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## Being Trans: An interpretative phenomenological study of young adults

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Signed: *Gemma Lee Taylor*

Dated: 26th October 2015

Being Trans: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Young Adults

Gemma Lee Taylor

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Award of Bachelor of Science (Psychology) Honours,  
Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science,  
Edith Cowan University.

Submitted October 2015

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### Abstract

Social structures assume a binary classification of gender whereby people are expected to accept the female or male gender expectations and gender roles commonly associated with their biological sex. However, gender identity and gender expression are personal experiences which do not necessarily align with the sex assigned to a person at birth. Young adults who identify as trans resist the predictable relationships and boundaries of sex and gender by embracing diverse gender identities and expressions. Research acknowledging more favourable life experiences of trans youth is limited, despite the importance of a sound knowledge base necessary to provide a positive and affirmative environment within clinical practice. The lived experiences of trans youth was explored using an interpretative phenomenological framework to understand the personal meanings of the participants' world view in relation to positive experiences. Ten participants between the ages of 18 and 24 years were interviewed, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Thematic analysis was conducted to find repeated patterns of meaning amongst the interview transcripts. Three overarching themes were identified and discussed: (1) identity validation, (2) a desire to speak out, and (3) identifying evidence of social change. Implications and future directions were discussed in light of contemporary media use to facilitate affirmative practices and for practitioners to heighten their awareness of the significance of gender in their own lives.

Researcher: *Gemma Lee Taylor*

Supervisor: Dr Bronwyn Harman

Word Count: 12,249

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### Being Trans: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Young Adults

Constructing and integrating one's self-concept is a challenging developmental task for all young adults (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Grossman, D'Augelli, & Frank, 2011). As an integral component to one's self-concept, gender identity is experienced personally and involves an internal sense of being male, female, both, or neither (Burgess, 2000). For young adults questioning their gender identity, there is the additional challenge of integrating this identity within a society that appears to be uncomfortable with non-conformity to gender norms and expectations (Burgess, 2000). Experiencing any sort of conflict with social pressures to conform to these norms and expectations creates a multitude of challenges for young adults working towards establishing their gender identity (Burgess, 2000). Whereas most people are described as *cisgender* and experience congruency between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity, there are people for which this congruency does not occur (Budge et al., 2013).

The umbrella label, *trans* emerged as a collective term representing many diverse sex and gender based identities and expressions (Riggle & Mohr, 2014). As an abbreviation of *transgender*, the term is commonly used to unite people who challenge the predictable relationships and boundaries of sex and gender (Riggle & Mohr, 2014). As a broad and encompassing term, it is used to describe people whose gender identity and expression does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011) and people who do not conform to prevailing societal expectations, norms and gender-based stereotypes (Riggle & Mohr, 2014). There are many unique ways that people experience being trans and this is further complicated by the myriad of terminology a person may use to describe their gender identity (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Hyde et al., 2014). For instance, some people who identify as trans may also identify as *non-binary* as they do not identify as either male nor female (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Also, people who have transitioned (to their affirmed

gender), may simply identify as male or female, and thus not consider themselves to fall under the trans umbrella. Whilst acknowledging and appreciating the different terminology people may use to represent their gender identity, the use of trans as a single representative term is necessary for the purposes of this research.

Trans youth have often been described as a marginalised and vulnerable minority group plagued with greater psychosocial and mental health problems than other social groups (Lombardi, 1999). Studies specifically involving trans youth appeared to be negatively weighted towards research concerning medical and psychological interventions, risk determinants and victimisation (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, 2007; Grossman, D'Augelli, Howell, & Hubbard, 2005). Although a few youth oriented studies have examined the resilience strategies used to counteract these issues and adapt positively to adverse experiences (Grossman et al., 2011; Sing, Meng, & Hansen, 2014), most trans research which captured elements of positivity incorporated large variances in age amongst the samples (Riggle & Mohr, 2014; Riggle et al., 2014; Singh, et al., 2011; Testa, Jimenez & Rankin, 2014). As such, research purely on the positive experiences of trans youth remains limited.

I begin with a review of the current literature with a brief overview of several factors compromising the health and well-being of trans youth, which are heavily influenced by culturally enforced social assumptions of gender. As my focus remains on positive experiences and outcomes captured from various studies, I then proceed to describe several relevant factors which contribute to a better quality of life for trans youth. These factors stem from research on resilience strategies employed by trans people to cope with negative life experiences. Finally, in light of recent findings, an overview of the impact of offline and online media for learning and connecting to others is discussed.

## **Known Challenges to Health and Well-being**

### **Social Assumptions of Gender**

Various cultures worldwide assume flexible concepts of gender with some cultures embracing three or four gender categories (Bartlett, Vasey & Bukowski, 2000). In these cultures, gender classifications acceptably vary by context in daily life or across the lifespan (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014; Bartlett et al., 2000). Most social structures however, have assumed a binary classification of two gender categories - male and female (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). This binary classification creates a powerful framework that structures gender related social roles, behaviours and expectations (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). More specifically, gender has a bearing on stereotypes, norms, traits and roles of men and women based on socially accepted standards of behaviour and appearance (Unger & Crawford, 1993). Social pressures to conform to gender expectations creates a multitude of challenges for young adults establishing their gender identity which appear to conflict with these culturally accepted norms (Burgess, 2000).

Further challenges to the development of one's gender identity occur due to obscured differences between the terms *gender* and *sex*. Often, these two terms are used interchangeably despite being independent and representing different concepts (Hyde et al., 2014). Sex refers to a person's physiological and biological characteristics – a complex relationship between genes, hormones and anatomy (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Social norms consider sex as permanently assigned, at or before birth (Hyde et al., 2014). Gender however, encompasses a person's social, cultural and psychological characteristics (Unger & Crawford, 1993). The confusion between gender and sex may serve to further reinforce social expectations that gender identity is congruent with gender expectations and gender roles associated with one's sex assigned at birth (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Trans people challenged the more common social perceptions that one is, and must be either, 'male' or

‘female’, ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ as determined by their assigned birth sex (Robinson et al., 2014).

### **Negative Experiences Impacting Mental Health**

Study after study has described trans people as victims of adverse experiences and recipients of threats to well-being directly related to their gender identity and expression (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Many studies worldwide have reported a high prevalence of gender-related victimisation which occurred from an early age and persisted across the lifespan, along with experiences of violence, discrimination and societal oppression (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002; Clements-Nolle, Marx & Katz, 2006; Pitts, Couch, Mulcare, Croy, & Mitchell, 2009; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2001; Witten, 2003). Trans youth were particularly vulnerable to victimisation within educational facilities, which served to reinforce gender boundaries in the classroom and within the curriculum (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Monro, 2006; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010). Trans youth were also met with experiences of discrimination, harassment and lack of opportunities when attempting to enter the workplace (Monro, 2006, Singh et al., 2014). Other studies have repeatedly documented experiences of adultism, challenges to health care and limited access to financial resources due gender identity and expression (Singh et al., 2012)

To broaden the knowledge on trans youth experiences, Grossman and D’Augelli (2006) examined the social and emotional experiences of trans youth, however their focus remained on the deficits, problems and struggles which affected their health and mental health. In the Australian literature, trans health and well-being studies drew attention to the high prevalence of depressive symptoms (Pitts et al., 2009) and experiences of elevated levels of mental distress and a poor quality of life (Hyde et al., 2014). In international studies, mental health issues such as an alarmingly high rate of suicide and substance abuse were

widely reported (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Haas et al., 2011; Risser et al., 2005; Testa et al., 2012) as well as a greater risk of homelessness (Mokonogho, Mittal, & Quitangon, 2010). The high prevalence of psychological distress suffered by trans people is well understood to relate to negative environmental experiences (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Consistent with Meyer's (2003) work on minority stress amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual populations, a higher incidence of mental disorders found within trans populations was essentially the result of being subjected to an oppressive and stressful environment (Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

### **Positive Effects & Building Resilience**

However, not all effects of minority stress were deemed negative. As a consequence of experiencing hardships, minority groups typically developed coping and resilience strategies which buffered the effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Resilience strategies involved the capacity to cope with stress, adversity and other negative life events as well as the ability to avoid psychological problems whilst experiencing difficult circumstances (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Singh et al. (2012) described these strategies as interconnected, compounding and reinforcing of one another (Singh et al., 2012).

