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Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Identity Development

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The words people use to describe themselves are different in different communities. In this entry, a particular language is used, with the acknowledgment that in different cultural communities different words may be used to describe similar phenomena. The following summary of transgender and gender nonconforming identity development is based on information compiled from predominantly White, North American samples in social science research. Herein, *trans** is used as an umbrella term to include transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, and other gender variant identities and forms of gender expression. This entry begins by discussing identity development in general and then focuses on *trans** identity development in particular. The entry concludes with a brief look at cultural considerations.

General Identity Development

Identity is a cognitive construct, a composite of one's self-perceptions and accompanying feelings with regard to a given social category. While each of us humans is a unique individual with our own internal sense of ourselves, we are inherently social and can only understand ourselves in relation to others. Because we do not exist in isolation and because we are social beings, our identities are shaped by the groups to which we develop a sense of belonging.

Each of us has a deep need to be witnessed, to be seen by others for whom we feel, as we are. Each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others' eyes as we see ourselves. These interactive processes, witnessing and mirroring, are a part of everyone's lives. When they work well, we feel validated and confirmed—our sense of self is reinforced. When the messages that we receive back from others do not match how we feel inside, the strength of our identities can become undermined. As well as needing to be witnessed by people who may be different from ourselves, each of us also needs to be seen and have our identities mirrored and validated by people who have identities like our own.

In the most common processes of development of a sex/gender identity, children first learn to identify their own and others' sex/gender in terms of binary categories of man/woman, boy/girl, male/female; this typically occurs by the third year of life. By the age of 5 years, most children have internalized rules about gender and a belief that biological sex and social gender remain stable and do not change over time. By the age of 7 years, children usually develop an understanding that superficial changes in appearance (e.g., longer vs. shorter hair, wearing pants vs. dresses) do not affect one's sex or gender category. Although these ages may vary slightly, children generally have a stable sense of their own sex/gender and the social meanings of sex and gender by the time they reach middle childhood.

During a typical adolescence, while teens and young adults simultaneously experience puberty and sociocognitive maturation, the key developmental task is to develop a stable adult sense of self. This stage is a time when adolescents first begin to self-consciously think about how they wish to define themselves in terms of social groups. There is a greater separation from parents/guardians and more investment in friends as adolescents begin to figure out who they are by interacting with others and engaging in ongoing social comparisons, by looking to others for witnessing and mirroring.

Young adults, having largely outgrown the emotional and social dependency of adolescence, begin to explore more complex life opportunities, which might include love, marriage, family, a career, and a more complex worldview. As young adults consolidate their identities into a larger, more complex construct, they come to a greater sense of self wholeness.

With increasing maturity come new challenges. Throughout adulthood and into old age, our identities continue to develop and transmute with changes in health, work, love, and family involvements. We leave behind earlier identities and cleave to new ones. As in earlier stages of life, our identities remain responsive to the feedback that we receive from others.

Trans* Identity Development

In everyday usage, and in the classical model of identity development, the terms *sex* and *gender* are commonly thought of as having the same meaning. However, distinctions between what is signified by *sex* and what is signified by *gender* are key to understanding trans* and gender nonconforming people. *Sex* is generally thought of as referring to the biological characteristics of a person and usually designated using the words *male*, *female*, and *intersex*, whereas *gender* is usually used to refer to social expressions of an internal sense of self and designated using the words *man/boy*, *woman/girl*, and *trans**—used as adjectives to describe the former terms. *Sex* and *gender* may refer to people's self-identities and presentations of self or to attributions made about them by other people.

Trans* and gender nonconforming people are individuals whose gender identities or gender expressions do not conform to society's conventional binary sex/gender system. They may combine *sex* and *gender* in unconventional ways in their own identities or in their gender expressions, or they may appear entirely conventional while having unconventional identities or sex/gender histories that belie their normative appearances. Genderqueer and gender nonconforming people are those who eschew binary understandings of gender and sex. They may, or may not, appear nonbinary in their gender expression. Some of the other, more common terms by which trans* and gender nonconforming people might describe themselves are *transsexual*, *transgender*, *cross-dresser*, *drag king*, *drag queen*, *trans man*, *trans woman*, *gender fluid*, *bi-gender*, *gender nonconforming*, *boi*, *agender*, *neutrois*, and *two spirit*. Some terms that are still sometimes used but are generally falling from favor are *tranny*, *transvestite*, *she male*, and *he-she*.

