time.

Each participant offered a unique set of beliefs or internalized views connected with their pre-nonconforming identity that they expressed having to integrate into their new perspective. While it required reflection on external factors, the result was a more settled internal experience participants universally reported, in Rose's words, was "something that I needed to figure out within myself."

Discussion of Research Findings

The impetus behind this study was to fill the gap in research related to the lived experience of gender nonconforming individuals. Recent qualitative research has made an intentional effort to include numerous identities in studies built around narrative inquiry (Katz-Wise et al, 2018; Morgan & Stevens, 2012) and grounded theory (Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt &

Ippolito, 2014), however, there has been no phenomenological inquiry to identify the essence of the lived experience for this population. The high rate of traumatization and victimization (Baams, 2018; Bandini et al., 2011; Connolly et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2013; Giovanardi et al., 2018; Lingiardi et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2010; Shipherd et al., 2011) and prevalence of mental health conditions (Connolly et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mustanski et al., 2010) present an imperative in developing greater understanding of lived experience as it relates to these risk factors. The results of this study help inform our understanding of both previous and future research as well as provide insight into salient themes that may be of use in developing and focusing treatment for a population at high risk.

There seems to be some consistency between stage models of TG identity development and the described experiences of TGNC individuals encapsulated in this theme. Several existing models of TG identity development identify mind-body dissonance, denial, distress, witnessing and interacting, consistency of identity, and physical transition as salient elements of experience or developmental stages (Devor, 2004; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Morgan & Stevens, 2012). While overlap exists, there are significant differences in how these were experienced which may be impacted by trauma experience. Many of these experiences were driven by more internal factors than outside comparisons or understanding as presented in the existing literature. As participants described, the experience was influenced by outside factors but there was a rich internal world of experience motivated by a need to rely on subjective understanding, individual authenticity, and a self-determined relationship with the concept of gender.

Trauma was universally reported as a factor in development, even when not related directly to TGNC identity presentation. Participants expressed a disconnect between their inner

experience and physical body, a lack of experiential vocabulary to facilitate meaning-making, and a heightened fear of rejection as a salient factor in the capacity to feel connection to important relational figures. This may be mediated by insecure attachment or a compromised sense of self resulting from complex trauma (Briere & Spinnazola, 2005; Briere et al., 2008; Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020). Both AMAB participants described how their efforts to explore identity were covert or delayed due to the hostile attitudes toward gender expression outside of a prescribed norm present in their environments, and expressed that trauma was impactful in the process of developing an accurate concept of self. Participants who were AFAB had less barriers present, as being a "tomboy" was expressed as universally accepted to a certain point. This suggests a significantly different experience for AMAB and AFAB individuals in developing a nonconforming identity. Questions arise as to how much concerns for safety impact the willingness with which AMAB individuals engage in exploratory behavior and expression as well as to how much variation exists in AFAB and AMAB experiences of trauma and identity development.

Implications for Clinicians

Self-awareness emerged as a crucial tool for clients in understanding their sense of disconnectedness, establishing consistency of self, processing doubt, and settling some of the ambiguity in developing perspective. Affective and interoceptive awareness is impacted by complex trauma experience (Courtois, 2008; Ford & Courtois, 2020). Counselors working with clients developing their TGNC identity may want to spend time shifting this awareness to explore any impact trauma has had on gender experience. Developing self-awareness could also benefit work in determining if disconnection experienced by participants is more related to traumatic dissociation. Counselors may consider determining where clients experience

disconnect via trauma or via incongruent internal and external experience. Exploring barriers to social connectedness could shed light on the nature of this disconnect. Helping clients develop self-awareness directed at internal defenses, unwanted feelings, and introjects can help identify the roots of doubt and anxiety that must be confronted as well as provide the client with greater capacity to recognize negative self-appraisal and attribution stemming from complex trauma.