Studies involving trans people from across the lifespan identified several resilience strategies which were employed to cope with traumatic events (Singh & McKleroy, 2011) and to buffer against discrimination (Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013; Mizcock & Lewis, 2008). Quantitative studies involving trans youth examined several measures of mental health problems and their relationship to designated aspects of resilience. For instance, higher levels of self-esteem, sense of personal mastery and perceived social support led to more positive mental health outcomes (Grossman et al., 2011). Studies adopting a qualitative approach identified supports and threats to resilience. For example, in a study of trans youth, the importance of being able to self-theorise one's gender, having a supportive educational environment, positively reframing mental health challenges

and developing supportive relationships were key aspects to resilience (Singh et al., 2014). Despite these outcomes, the resilience of trans youth has been described as an emerging field in the literature (Singh et al., 2014). As such, there appears to be a large discrepancy between the availability of research documenting the negative experiences of gender non-conformity, compared to research offering a strength-based perspective. Several aspects of resilience and supportive mechanisms are discussed in light of research from across the lifespan.

### **Awareness & Activism**

Research suggests that experiences of harassment, victimisation and discrimination often led to increased feelings of empathy and a greater acceptance of others (Riggle et al., 2011). Several studies have also described these experiences as often leading to involvement in social activism (Jones & Hillier, 2013; Riggle et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2014). Reasons for engaging in activism were associated with the need for perceived improvements within society and often seen as a responsibility (Jones et al., 2015). For instance, serving as a positive role model and educating others by discussing one's personal experiences, was an inspiring way of dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions, and provided a way to make the trans community more visible (Jones et al., 2015; Riggle et al., 2011). Jones et al. (2015) described positive outcomes of activism as having an immediate life-saving impact and an overall improvement to well-being.

### **Social Connectedness**

Emotional and social isolation, negative reactions, rejection and lack of overall support were commonly reported in the literature as critical barriers to resilience (Factor & Rothblum, 2007; Grossman et al., 2005; Maguen, Shipherd, & Harris, 2005; Singh et al., 2012). In contrast, feeling accepted by others and having the freedom of gender expression had a positive and protective effect on mental health (Grossman et al., 2011; Hyde et al.,

2014). Supportive families were a key source of resilience, even when messages of support were not always consistent (Singh et al., 2014). A positive and supportive peer group was particularly crucial for identity validation amongst trans youth (Monro, 2006) and this lessened the likelihood of experiencing harassment and discrimination (Jones et al., 2015). Being out amongst a network of friends created a level of perceived safety (Doty & Brian, 2010) and less of a need to manage one's identity which in turn, reduced stress (Meyer, 2003). Other studies associated support from family and friends with higher levels of self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (Erich, Tittsworth, Dykes, & Cabuses, 2008). Overall, maintaining and building social relationships with friends, partners and family were constructive measures in developing a positive outlook on life (Hyde et al., 2014).

### **In-Group Identification**

Trans youth described the benefits of *queer spaces*, organised venues where support was obtained and lent within an environment geared toward celebrating and normalising diverse gender identities and expressions (Riggle et al., 2011; Sing et al., 2012). Awareness and engagement with other trans people was independently related to a lesser feeling of fear and suicidal ideation, and an increased feeling of comfort (Testa et al., 2014). Positive in-group identification was a buffer against experiences of discrimination and psychological distress (Sanchez & Vilain, 2009) and facilitated the development of coping and resilience strategies (Pinto, Melendez, & Spector, 2008; Singh et al., 2012). Hendricks and Testa (2012) described group solidarity and cohesiveness as protective against adverse mental effects of minority stress, as members were able to create a positive view of themselves and this was effective at counteracting stigma. Having supportive community networks also cultivated a sense of hope and improved well-being (Singh et al., 2011). Using social supports and engaging in a community also reduced social isolation and anxiety (Bockting et al., 2013; Lombardi, 1999). Also, being a part of an associated subgroup of the trans community



facilitated the creation of supportive relationships which often led to increased self-acceptance and understanding of one's identity (Riggle et al., 2011).

### **Self-definition**

Embracing and accepting a trans identity enabled the expression of honesty, truth and unity within one's self (Riggle et al., 2011). The ability to self-define and theorise one's gender identity and expression, by using one's own words and concepts was as a key component of resilience (Singh et al., 2011; 2012). Riggle et al. (2011) likened the process of self-identification to achieving congruency and normalising one's feelings. Achieving congruency led to feelings of peace, happiness, relief and being whole. For others, the opportunity to challenge gender norms and the stereotypes of a male or female identity by "living beyond the gender binary" (p. 152) was a positive aspect of a trans identity (Riggle et al., 2011). As such, embracing the fluid and evolving nature of one's gender identity was a critical aspect of resilience (Riggle et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2011).

### **Media Influence**

An Australian study reported that sexuality education within schools did not respond to the needs or experiences of gender variant and sexually diverse youth, resulting in the search for knowledge from other sources (Robinson et al., 2014). These sources included the media, peers and learning through personal experience (Robinson et al., 2014). The internet in particular, provided sophisticated understandings of gender, sex and sexuality as well as an avenue of meeting others and accessing support services (Robinson et al., 2014). The wide array of online resources supporting gender diversity provided a means of supporting and networking trans youth, especially those who were geographically or socially isolated (Monro, 2006). For some, the internet was the only means of obtaining information on gender issues and gaining support from likeminded people (Robinson et al., 2014).

Offline media (e.g., television and movies) has been described as the key source of information for the general public on awareness of the trans community, thus influencing public attitudes and impacting the experiences of trans people (Heinz, 2012; Shelley, 2008). For instance, real life experiences of trans youth captured through documentaries have gained popularity in recent years as well as fictional trans-themed storylines in television shows. These media depictions were considered emotionally and psychologically important for trans youth actively negotiating their identities whilst absorbing such content (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Jones et al., 2015; Ringo, 2002; Shelley, 2008). Although some inconsistencies in offline media representations had the potential to sensationalise or exploit gender diversity, there is evidence to suggest that positive representations of gender diversity have increased in recent times (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Shelley, 2008). For trans youth, positive depictions of media representations enabled rehearsal, negotiation and construction of one's self-identity (Ghazali & Nor, 2012).

The multitude of online social networking groups operated by and dedicated to the trans community has expanded over recent years (Jones et al., 2015). The use of social media to connect trans youth to other trans youth was described as an empowering and validating aspect of resilience (Singh, 2012). For example, the popular media platform YouTube allowed for a wide international audience to follow the journeys of people documenting their transition and this provided support, motivation and inspiration during one's own transition (McInroy & Craig 2015). Research suggests that the ability to physically see and identify with another person through video was more honest and revealing than a textual disclosure of the same information (Rotman & Preece, 2010). Viewers were able to perceive emotions and feelings from both the way the content was delivered and the associated non-verbal cues (Rotman & Preece, 2010). Furthermore, online means of information allowed access to role models which would otherwise remain inaccessible (McInroy & Craig, 2015).

### **Limitations in the Literature**

Jones et al. (2015) suggested that negative stereotypes of trans people living risky lives were reinforced by research heavily focused on health risks, psychopathologies and adverse experiences across the lifespan. Monro (2006) argued that much of the existing literature appeared to focus on the marginalisation and inequities of trans people at a social level, as opposed to framing trans people in individualistic, non-pathologising terms. Although clinically relevant life events occurred with a sufficient frequency to warrant the attention in the literature (Hendricks & Testa, 2012), and whilst acknowledging these disadvantages are important, positive pathways and protective factors to facilitate positive identity development were often overlooked (Jones et al., 2015). There are trans people who attain happiness and satisfaction, successful careers and meaningful relationships (Riggle et al., 2011). However a paucity of research focuses on the positive experiences of trans people beyond self-acceptance (Riggle et al., 2014; Testa et al., 2014).