Some aspects of trans* and gender nonconforming identity development fit well within a classical identity development framework. Trans* and gender nonconforming people usually report that their earliest memories of recognizing gender occurred around the typical childhood ages. However, their ages differ in when they recognized that they do not fit in the gender and sex to which they were assigned. Adolescence and young adulthood for trans* and gender nonconforming people typically include age-appropriate periods of self-exploration, social exploration, and experimentation. However, puberty and the associated changes in social expectations are often times of extreme crisis for trans* and gender nonconforming youth due to unwanted physical maturation into adult bodies misaligned with their gender identities. This is a time of alarmingly high risk for suicide among trans* and gender nonconforming youth who lack sufficient familial supports. If they have not already articulated a trans* or gender nonconforming identity, many transgender people first do so during adolescence. During adulthood, trans* and gender nonconforming people inevitably confront the same issues of health, work, love, and family as do other adults. However, there exist several unique developmental features of trans* and gender nonconforming identity development. For most people, gender is not an identity that changes over time, whereas for trans* and gender nonconforming people, gender identity may vary greatly over the life course.

Theoretical models of trans* identity development summarize some of the unique

developmental features of coming to a trans* identity. One notable feature of these models is that they may be used to understand experiences at any point in the life course. While a trans* identity may begin at childhood, it may also begin at any other stage of life, and it may proceed at a variety of paces with a range of end points.

In the stage model proposed by Aaron Devor (see [Table 1](#)), early identity development stages are marked by anxiety and/or confusion about the suitability of one's originally assigned gender/sex and attempts to find a socially acceptable gender expression. These stages are often characterized by resistance to roles and activities socially expected of people with their originally assigned sex, preferences for other-gender activities, and explorations of other-gender roles and identities that support greater variations in gender presentation. For children who recognize early that their assigned birth sex is not in alignment with their felt gender, a sense that something is "wrong" may emerge at a very young age. Thus, trans* and gender nonconforming children may struggle with early ego identity development and cognitive emotional skill building. At any developmental life stage, however, without adequate social support, trans* and gender nonconforming people may develop high levels of internalizations of guilt and shame, resulting in interruptions to the development of healthy self-esteem.

Table 1 Stages of Transsexual Identity Formation

<i>Number</i>	<i>Stage</i>	<i>Some Characteristics</i>	<i>Some Actions</i>
1	Abiding anxiety	Unfocussed gender and sex discomfort	Preference for other gender activities and companionship
2	Identity confusion about originally assigned gender and sex	First doubts about suitability of originally assigned gender and sex	Reactive gender and sex conforming activities
3	Identity comparisons about originally assigned gender and sex	Seeking and weighing alternative gender identities	Experimenting with alternative gender consistent identities
4	Discovery of transsexualism or transgenderism	Learning that transsexualism exists	Accidental contact with information about transsexualism
5	Identity confusion about transsexualism or transgenderism	First doubts about the authenticity of one's own transsexualism	Seeking more information about transsexualism
6	Identity comparisons about transsexualism or transgenderism	Testing transsexual identity using a transsexual reference group	Start to disidentify with women and females; start to identify as transsexed
7	Identity tolerance of transsexual or transgender identity	Identify as probably transsexual	Increasingly disidentify as originally assigned gender and sex
8	Delay before acceptance of transsexual or transgender identity	Waiting for changed circumstances; looking for confirmation of transsexual identity	Seeking more information about transsexualism; reality testing in intimate relationships and against further information about transsexualism
9	Acceptance of transsexual or transgender identity	Transsexual identity established	Tell others about one's transsexual identity
10	Delay before transition	Transsexual identity deepens; final disidentity as original gender and sex; anticipatory socialization	Learning how to do transition; saving money; organizing support systems
11	Transition	Changing genders and sexes	Gender and sex reassignments
12	Acceptance of posttransition gender and sex identities	Posttransition identity established	Successful posttransition living
13	Integration	Transsexuality mostly invisible	Stigma management; identity integration
14	Pride	Openly transsexed	Transsexual advocacy

The next stages are often marked by the discovery of the existence of trans* and gender

nonconforming identities that capture much of what an individual has been feeling about their own gender/sex. Newly discovered identity options may initiate a new period of gender identity confusion, during which one may make comparisons between one's earlier gender/sex identity and prospects for a new identity. During these periods, people generally actively search out more information about their newfound identity possibilities. This may be done through online research, through paper-based resources, or in virtual or face-to-face relationships with other trans* or gender nonconforming people. The main goals of identity and social comparisons are to recognize similarities and differences between oneself and the identities being considered and to begin to establish a goodness of fit, in aid of determining if a trans* or other gender nonconforming identity should be adopted.