Counselors should also be mindful of the capacity for online spaces to serve as community for clients in environments unaccepting of gender nonconformity or who have fears for personal safety. This was especially true for the AMAB participants. Both of them expressed that online spaces provided visibility, normalization, validation, community, and knowledge. Social connectedness is a protective factor in the impact of minority stress (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Meyer, 2003). Online spaces might help generate social connectedness, though further research would be beneficial in determining this. This also touches on the variation between AFAB and AMAB experience. There were stark differences in the level of fear for personal safety expressed by AFAB and AMAB participants as well as the level to which nonconforming presentation was tolerated in childhood. Counselors should consider that AMAB individuals may be reticent to explore gender if there is an intense fear for personal safety. To this end, it is crucial that counselors receive clients with universal positive regard and educate themselves on how to deliver multiculturally competent trauma-informed care that provides a safe environment for exploration.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study attempted to incorporate as diverse a set of voices as possible. However, the participants who responded to recruitment were homogenous to the extent that it makes generalizability of results difficult. Participants were primarily White, AFAB, middle-class, and

from the southeast region of the United States. Considering the variation between AFAB and AMAB participants, a larger set of AMAB experiences would have been beneficial. A broader range of racial/ethnic identities and socioeconomic statuses may have generated reported experiences vastly different from those of participants with the means for counseling, education, and the benefit of not facing additional discrimination factors. There may be marked differences in the experience of individuals who have not already integrated an understanding of how their trauma and identity interact. More variance in racial/ethnic identity could also have broadened the scope of experiences and generated new emergent themes. Variability in the extent to which nonconforming identities are received across cultures has the potential to provide distinctly different experiences, and there is little to suggest that the themes identified in this study hold true across cultural and racial/ethnic lines. This lack of demographic variability could also have impacted the low number of participants in this study. Despite the efforts taken to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, there is still the potential for researcher bias or interpretation to affect the results of this study. The researcher's work as a counselor for this population presents the potential for these themes to have some lens of experience through which they have been received.

As noted, the population studied is in need of further research to inform effective treat and conceptualization. Differences in AFAB and AMAB experience appears to be significantly different, and further inquiry into where variance arises would be highly beneficial for practical application. Fear of personal safety was a constant for both AMAB participants, and there are questions as to whether this fear has a significant impact on identity development among different identities. The supportive role played by online communities is a potential direction for inquiry and could provide counselors with additional resources to provide clients if these spaces

are significantly impactful. Future researchers may also want to explore the potential interaction between internalized stigma or doubt and trauma, such as if there is elevated risk for internalized stigma in TGNC trauma survivors compared to those without trauma experience. Many of the impacts and mechanisms of complex trauma were noted as delaying the process for participants, and there are opportunities to explore variation within the TGNC population. Follow-up studies may also place an emphasis on the identity development experience for TGNC individuals with more diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study intended to provide greater understanding of the lived experience of TGNC identity development in individuals with complex trauma experiences. Phenomenological reduction and analysis of semi-structured interviews with seven individuals resulted in seven emergent themes expressing the essence of their experience: (1) Disconnection, (2) Suppressing Awareness, (3) Leaning In, (4) Adversity, (5) Establishing Consistency, (6) Interactive Growth and Discovery, and (7) Developing Individual Perspective. These themes represent the consistent experiential elements of a population in need of a broader basis of research from which to inform clinical work and understanding. Interesting contrasts also emerged from participant descriptions, providing direction for future research and clinical considerations. While limitations may prevent the generalizability of these results, participants have provided valuable insight into the experience of an underserved population.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT
for a Research Study entitled
"The Lived Experience of Identity Development for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Individuals Who've Survived Complex Trauma"

You are invited to participate in a research study to understand the lived experience of identity development in transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals who have experienced complex trauma in childhood and adolescence. This study is being conducted by Kevin White (MS, APC, NCC, Doctoral Candidate), under the direction of Dr. Jessica Tyler in the Auburn University Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as transgender or gender-nonconforming, endorse childhood/adolescent experience of complex trauma, and are between the ages of 18-40.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete a screener survey online using Qualtrics survey delivery web software with a total time commitment of 15 minutes, and if you meet criteria, you may be selected to complete virtual interview lasting 60-75 minutes using Zoom meeting software.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and include some emotional discomfort or breach of confidentiality with recorded interviews. You will be asked questions about prior trauma experience. All precautions will be taken to minimize the risks of a breach of confidentiality.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, you can expect to help inform counseling practices and research related to psychological treatment of individuals who identify as transgender or gender-nonconforming. I cannot promise you that you will receive any or all of the benefits described.

Will you receive compensation for participating? Participants who complete an interview will be entered into a raffle for a $50 gift card for an online retailer of their choice. Participants will be entered into the drawing by successfully completing the interview.

Are there any costs? If you decide to participate, you will accrue no personal cost.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the activity. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University or the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling.