Studies exhibiting elements of positivity mainly captured data from online surveys or incorporated large variances in age amongst the sample, resulting in emergent themes being pooled from aggregate data (Riggle et al., 2011; Riggle & Mohr, 2014; Singh et al., 2011; Testa et al., 2014;). Due to the large variations in participant ages, it is difficult to understand the specific experiences of a younger generation of trans people. It is also difficult to understand the experience of Australian trans youth, as Australian research has mainly focused on adults (Couch et al., 2007; Pitts et al., 2009; Jones, Gray, & Harris, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). As life experience generally correlates with chronological age, older adults who had transitioned many decades ago would have reported differences in experiences than young adults who had only recently and openly self-identified as being trans. These differences in experiences may also intertwine with social change and it was anticipated that social acceptance has increased over time.

### **Rationale**

My research objective was to qualitatively explore the meaning and significance of the lived experiences of trans youth. Aligned with the theories of positive psychology – which aimed to amplify the strengths of clients rather than to repair weaknesses (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) – my intent was to draw attention to the positive aspects of these experiences. My research purpose was to address the gap in the qualitative literature for research which appreciated the richness and diversity of this subgroup in a phenomenological manner. By embracing a positive focus on gender diversity and identity, I showed support for affirmative therapeutic practices to encourage and promote optimal health and wellbeing for trans youth. A focus on the positive factors which enable trans youth to prosper may encourage the improvement of therapeutic climates to foster these strengths within clinical practice (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Based on these premises, the underlying research question of the study was “what are the positive aspects of the experiences of trans youth?”

### **Research Design**

#### **Methodology**

The research design adopted a phenomenological methodology, committed to understanding the essence and meaning of peoples’ lived experiences of a phenomenon (Smith, 2004). More specifically, the use of an interpretative phenomenological approach permitted an idiographic focus to deeply examine the meanings assigned to the experiences of participants (Smith, 2004). The approach also allowed for a subjective and reflective process of interpretation and the explicit involvement by the researcher (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Based on a social constructionist epistemology, the approach was relevant to the research question as the epistemology placed knowledge within the process of social

interchange, highlighting the influence of interactions with others in one's social environment to determine the impact of positive experiences of trans youth (Smith, 2004). This approach was used to obtain an understanding of how the trans youth made sense of their experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them. (Smith, 2004).

The approach involved the collection of data through interviews and observations to compose a detailed description of positive experiences (Smith, 2004). As experts on their own experiences, participants offered an understanding of their thoughts and feelings by telling their own stories in their own words (Reid et al., 2005). The approach balanced emic and etic positions (Reid et al., 2005). Firstly, the phenomenological, insider approach began with prioritising the world views of the participants. Secondly, a subjective and reflective interpretation process aimed to understand these world views in light of positive experiences. Furthermore, in line with the broad posit of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) an interpretative phenomenological approach provided the opportunity for participants to express their views about strength, wellness and quality of life (Reid et al., 2005).

### **Participants**

This research was approved by the Edith Cowan University School of Psychology and Social Science Ethics Sub-Committee. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who were: (a) between the ages of 18 to 30 years old and (b) self-identified as trans. Ten participants were recruited through social media and personal contacts. Permission was obtained for a social media post (Appendix A) to appear on pages of relevant Australian organisations dedicated to the health and well-being of trans people. Interested persons contacted me directly and one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were organised to take place at mutually agreed times and locations. One interview was conducted by Skype due to the location of the participant.

Participants were aged between 18 and 24 years old. Six participants assigned male at birth preferred “she” or “her” (feminine) pronouns. Four participants assigned female at birth preferred “he” or “him” (masculine) pronouns. Some participants were comfortable fitting within the gender binary and others considered themselves non-binary. The various words and phrases used by participants to describe their gender identity appeared in Table 1 along with relevant demographic information. For participants who had transitioned, their journey began in adolescence or early adulthood. Nine participants resided in the metropolitan area and one participant resided interstate..

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	What words or phrases do you use to describe your gender identity?	Education	Employment Status
Olivia	19	“Woman, female, trans woman, trans female... they are the common terms I use to describe myself.”	Tertiary Student	Casual/Part Time
Tessa	24	“Feminine, binary...it’s pretty clear cut for me. I’m not gender fluid or anything so it’s really quite simple.”	Tertiary Graduate	Full time
Matt	21	“Although I do identify as being a trans man, I don’t use the word as much because I don’t like how it sounds semantically. I like saying female-to-male or FTM and just transgender as well. I definitely wouldn’t use transsexual because to me it has a lot of negative connotations”	Tertiary Student	Casual/Part Time
Phil	19	“I describe myself as non-binary, a trans man generally, trans-boy. I am a guy but I am non-binary. I don’t fit the...gender binary...because I don’t.”	Tertiary Student	Casual/Part Time
Fiona	20	“I normally say woman or a transgender woman. I consider myself pretty binary in terms of gender. Fairly simple to me.”	Secondary Graduate	Not currently employed
Flynn	19	“Not sure yet. I went by non-binary for a while and now I’m sort of more masculine. I go trans masculinish. I go by he, him pronouns.”	Tertiary studies on hold	Not currently employed
Anna	19	“Female to neutral, gender fluid and also just transgender. I think trans feminine is the general term for it but normally just trans female, gender fluid.”	Tertiary Student	Casual
Bree	24	“Woman, female, trans, transgender, trans woman.”	Higher Education Graduate	Full time
Kyle	18	“To the general population, I’m a guy but to people who know me personally I just say I’m a trans guy or trans man.”	Secondary School Student	Casual/Part Time
Melissa	24	“Trans female, trans woman or just woman or female.”	Secondary Graduate	Job Seeking

## **Materials**

An information letter (Appendix B) was emailed to potential participants with the details of the research. A consent form (Appendix C) was given to participants to sign before the interview commenced. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix D) comprised of open ended questions and probes, was used to guide the progress of the interview. An audio recorder was used to record the interview for transcription. A reflective journal was used to record my thoughts and observations during the interview process as well as bracket out biases about the study as the research process progressed. A list of counselling and support services (Appendix E) was provided to participants at the completion of the interview. Finally, participants were awarded a \$20 Coles Myer gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and effort in the research process.

## **Procedure**

Before the commencement of the interview, each participant was given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study with the researcher. Participants were assured that after the audio recordings of the interviews had been transcribed, the recordings would be erased. Participants were also informed that confidentiality would be maintained with use of pseudonyms throughout the research. Participants were offered the right to refuse to answer any questions and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The interview commenced after the participant signed the consent form thereby indicating their agreement with the conditions of the research. For one participant, verbal consent was obtained. as the interview was conducted by Skype.

Each participant engaged in one semi structured interview. The interview schedule was used as a guide, however the interview process was conversational and each participant was encouraged to discuss and expand upon their responses where necessary. The interview approach supported the proposed methodology and allowed for a focused yet flexible

interaction between myself and the participants. The interview began with rapport building by asking the participant for demographic information including how they described their gender identity, their age, employment, study and residential status. The interview progressed with a positive focus on self-identification, navigation through early adulthood and perceived levels of support and stress. The format and structure of the interview allowed me to ask clarifying questions, probe for information, generate discussion and keep participants engaged throughout. Once the interview was completed, the participants were thanked for their contribution to the study and were provided with a list of counselling and support services. The length of interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 90 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

To enhance interpretative rigour and to ensure that participants would retain as much control over the research as possible, a copy of the interview transcript was emailed to each participant for member checking. Each participants was invited to read through their own transcript to ensure that what was transcribed accurately reflected their views and experiences. This enabled participants to make adjustments where necessary. Upon review, two participants made minor grammatical changes and clarified points. The remaining eight participants did not request any changes. The process of member checking increased the credibility of the research findings by certifying the participants' experiences.

Aligned with the methodology, thematic analysis was appropriate for identifying, analysing and reporting central patterns and themes from the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used to find patterns of meaning amongst the collective descriptions of subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, each interview transcript and contextual data from the reflective journal was read and re-read to obtain a deep understanding of each participant's experience allowing for a detailed examination of what was said in the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Secondly, each transcript was



analysed for meaningful units by identifying common words, sentences and concepts which represented the participants' collective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reviewing the similarities and differences between the meaningful units allowed for comparisons across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process identified emerging and recurrent themes which described the meaning of the experiences (Green et al., 2007). Furthermore, the process enabled the reorganisation of clusters of related ideas into a table of themes. This allowed for a clear comparison of the themes with the group and evaluated against findings in the literature. The table of themes represented not only commonalities across each of the participant's accounts, but also variations amongst these accounts (Reid et al., 2005).

