

# Summary of key findings



## An exploration of the lived world of transgender and non-binary identities through occupational narratives

### Key findings

#### *Occupational engagement and gender expression*

There were differing experiences of occupational engagement in relation to gender expression for non-binary identities and binary transgender identity. The participant who had a binary gender identity discussed how the notion of passing, that is conforming to gender expectations of others, was critical to them in terms of being recognised in their authentic gender and engagement in activities which were considered gendered was instrumental in achieving this. Similarly, non-binary participants described how they strove to have their non-binary identities acknowledged through engaging in occupations which subverted binary expectations such as grooming, namely through make-up and clothing. However, this was often met with hostility and sometimes abuse.

#### *Environment and gender expression*

Occupational experiences were situated. Non-binary participants described hostile spaces, such as the workplace, where gender expression was curtailed and binary gender expression expected. There were also spaces, notably the virtual environment, which facilitated creativity and expression of gender identity.

#### *Occupational injustices*

Participants recounted examples of occupational deprivation and exhausting adaptive strategies undertaken to be able to engage safely in occupations. Occupational alienation was evident in how participants, forced to conceal their gender identity, had to engage in activities which bore no meaning to them, and how having to conceal gender identity affected their ability to engage in activities meaningfully and creatively.

### Project aims

- To examine how occupational engagement, environment and embodied knowledge relate to the formation and expression of identities for those transitioning gender.
- To gain insight into how occupational engagement may have a therapeutic influence in the expression of identities of those who are transgender or non-binary and genderqueer.
- To explore how themes, associated with transgender and non-binary identities, such as agency, social stigma and environment, are embodied and / or enacted through an engagement with occupations.

### Background

'Transgender' is an umbrella term for those who do not adopt a fixed gender identity or whose gender identity is not traditionally associated with their birth sex. Non-binary and genderqueer refers to those who may identify with some aspects of binary gender identities or those who reject such binary definitions (Richards *et al*, 2017). There is growing evidence that individuals who define as transgender can face discrimination in health care settings (Rounds *et al*, 2013) and the Transgender Inquiry report (House of Commons, 2016; p.42) identified 'significant problems' in how transgender people are treated by the NHS. The role occupational therapy can play in promoting health and wellbeing for transgender, and non-binary, clients remains under-explored. The discrimination faced by transgender and non-binary people manifests, in the language of occupational science, in the inability to engage in meaningful and essential activities (Bockting *et al*, 2013) and Dowers *et al* (2019) identified how transgender people lack parity when it comes to occupational opportunities.

## Methodology

Following university ethical approval, an advisory group of four individuals who define as transgender or non-binary were recruited to help ensure that the research did not exploit participants and addressed the need raised by Namaste (2009) of helping ensure its relevance to the transgender communities. Snowball sampling was undertaken and five participants were recruited who defined as a transgender woman, trans masculine non-binary and non-binary or genderqueer. Three interviews, the last being a walking interview, were undertaken with the participants over a one year period. Interviews were transcribed and data was coded, and new materialist ontology (Alldred and Fox, 2015) informed the data analysis. Rigour was maintained through reflexivity, member checking and conferring with the study's supervisors.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Occupational engagement is fundamental to the expression of gender identity. Furthermore, the research illustrated the barriers that transgender and non-binary people can experience in engaging in such occupations – and that this can be distinct for these two communities – and how this impedes gender expression. Findings indicate roles for occupational therapists in working with transgender and non-binary clients including those relating to the workplace, such as raising awareness in terms of attitudes (e.g. correct use of pronouns etc) and the environment (e.g. importance of gender neutral toilets); facilitating access to community groups where undertaking of meaningful occupations can be done; and reflecting on own practice with regards to stereotyping gender roles. There is need for training and education on diverse gender identities within the profession and further research into the occupational experiences of these communities, particularly non-binary communities, would be beneficial. Furthermore, research into occupational therapists' own experiences of working with transgender and non-binary people would help develop understanding of current and potential roles for the profession in supporting these communities.

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