Your privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous and confidential. Information obtained through your participation may be

used to fulfill the requirements for dissertation completion and publication in a professional journal.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or contact Kevin White via email at klw0070@auburn.edu or the supervising faculty member Dr. Jessica Tyler who can be contacted at jim0001@auburn.edu. A copy of this document will be given to you to keep.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

_____	_____
Participant's signature Date	Investigator obtaining consent Date
_____	_____
Printed Name	Printed Name
	_____
	Co-Investigator Date
	_____
	Printed Name

"The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 07/01/2022 to ---------- Protocol # 22-249 EX 2207"

Appendix B

Listserv Announcement

Dear Colleagues,

I am a Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral candidate in Auburn University's department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. I am reaching out to find potential participants for my qualitative study titled "The Lived Experience of Identity Development for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Individuals Who've Survived Complex Trauma" to complete my dissertation and earn my degree. I am conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Jessica Tyler.

This phenomenological study seeks to identify the lived experience of identity development in transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals who have experienced complex trauma in childhood and adolescence. I am looking for participants who identify as transgender and gender-nonconforming, are between the ages of 18-40, and who have childhood and adolescent experiences of complex trauma within the family/caregiving system. I would like to ask you to please consider clients you may be seeing who are a potential fit for this study and share the attached information letter.

Participants will be expected to complete a short survey to determine eligibility, and all participants who are selected and complete a 60-75-minute interview will have the opportunity to receive a $50 gift card for an online retailer via raffle.

This study is approved by the Auburn University Institutional Review Board, Protocol # 22-249 EX 2207.

I appreciate your time and support in this process!

Sincerely,

Kevin White, MS, APC, NCC
Doctoral Candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision
Auburn University

Appendix C

Social Media and Physical Recruitment Flyer

Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Research Study
Be part of an important study on transgender and gender-nonconforming identity development!

Are you between 18 and 40 years of age?

Do you identify as transgender or gender-nonconforming?

Have you experienced complex trauma in childhood and/or adolescence within the family/caregiving system?

If you answered ***YES*** to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study to increase understanding of the transgender/gender-nonconforming experience.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the lived experience of identity development for transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals who experienced complex trauma in the family/caregiving system. Benefits include helping increase understanding of the experiences of the population, informing future research, and informing counseling approaches for transgender/gender-nonconforming individuals. Participants will have the opportunity to win a $50 gift card to an online retailer of their choice once they have been selected and completed an interview.

Adults between 18-40 are eligible if they identify as transgender/gender-nonconforming, and have experienced complex trauma in childhood or adolescence.

This study is being conducted by Kevin White, MS, APC, NCC at Auburn University under the supervision of Dr. Jessica Tyler.

Please contact Kevin White at **klw0070@auburn.edu** or follow the QR code below for more information.

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_a4f5jci06orxtHw

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Appendix D

Screening Survey

1. Please indicate which term most accurately describes your gender identity.

- Transgender
- Gender-nonconforming (nonbinary, agender, genderfluid, Two Spirit, etc.)
- Cisgender

2. What is your age?

- 0-18
- 18-40
- 40+

3. Please specify your ethnicity.

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Latino/a/X or Hispanic
- Two or more
- Other/unknown
- Prefer not to say

Please indicate which of these you have experienced prior to your 18th birthday.

4. Did a parent or other adult in your household often swear at you, insult you, put you down or humiliate you?
Or
Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?

- No
- Yes

5. Did a parent or other adult in the household often push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?
Or
Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?

- No
- Yes

6. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?
Or
Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?

- No
- Yes

7. Did you often feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?
Or
Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

- No
- Yes

8. Did you often feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?
Or
Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?

- No
- Yes

9. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?

- No
- Yes

10. Were any of your parents or other adult caregivers often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at them?
Or
Sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?

- No
- Yes

11. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?

- No
- Yes

12. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?

- No
- Yes

13. Did a household member go to prison?

- No
- Yes

Please indicate if you have ever any of the following symptoms post-trauma.

14. It has taken me a long time to calm down after I have become upset.

- No
- Yes

14. I have felt numb or emotionally shut down.

- No
- Yes

16. I have felt like a failure.

- No
- Yes

17. I have felt worthless.

- No
- Yes

18. I have felt distant or cut off from others.

- No
- Yes

19. I have found it hard to stay emotionally close to others.

- No
- Yes

Please provide your first name and contact information (phone & email).

_____

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

1. What is your lived experience with the development of your TGNC identity?
2. What were the meaningful interpersonal experiences that informed your TGNC identity development process?
3. What were the meaningful environments that informed your TGNC identity development process?
4. In what ways has your trauma experience influenced your experience of identity development?
5. Is there anything important that I haven't asked about?