To strengthen credibility of the findings and to enhance interpretative rigour, researcher triangulation was undertaken to corroborate the data and themes (Liamputtong, 2013). A discussion of the overarching themes and subthemes with my research supervisor – who acted as an independent auditor – allowed for reorganisation and verification of the findings. Self-disclosure through the use of a reflective journal enhanced methodological and theoretical rigour by ensuring a clear audit trail of decision made throughout the research process (Liamputtong, 2013). Recording my thoughts, feelings and observations enabled me to bracket out any potential biases to retain my focus on the participants' subjective meanings before, during, and after data collection and analysis. I was able to identify my own subjective feelings, preferences and one-sided understandings of the experiences, thus monitoring my personal beliefs throughout the research process.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I self-identify as a heterosexual female ally and have a sibling who identifies as non-binary. My interest in this subject matter is personal and stems from my commitment to supporting equality and social inclusion. Furthermore, I wanted to adopt a methodological approach for this research which would be as empowering as possible to the people who

participated. I acknowledge that my interactions with each participant and the approach to interviewing taken may have affected some responses. Participants who knew of me prior to the research taking place, may have had a greater level of trust and as such, the ability to generate a more candid disclosure of their experiences. By maintaining a reflective journal throughout the data collection process, I was able to explore my own interpretations and understandings of the participants' experiences.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

Thematic analysis captured the importance of three overarching themes within the data in relation to the research question: (1) identity validation, (2) a desire to speak out, and (3) identifying evidence of social change. Various sub-themes captured the essence of each overarching theme, as shown in Table 2. Aligned with the principles of interpretative phenomenology and thematic analysis, references to the literature and selected data excerpts supported the thematic findings and interpretations.

Table 2

*Themes*

<b>Overarching Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Theme</b>
Identity Validation	Learning What Was Not Taught Redefining Gender This Makes So Much Sense
A Desire to Speak Out	Testing the Waters For Trans and Gender Diverse People
Identifying Evidence of Social Change	Online Media Offline Media Representations and Role Models

## **Identity Validation**

An internal sense of identity validation was a recurrent theme throughout the data. This overarching theme reflected how participants accepted and personally made sense of their gender identity. Three sub-themes reinforced the meaning of identity validation to the individual. The first sub-theme represented the active process of learning what was not taught, particularly within the educational system and having to seek out information from various sources. The second sub-theme involved a sense of redefining the meaning and concept of gender. The third sub-theme involved achieving a more positive frame of mind by reconciling past feelings and behaviours with present feelings and behaviours.

### **Learning what was not taught**

Participants described their personal journeys in self-education and how they went about learning what was not taught in order to understand and make sense of their gender identity. Participants described this research as time consuming but necessary to understand the meaning of gender as an identity and not a physicality. Assigned a male at birth, Tessa began her transition to female a little over a year ago. She spoke about feeling a lot more genuine in her expressions of herself and her experiences enabled her to gain a much deeper understanding of herself:

*I'm unlearning a lot of things that were ingrained into me, like a lot of stuff that I was taught. Because we're sort of raised with so much... expectation of our gender [I went about] teaching myself that I'm trans and it's OK to be that way... there's absolutely nothing wrong with it.*

Tessa referred to prevailing gender expectations that one's gender identity corresponds with prevailing stereotypes and norms of that particular gender, in addition to congruency with one's sex assigned at birth (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). She described these expectations as having been taught and reinforced from a young age and as such, these expectations were heavily established and ingrained in day to day life. In embracing a trans identity, Tessa

referred to this as an unlearning process, a process of discarding accumulated knowledge on prevailing gender expectations. Without the assistance of counselling support at the time, she described no other way of overcoming these expectations other than by learning what was not taught through her own research on gender identity – an internal sense of being male, female, both or neither (Burgess, 2000). Educating one's self with new found knowledge was reiterated by 19 year old Anna, who identified as gender fluid, trans-feminine:

*I've kind of had to reassess my ideas on a whole lot of things that I'd just taken as fact for years because that's what I'd be taught. So the main question that I had to ask myself was "What is gender? I might just want to be a girl, it might just be a phase?" I've definitely had to change the way I see gender... [because] I'd always measured myself against masculine standards, I went to an all-boys school which was awful.*

Similarly, Anna described how she went through a process of learning and understanding gender and how this was contrary to what she had accepted as fact based on societal expectations and educational teachings. She described how she answered her own questions to do with gender identity through her own research.

Participants referred to gender expectations as taught and reinforced from a young age. The existence of a binary classification of gender (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) and the terms, gender and sex often mistakenly used interchangeably in common vocabulary, (Hyde et al., 2014) served to reinforce social expectation of congruency between sex assigned at birth and gender identity. By reassessing ideas regarding sex and gender identity through actively seeking out information and resisting pressure of societal assumptions of gender norms, participants were able to make sense of their gender identity.

Some participants described how they formed early understandings of their gender identity at a young age, but it was not until years later that gained an understanding and awareness of trans as a concept. Fiona recalled that although she "*wanted to be a girl when I was really young*" she was not aware of the idea and concept of being trans until just before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. She recalled:

*I only just recently [had] been hearing about trans people and then I was like “oh shit, I’m trans” and it made me feel really happy...this is really right...but I was also really, really terrified because it requires you to rethink a lot of things.*

Twenty four year old Melissa explained that just over a year ago, she did not know anything about trans people. She did however, speak about how she had been struggling for a long time, but “*didn’t know that we existed*”. After a chance meeting with a trans girl, she described her self-identification as “*intense*” and after learning more about trans people, her “*realisation was really fast*”:

*So I met this trans girl and we got on really well...I guess I must have thought that trans people was all a surgical thing, I thought everyone had had surgery by the time they were young teenagers of something, [and] that was the only thing that changed people’s bodies. And then she [a trans girl] was talking about hormones...I think that was my moment of realisation.*

Challenging gender norms and the stereotypes of a male and female identity was described by Riggle et al. (2011) as “*living beyond the gender binary*” (p. 152), a positive and empowering aspect of a trans identity. Before identifying as non-binary, Phil felt pressure to be a specific kind of way and mould into society’s gender boundaries and rules:

*Even if I still identified as a woman I think discovering that I could be non-binary or just discovering that I didn’t have to fit the gender binary... that’s good. It doesn’t matter what I wear or whether I say I am a boy or a girl or neither...and it shouldn’t matter for anyone.*

Discovering that gender rules were merely social constructions, was a huge sense of relief for Phil. He felt that he did not have to conform to gender ideals, he could just be himself dependent on how he was feeling and that there was no hindrance on how he could express himself. This was hugely positive to experience. Similarly, 21 year old Matt described how his process of self-education mainly through online research was a positive experience of discovery, and feelings of normality were reinforced when he discovered that there were other people that he could relate to:

*I never heard about [being non-binary] before, wasn’t educated in it because I went to a Catholic all-girls school, so no chance of it there. I think, once I had sort of been comfortable with using the word trans and sort of educating myself to the point where*

*I felt like, "Alright, maybe I can see if this applies to me." I did a lot of educating myself and trying to find just anything, books or blogs or videos...and [I] was shocked...thank god for YouTube and people doing their transition because that was amazing!*

For Matt, learning by relating his experiences to others was motivating and inspiring and this led to feelings of hope and inclusivity. His words were emotionally driven, particularly when he described his discovery of transition timelines on YouTube. This form of media enabled the perception of emotions and feelings through the way the content was delivered in addition to verbal cues (Rotman & Preece, 2010). This was supported by research that described the representations of trans people on popular media platforms such as YouTube as having the potential to significantly impact the identity development and lived experiences of youth questioning their gender identity (McInroy & Craig, 2015).