It is important to note that concurrently with the comparative exploration of possible trans* and gender nonconforming identities, there will usually begin a *disidentification* process from the originally assigned sex and gender. During this time, people who are considering adopting new gender and/or sex identities may also compare themselves with other gender identities more consistent with their originally assigned sex and gender, such as butch lesbian or drag queen. After these periods of identity exploration and experimentation, there may be a greater confidence in accepting a more consolidated identity as a trans* or gender nonconforming person.

Eventually, following periods of gender anxiety, gender confusion, gender explorations, and comparisons between one's own gender identity and expression and that of others, there emerges the first internal cognitive and emotional tolerance of a trans* sense of self, where one comes to believe that one is "probably" trans*. During this stage, there is usually a period of delay when people test how well a trans* or other gender nonconforming identity fits with their own self-concept and others' perceptions of them. This is also often when trans* or gender nonconforming people become increasingly confident to disclose to others that they are developing a trans* identity. A possible trans* identity may also be tested by experimental enactment of it in the safety and privacy of intimate relationships. As the trans* identity becomes stronger, one will further disidentify with one's originally assigned gender and sex.

Older people, who have grown up during times of greater ignorance and higher stigmatization of trans* and gender nonconforming people and who, simply due to the passage of time, will have greater social entanglements and investments in their originally assigned gender/sex, will often enter into a period of delay before fully accepting and publicly enacting a change in gender identity and gender expression. Because they will often feel that they have a great deal to lose, they may need to feel that they have as thoroughly as possible explored and conscientiously considered all less radical alternatives before risking upending their already well-established lives to adopt and express a new identity. Furthermore, without adequate social supports, without sufficient opportunities for identity exploration, and without safe spaces that are free from harassment and discrimination—which is more commonly the experience of older adults—trans* and gender nonconforming people of any age may feel isolated, shameful, and unsure of themselves. Unable to move ahead and largely disidentified from their originally assigned sex and gender, they may enter an uncomfortable period of identity limbo during which they feel unmoored and despondent. They may become increasingly hopeless, anxious, and depressed, and may turn to drugs, alcohol, or other risky behaviors as coping mechanisms.

Younger people and others of any age who have experienced a social environment more knowledgeable about and accepting of gender variance may be able to understand and identify their gender feelings very quickly. They may experience less daunting levels of stigma

and may find supportive networks to be quite accessible. As a result, they may view social and emotional barriers as more easily surmountable and are more likely to feel that they have adequate supports in place. Under such circumstances, the processes of adoption and expression of a trans* or gender nonconforming identity may become quite telescoped and may go quite smoothly.

For those whose gender and sex identity expression might involve physiological changes, the next developmental stage usually involves a second delay while considering if a medical transition should be the next step. If so, this is followed by an unavoidable period of delay while the logistics of transition are arranged and accomplished. Once a desired level of transition is completed, the remaining tasks involve integration into a larger social network in the transitioned gender and/or sex and the development of a greater sense of pride in the posttransition and publicly affirmed gender and sex.

After achieving ego alignment, trans* and gender nonconforming people experience a coherent sense of self and are ready to live fully and relate authentically to others. In doing so, there is greater confidence, and there may also be increased social support with which to manage the stigma and discrimination that continue to beleaguer trans* and gender nonconforming people. To counter this, some trans* and gender nonconforming people become involved in social and political advocacy.

Trans* and gender nonconforming identity development is best understood more as a process than as a route to an identity developmental destination. Over their entire life course, trans* and gender nonconforming people, like everyone else, engage in lifelong learning about how to manage changing gender roles and expectations, often while also managing burdensome stigma and discrimination. Ultimately, as it is for all people, the goal is to feel successful in a journey of self-authentication.

Cultural Considerations

As mentioned earlier, this identity development is based on research studies with mostly White American samples. Despite this, other identities may influence one's trans* identity development. For instance, trans* people of color may encounter discrimination based on their gender identity, their race, or both. In fact, trans* people of color are often targeted for hate violence—particularly for physical assault and murder. In recent years, trans* women of color have been especially susceptible, with an increased number of reported hate crimes murders each year. Furthermore, social class, religion, and sexual orientation identities may influence how trans* people feel about their gender identity, which may affect other psychological factors as well. As a result, intersectional approaches are necessary in understanding trans* people with multiple marginalized identities.

See also [Gender Nonconforming People](#); [Gender Nonconformity and Transgender Issues: Overview](#); [Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Adolescents](#); [Transgender People](#)

- women
- sex work
- sex trafficking
- transsexualism
- sexism
- sexual harassment

- women against violence against women

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Further Readings

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