### **Redefining Gender**

Participants spoke about the meaning and complexity of gender and how this was shaped through idiosyncratic features. Reconstructing the meaning of gender involved departing from pre-defined ideas of gender, culturally bound, shaped and enforced by society, and towards the literal meaning of gender. By redefining gender, participants were able to make sense of and normalise their identity. Nineteen year old Olivia explained:

*Before I used to think that a male body has to have certain characteristics and a female body has to have certain characteristics when the actual truth is, if you identify or you are a man, then you have a male body. If you identify or are a woman, then you have a woman's body & that's what's really helped me as I used to think... 'oh no, to be trans I have to have XYZ surgery', when that's not necessarily the case.*

Confusion between the meanings of sex and gender occurred due to the terms often being used interchangeably despite representing different concepts (Hyde et al., 2014; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Olivia referred to "certain characteristics" as a person's physiological and biological characteristics (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) as a concept separate to that of "if you identify" reflecting one's gender identity – encompassing social, cultural and psychological

characteristics (Unger & Crawford, 1993). Realising that gender meanings were subjective was helpful and comforting to Olivia, who identifies as trans-female, or simply female.

Similarly, Matt described how he learnt that the need to be a masculine to be a male was shaped by society and not a necessity:

*When I came to the realisation that I didn't need to be masculine to be male, that was really helpful and [it] definitely felt like [a] relief. [I was] comfortable identifying as trans knowing... that it could be whatever I wanted to define it as.*

Olivia and Matt's statements referred to the subjective interpretations of masculinity and femininity. By learning and understanding the meaning of gender as a construct, they were able to position themselves comfortably within the gender spectrum which reinforced their sense of identity. Redefining gender involved replacing socially reinforced assumptions with a more dimensional meaning of gender for identity formation and validation.

Although Tessa described herself as fitting within the gender binary, she referred to gender being fluid as a concept and changeable over time. She explained how she learnt that it was acceptable for gender to not be strictly male or female, that it could be somewhere in between or something else entirely. Due to this changeability, Tessa questioned the existence of gender roles and stereotypes attached to these gender roles, departing from societal constructions of the meaning of gender and embracing new meanings:

*I think it has given me a much deeper understanding of myself ....and it sort of gives you this really strange view of sex and gender in which it sort of is not relevant at all, like if it's such a fluid thing that can be manipulated that easily then why do we have gender roles and that sort of thing?*

For Phil, it was not about fitting within the gender norms culturally constructed by mainstream society. Discovering “a new way of thinking about things” rendered it more fitting to describe himself in the following words:

*I describe myself as non-binary...a trans man generally, trans boy, whatever, I am a guy but ...I don't fit the gender binary. I was kind of like 'what... this is interesting, this is a new way of thinking about things, this makes way more sense... gender whatever, and that basically still fits, it's just more specifically to one side or to a masculine kind of presentation.*

Two years ago, Phil went from describing himself as gender queer to describing himself as non-binary. Praising the support of his peers, I sensed comradeship and passion, particularly when he exclaimed “*we’re all in this together, we can completely destroy the idea of two genders...gender whatever.*” These findings were consistent Riggle et al.’s (2011) theme of “living beyond the binary” (p. 152). Confronting the typical dichotomous classifications of gender allowed for a more authentic presentation of the self. Challenging gender norms and the stereotypes of a male or female identity by describing gender as fluid and changeable enabled the freedom of self-expression, a positive aspect of a trans identity (Riggle et al., 2011).

### **This Makes So Much Sense**

All participants expressed satisfaction and relief when they were able to come up with terminology which best described their gender identity. Participants described how they reconciled feelings and behaviours of the past through a process of self-identification. Although this was often a confusing time, participants reported that “*it explained a lot*” and eventually they were able to make sense of their gender identity. These findings were aligned the experience of congruency, a positive aspect of a trans identity (Riggle et al., 2011). Congruency was associated with the application of descriptive words or labels to normalise feelings (Riggle et al. 2011). For 20 year old Fiona, having a term to describe herself enabled her to see a brighter future for herself. Her words reflected positivity and hope for the future. She talked through her past and reflected on how, upon self-identifying as trans, it explained a lot. She spoke with an emphasis on how self-identification helped her work towards overcoming depression which plagued her mental health for many years:

*The thing that really struck me was how much more comfortable even just knowing I was trans made me about myself because it really explained a lot. There were all of these years of confusion and pain and all of this stuff which never really made sense. It made me understand who I was a bit more and it also helped me feel more*



*comfortable, because at the time I was very, very depressed .... Then I realised I was trans and...I saw a more positive future for myself...even if this doesn't solve everything, it's going to make things better and that's going to make it worth keeping on going and that was a pretty big deal.*

Similarly, Anna reflected on her childhood memories when looking back and making sense of her identity. Although she did not elaborate, she stated “*well, that would make a whole lot more sense if this was what I was feeling at the time*”. Bree looked back at her journey which began some time ago. As a 24 year old trans woman, Bree explained that by self-identifying as trans, she was able to make more sense of her thoughts, feelings and behaviours:

*I guess I felt good about it because I felt like things were making sense and I had gone out a couple of times presenting as a woman and [saying], 'yeah this makes sense, I feel good about this'. Being able to live full time I think, really made me feel a lot more comfortable in my own skin and I felt...I think I became a much more positive person overall. It's kind of hard to look back on and sort of relate to it but at the time it was a really good place to be, emotionally I felt like I had entered a really positive frame of mind, I felt a lot better, I was sort of starting to socialise a bit more and a bit better.*

When Bree began living full time as a woman, it made her feel more positive and confident overall. Making sense of feelings and behaviours of the past and gaining confidence and a more positive mindset were in line with finding truth and unity within themselves which had not been previously experienced (Riggle et al., 2011). For Olivia, discovering appropriate terminology to use was a positive aspect of claiming a positive identity:

*I probably started identifying as transgender in (date). Back then I identified as non-binary. I guess it was kind of nice to have a term to describe myself for the first time & that was really important having that kind of community and sense to go...hey what I feel is actually not wrong or not broken, what I feel is actually quite valid in this different identity.*

Olivia described how having a term to describe herself for the first time was an important positive aspect of self-identification which was an empowering meaning to her internal sense of self. Some people, particularly those who had positive role models and strong supports, felt validated and euphoric when they discovered that there was terminology to describe their experiences and that they were not alone (Kaufman, 2008). This was reinforced by Riggle et

al. (2011) who stated that self-identification and congruency was achieved through finding words which represented their identity, and thus enabling the normalisation of feelings.

The complexity within the construction of one's gender identity may have an absence of a clear-cut ending (Jones et al., 2015). For example, a number of participants in Jones et al. repeatedly described their gender explorations as an ongoing process. For 19 year old Flynn, his way of describing his gender identity included the words "*all over the place*" and "*underexplored*". Flynn described how he navigated through making sense of his identity, the impact of changing his name and using terminology that internally made a lot of sense to him. Having a preferred name to represent his gender identity was hugely validating and empowering:

*I always hated my birth name and I thought that it just never suited me... a few months ago...I went with [a name change] for a trial thing and even though I was still sort of officialish (sic) going by they/them...because it's a masculine name, some of [my friends] started saying he/him... I wasn't sure if it felt more right because people were listening to what I asked them to call me but then when people started calling me he/him it was like 'yeah...I'm one of those'. It feels like it fits.*

Flynn's decision to change his name to compliment his preferred pronouns signified a fresh start and an opportunity to leave behind an old identity. Some participants explained that they "*had been struggling for a very long time, but didn't know that we existed*". When reflecting on the past, participants often made comparisons to how they felt before to how they felt now. For example, Melissa felt that prior to self-identifying as trans, her old identity was "*merely a shell*" which was "*meaningless and unimportant*" to her. She discovered she was trans after talking to a friend of a friend and after doing her own research "*it explained everything.*"

Similarly, Tessa described how she lived up to what others expected of her; despite going against what she felt was her true self. Tessa felt a great sense of relief when she was able to feel a lot more genuine in her expressions of herself and not feeling compelled to do what others expected of her:

*What I keep sort of thinking is...before I transitioned it was like living sort of by a script...like doing what other people expected of you. I didn't actually transition until about a year ago, I started my transition and the stuff I was going through then...going to uni, finding a good job...it was all stuff that was expected of me". I was sort of almost in a denial phase almost, like after high school I decided...I just wanted to be normal and that sort of thing, be masculine, do what people wanted me to do.*

### **A Desire to Speak Out**

Participants expressed a desire to speak out, engaging with others to sensitively ascertain the underlying values of those important to them. The desire to speak out represented the active process of testing the waters, by communicating hypothetical scenarios with peers and questioning levels of support and tolerance. In addition to the wording of the responses, participants paid close attention to body language and tone. The first sub-theme was discussed in relation to Riggle et al.'s (2011) act of self-disclosure as a positive aspect of a trans identity. The second sub-theme was discussed in light of Riggle et al.'s (2011) experiences of sensitivity towards others and youth oriented research by Robinson et al. (2014) relating to speaking out on behalf of the trans community

### **Testing the Waters**

Rather than internalising feelings, participants tested the waters with peers, family and others to ascertain their underlying values and how they might react to their trans identity. For example, Matt asked his high school friends, “so if I had a dude’s name, what would it be?” and “have you heard about trans people?” and “my friend got kicked out of home and they’re trans, what do you think about this?” On the whole, participants noted a variety of positive responses. One participant came out to his partner as they were newly dating “hey by the way, just so you know, I’m questioning my gender, so I’m probably going to be a dude in a while” and this was met with acceptance. These findings were aligned with the continual negotiation of “just how out to be with different people” (p. 146) across different contexts described in Legate, Ryan and Weinstein (2012).

Testing the waters also included the exploration of one's gender identity and whether that identity fit with one's internal sense of self. Often, this was facilitated safely around trusted peers. Tessa explained that because she was living out of home, "*I was sort of able to explore my gender identity around my friends. If I was still living at home, I wouldn't have had that opportunity, so that really helped work out what I wanted.*" Phil described how testing the waters enabled the consolidation of friendships resulting in open minded and supportive friends:

*If your friends don't accept you, then they're not friends and they're probably shitty people anyway. It's like an easy test to figure out if someone's open minded because [you could say]... 'hey, I'm non-binary which is this...or...I'm a man and I was designated a girl at birth just so you know' and if they're not ok with that then ...it's probably not worth being friends with them. I find the trans people most open minded considering what they've gone through...not all the time... but a lot of the time...it's not only about being trans, but if you have other things going on, they're more likely to be accepting of it.*

Being around peers and having a sense of community was important for support. These findings were aligned with Riggle et al. (2011) description of the act of self-disclosure. When done sensitively toward the person you are sharing with, it was a liberating experience and whilst self-disclosure was potentially scary due to a risk of rejection, it was probably the single most important thing one could do towards mental, emotional and physical health (Riggle et al., 2011). Positive interpersonal relationships were reinforced when family and friends accepted their gender identity and expression (Riggle et al., 2011).

### **For Trans & Gender Diverse People**

Data revealed the tendency for participants to speak out to and on behalf of other trans and gender diverse people. Riggle et al. (2011) stated that personal experiences of harassment, victimisation and discrimination often led to an increased feeling of empathy and a general sensitivity to the feelings of others. However, findings within this research

suggested that the desire to speak out emerged from feelings of empathy for others due to a perception of their own personal experiences having been a lot better in comparison to others. For example, 18 year old Kyle described his transition as “*really easy, it surprised everyone, even the people who sort of went through it with me.*” Kyle’s decision to transition during high school was met with support and understanding from his family, school and peers. Although he admits that he “*didn’t have to jump through the hoops like other people have*” and that he “*pretty much got hormones straight away*” his awareness of social issues in relation to trans people is described in his openness to share his experiences to educate others:

*The only way to stop oppression and transphobia and the troubles with it is just by educating people so by opening the door and saying ‘I’m happy to talk about it, let’s have a chat, that’s cool’ to eliminate that idea of trans people being some different species. It’s just human curiosity and there’s no easier way to find out about stuff than from someone who’s gone through and actually first-handedly (sic) experienced it.*

Although Tessa described her transition as fast, smooth and dramatic, her awareness of others’ struggles generated a sense of guilt when she compared her experiences to other peoples:

*I’ve had the one [full time] job the whole time for my transition and I haven’t had experience trying to find a job but I’ve been really lucky in terms of my transition. I haven’t lost anyone, I pass reasonably well, the doctors have all been like ‘go for it, that’s fine, do this’ and I almost feel a little bit guilty for that...I have to sort of, be aware that it’s not like that for everyone at all. My friends have been really great mostly, I haven’t lost any friends throughout this whole thing, it’s fantastic, as far as I know that’s basically unheard of. I came out... at work and everyone’s been really good there, that’s another fairly unique experience.... It sort of took a while to get used to, coz for first couple of weeks [I was] expecting something to happen, but nothing did...so it’s been good.*

Evidence of empathy was also demonstrated by participants when comparing their experiences to others trans people in drawing attention to social issues relevant to the trans community. Flynn took the opportunity within the interview to draw attention to queer homelessness, and what he described was a huge problem in the community. He spoke about

other's experiences of battling depression and anxiety as well as *"having to couch surf or live in their cars"* because their parents *"kicked them out."*

Research suggests that serving as a positive role model and educating others through one's personal experiences was an inspiring method of dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions and provided a way to make the trans community more visible (Riggle et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015). For Olivia, the opportunity for her to speak publically about her personal experience and life journey was a positive and personal means of effecting social change. She described the audience as *"really respectful and really supportive of me doing this"* and that it was a *"really nice environment to have the support of people and being able to talk about the mental health sector with mental health professionals and peers as well."*

The abundance of online resources and information to support trans youth in their identity development by providing a sense of community and representation has been described in the literature (McInroy & Craig, 2015). All participants described ways in which online technology facilitated their desire to speak out. Participants gave examples of online resources including *"forums where I can effect change"*, *"a social justice type blog on Tumblr so I can of talk about these issues a lot"* and *"being a part of the [Facebook] group"*. Previous research described the development of personal support communities through online spaces which provided the opportunity to develop a peer group, a means of tracking transitions and sharing information (Ghazali & Nor, 2012). The literature also praised trans populations as being active producers of online knowledge about trans identities and issues through active blogging and resource sharing (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Media platform, Tumblr was where many trans people learnt about transitioning and coming out (McInroy & Craig, 2015). The benefits of an online support network was described by Olivia in the following way, *"when I was coming out and when I was dealing with issues in my life...they*

*kind of really helped because I had people who I knew, who would understand without me having to explain things over and over.”*

Connecting with existing communities of like-minded people who not only respected their gender identity, but who were also in a similar process of self-theorising their own gender, created supportive relationships, understanding and self-acceptance. (Riggle et al., 2014). Through communications with others through a social media support group, Matt described how helping others had a positive impact on his life:

*I guess I don't realise whilst talking to them that I am sort of getting involved with giving some resources and coz the people I'm talking about are gender diverse and queer and what not and just been like 'thanks, I didn't know who I could talk to about this...it feels like such a relief.'*

Engagement in social activism created a pathway to community which was very rewarding. Forms of social activism were highlighted in the literature, which included being a role model and educating others, as well as general social justice work and working in ways to make the trans community visible to dispel stereotypes (Riggle et al., 2011). Serving as a positive role model by providing help and support to others was met with feelings of reciprocity. Matt spoke about his desire to help others in a similar situation to by giving them the resources that he did not have or had to struggle to find at the time. The desire to do so was highlighted in previous research in terms of being a positive role model. Robinson et al.'s (2014) study of the issues facing gender and sexuality diverse youth found that those who had already revealed or no longer concealed their gender identity or sexual orientation served as role models for those who were either yet to do so, or not yet decided about gender or sexuality. Studies on the patterns of empathy in online communication suggest that reaching out and handing emotional support was much easier in online communities than more practical forms of support (Rotman & Preece, 2010). Through their research on the growth of YouTube online communities, Rotman and Preece (2010) described the importance of virtual support in creating a sense of group cohesiveness and a forum for empathy and support.

### **Identifying Evidence of Social Change**

Participants provided many examples which contained elements of positivity by identifying evidence of social change within online and offline forms of media. As media was described as the predominant source where the general public gained general knowledge about trans issues (McInroy & Craig, 2015), the importance of positive media representations of trans people were discussed in light of informing and influence the attitudes of the public (McInroy & Craig, 2015). In addition, the importance of media depictions and representations of trans people were aligned with research describing the importance of these depictions as positively impacting on the lives and experiences of trans youth, especially during gender identity development (Heinz, 2012; Shelley, 2008).

#### **Online Media**

In terms of identifying evidence of social change in online media, Matt referred to a news article on social media regarding an eight year old trans girl who received the support of her school to participate in a sports carnival alongside students of her preferred gender:

*The school ...her family...her friends...support her. I was shocked! I thought they were going to do something awful...but the majority of the responses I've been seeing are really positive and I was just floored because I did not expect that! I view Perth as the sort of equivalent of an American redneck city especially when I think about Melbourne... I guess it seems, even though it's a gradual thing and things are improving and that's wonderful.*

Matt spoke about this positive outcome and support surrounding the young trans girl, fuelled with passion and excitement for greater societal acceptance, particularly as his initial expectations of discrimination were not met. These expectations were also described by Bree, “I think as trans people, we are used to being sidelined...we see a lot of discrimination in our own lives and we also see it in many other forms.” As expectations were exceeded, particularly with reference to Perth as being less progressive than other major capitals in



Australia, I sensed that Matt was optimistic about the future and that he strongly believed that positive social change would gradually occur over time.

The increased visibility and public awareness of trans people fuelled by online media coverage of reality television star Cailyn Jenner's transition produced mixed, yet mostly positive responses from participants. Flynn was *"really proud of her because she's facing so much shit, although she's facing a lot of good stuff...sometimes those few little comments can break you."* An empathetic response by Kyle was *"physically she looks amazing and I hope she's doing well mentally."* Matt happily described the media coverage of Caitlyn as *"still a step forward"* and that *"this wouldn't be happening ten years ago maybe even five years ago, and would probably not be a positive thing."* Matt referred to a timeline of social change, with things improving in recent years. Anna referred to improvements in the media's perception of trans people when and explained, *"It's great that the media coverage of her was largely positive and people seemed to be more accepting in the media"*. She sensed a degree of social change in recent times, her example being *"last year, if there was anything in the media that was about transgender people it was mainly either on sitcoms...transphobic jokes."* Similarly, Olivia commented on the media progressing *"beyond...trans people being punch lines...and jokes"* and Anna described these improvements in the media as heartening to her and that *"it seems like the attitudes of people who watch said media [are also]."*

### **Offline Media**

Bree described Australia's access to international television shows that were willing to analyse and provide insightful depictions of queer culture as evidence of social change. Affordable access to television shows (e.g. through Netflix) had the ability to attract a wide audience of Australians with the potential to generate thought provoking conversations amongst household viewers of varying demographics. This action in itself may be described

as a catalyst for social change. Bree spoke excitedly of the positive evolution of the media as a powerful way to shape and influence cultural attitudes and values:

*We have so many people watching Orange is the New Black! I really get the feeling that this style of media is only going to promote...not just trans people, it's going to investigate racial relationships...queer people...women's culture and how that influences things. Ultimately, I think it's important to keep in mind that...the biggest step for achieving gay rights wasn't the Stonewall Riots, it was Will & Grace!*

Since the 1970s, a marked increase in the representation of trans people in offline media have been reported in various studies (Ghazali & Nor, 2012). The increased visibility has resulted in a wealth of diverse, real-life, and increasingly positive representations (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Heinz, 2012). Offline media was frequently the medium by which people who came to identify as trans first encountered representations of trans individuals and communities (Heinz, 2012). Media representations of trans people (real or fictional) had the ability to significantly impact identity development by enabling rehearsal, negotiation and construction of identities (Ghazali & Nor, 2012). Although some research highlighted inconsistencies in media representations, describing negative or problematic representations resulting in sensationalisation or exploitation of trans people, the findings are aligned with research which suggests that more positive or constructive media representations had increased in visibility over time (Shelley, 2008).

### **Representations and Role Models**

Participants spoke about the growing representation of gender diversity in offline media as evidence of social change, and within these representations, there appeared to be more positive depictions of trans people overall. Olivia spoke passionately and excitedly about observing other trans people in the media. She named “*Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Isis King [and] Carmen Carrera*” as “*really important*” positive role models who inspired her involvement in activism. Bree spoke with a lot of emphasis on how Caitlyn Jenner’s media

coverage had the potential to positively shape public opinion and encourage cisgender acceptance of trans people:

*If she continues to be a prominent figure and people keep seeing her...I hope [her TV show] gets great ratings. I hope people can see a positive view of a trans person transitioning. At the end of the day...a positive role model is going to be a good thing for trans people's acceptance by cis people.*

Tessa described how the media coverage of Caitlyn Jenner gave the general public a greater awareness of trans people in a sense of *"I feel like after Caitlyn Jenner, I could almost go into [lingerie shop] and go 'hey, do you have anything for transgender women?"*

These findings contrasted with research within the last decade which suggested that positive role models for trans youth were exceptionally rare in mainstream media (Davis, 2009).

Robinson et al. (2014) described the importance of positive role models for youth, who were likely to be at the stage where they were forming their own identities and coming out.

Positive role models were described as having the potential to shape more positive perceptions and reception from families, friends and the community (Robinson et al., 2014).

Furthermore, accessibility to these role models provided a sense of connectedness and representation (McInroy & Craig, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of trans youth, to draw attention to the positive aspects of these experiences in a phenomenological manner.

Qualitative research which draws upon elements of positive psychology is essential to enhance the knowledge of positive and affirmative practices when working with trans youth who seek professional help and support. In answering the research question, the positive experiences of trans youth were outlined in several parts.

Firstly, validating one's gender identity involved drawing upon multiple resources to learn what was not taught, particularly within the educational framework. Gaining awareness

of the common misconceptions of gender, and thus somewhat redefining gender, participants were able to normalise their identity. After establishing (or actively working towards) their gender identity, participants were able to reconcile and make sense of past behaviours, thoughts and feelings. These sub themes reflected positive aspects of a sense of achievement of gender identity reflecting an authentic self.

Secondly, participants expressed a desire to speak out to others. By gradually testing the waters with people whom they had frequent contact with, youth were able to protect themselves by gauging the levels of perceived acceptance, before revealing their gender identity to others. A desire to speak out for other trans and gender diverse people was reflected in the various ways participants engaged in social activism.

Finally evidence of social change emerged from the transcripts, as participants spoke about greater social awareness of trans people in recent times, combined with hope and optimism for positive social change in years to come. References were made to the influence of online and offline media, providing an outlet for greater trans representations and news articles reporting on trans issues in a more positive light.

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. Firstly, the participants in this study were self-selected and were aware of the research focus on positive experiences. As such, there may have been a degree of self-selection bias which may have led to an exaggeration of the positive experiences. For instance, participants may have been more cooperative, motivated and sociable than other trans youth. In addition, participants were also well educated and resided in an urban area (with the exception of one rural, interstate participant).

### **Implications and Future Directions**

Research interest in the lives of trans people appears to be expanding in recent years (Jones et al., 2015) and although further research would be beneficial in a number of areas, implications for practice are discussed in light of the findings. As part of normal psychosexual development, a certain amount of questioning and experimentation around gender identity is common in adolescence and young adulthood (Kaufmann, 2008). Gonzalez and McNulty (2010) recommended that health professionals reject the assumption that everyone should follow a prescribed path of gender identification and expression. According to Burgess (2000), the very core of what health practitioners can do for youth questioning their gender, is to provide a positive and affirmative environment. As language and terminology is a prevalent issue in the trans community, simply validating a person's gender identity and using their preferred pronouns can make a world of difference to that person (Burgess, 2000). Furthermore, due to the abundance of resources available on trans issues, Davis (2009) recommends exercising a degree of caution against the use of inaccurate, outdated or discriminatory terminology.

Sing et al. (2014) cautioned against the assumption that a complete understanding of trans youth may be generated solely from theory and academic research. Gaining awareness of the common experiences in the lives of trans youth from research findings may broaden understandings in addition to taking into account the individual circumstances, needs, wants and desires of each individual (Singh et al., 2014). In addition to professional sources of knowledge, it may be of interest for professionals working with trans youth, to access media resources to gain useful insights of trans representations and role models to share with their clients (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2009). Social work research reported the use of popular media representations of trans identities were well received and viewed as supportive of gender exploration to foster identity development (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2009). This was

reiterated by McInroy and Craig (2015) who recommended that health practitioners recognise both the risks and supportive opportunities of media consumption to facilitate identity exploration of their young adult clients.

Due to the active role of psychologists involved in gatekeeping medical transition (Budge, 2015), adopting methods from the counselling literature in support of the exploration of gender identity may promote a more affirmative approach to practice to improve the well-being of clients seeking help and guidance (Singh & Burnes, 2010). Adopting a more positive view of gender identity may help create a therapeutic environment that enhances and supports clients' development towards an authentic self (Riggle et al., 2011). Furthermore, Gonzalez and McNulty (2010) suggested that professionals seeking to create a trans-affirming environment for their clients may wish to consider the role of gender in their own lives or reflect upon societal messages that made them feel empowered or disempowered about their gender identity (Singh et al., 2014). By broadening awareness of the significance of gender in their day to day lives, health professionals may increase their understandings of the complex gender-affirming processes described by clients in clinical practice (Singh et al., 2014)

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## Appendix A

### Social Media Post



**Do you identify as transgender?**

**&**

**Are you aged between 18 to 30 years old?**

If so, I would be very interested in having a chat to you about your experiences!

Hi there... My name is Gemma, and I am currently completing my Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Psychology at Edith Cowan University. It is a requirement of the course that I undertake a research project.

**The aim of this research is to explore the lived experiences of people who are transgender, particularly with regards to positive aspects of these experiences.**

Your involvement in this study will be to participate in an interview at a mutually convenient time and location, and answer general questions in relation to your experiences of being transgender.

Total involvement should be approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

**Your participation in this research is voluntary and all information provided by you is strictly confidential.**

As a token of appreciation for your time and effort, you will receive a \$20 Coles Myer gift card.

Would you like more information?

Please contact the researcher,  
Gemma Taylor on 0481 XXX XXX or [gtaylor6@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:gtaylor6@our.ecu.edu.au)

## Appendix B

### Information Letter

#### Being Trans: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Young Adults



Thank you for your interest in this research. My name is Gemma Taylor and I am currently completing my Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Psychology at Edith Cowan University. It is a requirement of the course that I undertake a research project. You have been chosen at random by responding to my research advertisement.

JOONDALUP CAMPUS

270 Joondalup Drive,  
Joondalup  
Western Australia 6027  
Telephone 134 328  
Facsimile: (08) 9300 1257  
CRICOS 00279B

The aim of this research is to explore the lived experiences of people who are trans, particularly with regards to positive aspects of these experiences. Your involvement in this study will be to participate in an interview at a mutually convenient time and location, and answer general questions in relation to your experiences of being trans. Total involvement should be approximately 45 minutes to one hour. As a token of appreciation for your time and effort in this project, you will receive a \$20 Coles Myer gift card.

ABN 54 361 485 361

The rationale and design of this study has satisfied the strict guidelines laid down by the Edith Cowan University School of Psychology and Social Science Ethics Sub-Committee. Subject to any legal obligations, all data remains confidential and publication of the results will not disclose your identity, and at no time will your name be reported. If you are interested in the outcome of this research project, I will be pleased to share it with you upon its completion, which is scheduled for October 2015. My contact details are listed below.

Should you wish to participate in this study, it is requested that you complete the attached consent form. I would also like to audio record the interview and am seeking your consent to do that. The reason for recording the interview is to ensure that an accurate record of what was discussed during the interview can be analysed. Once transcribed, the recording will be destroyed. After the study is complete, the data collected will be stored in a secured filing cabinet at Edith Cowan University. The data may be used in future research. Please understand that your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty, and to remove any data that you may have contributed.

Although that it is envisaged that this study will not be stressful for participants, if at any time you become distressed with any aspect of this study, assistance is available to you through a number of counselling services as attached. You may also refuse to answer any question and are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me via the details below, or my supervisor, Dr Bronwyn Harman on 6304 5021. If you have any concerns about the project or would like to talk to an independent person, you may contact Ms Kim Gifkins, Edith Cowan University Research Ethics Officer on 6304 2170 or [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au).

If you are interested or would like further information, I can be contacted via mobile 0481 XXX XXX or email [gtaylor6@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:gtaylor6@our.ecu.edu.au).

Yours sincerely,  
Gemma Taylor



## Appendix C

### Participant Consent Form



JOONDALUP CAMPUS

270 Joondalup Drive,  
Joondalup  
Western Australia 6027  
Telephone 134 328  
Facsimile: (08) 9300 1257  
CRICOS 00279B

ABN 54 361 485 361

I \_\_\_\_\_ have read the information sheet provided and agree to participate in the research study conducted by Gemma Taylor of Edith Cowan University.

I understand the purpose and nature of the study and am participating voluntarily.

Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I grant the permission for the data to be used in the process of completing an undergraduate Psychology degree and acknowledge that it may be published and/or used in future research.

I understand that my name and other identifying information will not be used.

I understand that I can refuse to answer any question and am able to withdraw from the study at any time.

I also grant permission for the interview to be audio recorded and understand that the recording will be erased once the interview is transcribed.

I understand that I have the right to view the completed research and that the research may be published.

Signed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D

### Proposed Interview Schedule

Before we begin, I would like to thank you for your time and decision to participate in my research. I am sure your comments will be valuable.

1. What words or phrases do you typically use to describe your gender identity?
2. I am interested to know about the time you felt that you first identified as being trans? How did you feel? What was going through your head at the time? Did you feel like there were things that were positive about your self-identification? Why?
3. Can you tell me in what way if at all that being trans has changed the way you see yourself? How does this make you feel? Do you think this is a positive/negative thing? Why? Overall, how positive do you feel about your experiences?
4. What do you think the positive things are about being trans? Can you tell me about as many positive aspects that you think are important to your life? Do you have any examples?
5. I am really interested in your experience of being trans and being a young adult. Can you please tell me what it is like to be trans as well as being a young adult?
6. Do you feel that your needs are met in terms of support? Do you feel you have a positive relationship with the people you see as support, yes/no? Can you tell me in what way? How does it make you feel?
7. Do you feel that your experience in identifying as trans has reduced your stress? In what ways do you think your stress is reduced? What kind of coping strategies do you use?
8. I'm also interested in anything else that you might like to discuss regarding your experiences in being trans. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about in relation to this?

## Appendix E

### List of Counselling & Support Services

After discussing your experiences, you may have brought up some unresolved issues. This page has been compiled to provide you with a list of available support services that you may wish to contact if you want to further discuss any issues

#### Telephone & Online Support

Lifeline	13 11 14	<a href="http://lifeline.com.au">lifeline.com.au</a>
Living Proud LGBTI Community Services of WA	1800 184 527	<a href="http://livingproud.org.au">livingproud.org.au</a>
QLife Counselling & Info Line	1800 184 527	<a href="http://qlife.org.au">qlife.org.au</a>
Headspace	9208 9555	<a href="http://headspace.org.au">headspace.org.au</a>
YouthLink	1300 362 569	<a href="http://youthlink.perthwa.net">youthlink.perthwa.net</a>
YouthFocus	6266 4333	<a href="http://youthfocus.com.au">youthfocus.com.au</a>
Quarry Health for Under 25s	9227 1444	<a href="http://quarryhealthcentre.org.au">quarryhealthcentre.org.au</a>
YMCA Lynks Counselling	9328 3221	
Samaritans Youthline	9388 2500	
Crisis Care Unit	9325 1111	

#### Psychological Support Services

Edith Cowan University Psychological Services Centre Level 2, ECU Health Centre 30 Dunebar Road, Wanneroo	9303 7801	<a href="http://ecu.edu.au">ecu.edu.au</a>
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