



Gender Fluidity: Consequences for Youth's mental health and important protective factors

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This review aims to delineate and analyze the acceptance of gender fluidity which refers to an individual's gender identity being flexible and not confined to traditional binary gender categories of male and female. Important differences in various terms that may or may not fall under the term gender fluidity such as 'Genderqueer' and 'Non-binary' etc. will be discussed.

Methods: After presenting the definition, the important differences and the historical background of the concept, data from various studies will follow. The survey data are mainly from the USA, Canada and Greece and cover the period 2009 to 2023. Very often the exact words of people with gender non-conforming are quoted.

Discussion: Evidence is recorded on the mental health consequences for gender fluid young people due to non-acceptance by family, school and friends. Negative mental health consequences for young people lead to a model of minority anxiety about the health of sexual minorities. Instead, attempts of acceptance by the family and school lead to a supportive framework. For example, the Genders & Sexualities Alliances (GSA program operating in Canada will be mentioned and its results will be presented. Finally, there is a reference to the international legislation and that of Greece in particular, and the governmental treatment of gender fluid people.

Conclusion: The negative consequences on mental health as a consequence of the non-acceptance of gender fluidity make evident the need for direct intervention and recognition of young people who want to express themselves in this way.

Keywords: Gender Fluidity, youth, mental health, family, school

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Introduction

Gender fluidity is a concept that refers to an individual's gender identity being flexible and not confined to traditional binary gender categories of male and female^[1,2]. In many literature surveys it seems that there is a large amount of young people who are wondering about their gender and sexuality and that the term «gender fluidity» has captured the attention of young people. The non-acceptance of this situation by the school, their families and professionals leads to negative consequences for the mental health and well-being of young people. For this reason, ways and initiatives are presented where the young people's environment can help them and reduce the stress and negative emotions they may feel due to non-acceptance.

Historical Retrospective

Gender fluidity is mentioned for the first time by Robert Stoller. In his book *Sex and Gender*, he states that gender was not fixed and can vary over time and stresses the difference between biological sex and gender expression^[3]. Those who identify as gender fluid often express themselves in a way that is not stereotypically associated with their birth sex, and may present as masculine, feminine, or androgynous at different times or a combination of these. This identity is different from genderqueer or non-binary, which are umbrella terms that encompass a wide range of gender identities that fall outside of the binary^[4]. More detailed, in the 1990s, the term "genderqueer" was used by some activists and scholars to describe people who rejected traditional gender categories^[4]. This term has since been adopted by many people who are not binary and do not conform to gender as a way of affirming their identity in recent decades in Western countries. In contrast, it seems that in many indigenous cultures around the world, gender has traditionally been considered more fluid and less binary than in Western societies^[7]. For example, in Native Americans, people who embody both an androgynous and a feminine characteristic are called "two-spirit people"^[8].

Significant differences in similar terms

To avoid confusion regarding terminology, important differences in terms are listed. "Androgynous" is a gender expression that combines masculine and feminine characteristics. "Mixed Gender" or "Pangender" incorporate both male and female aspects and refers to a gender

identity where a person experiences or identifies with multiple genders. A "Gender Fluid" person varies between different gender identities and may change over time. Also, "Bisexual" defines as a romantic or sexual attraction to both males and females and "Pansexual" defines as a romantic or sexual attraction to all genders or regardless of gender "Gender", "Gender neutral", "non-Gendered", "Genderless", "Neuter" or "Neutrois", do not have sex^[5]. Therefore, taking all the above into account, we could say that because gender is culturally and historically specific, internally contradictory and subject to change^[6], the restriction of gender to only two options creates discrimination against people who do not identify with either of them and this raises serious moral concerns. These ethical concerns even apply to the research part. For example, a 2020 survey in the UK wanted to examine whether questions about sexual orientation and gender fluidity (SOGI) in surveys represent sexual minorities. It was found that the questions were vague and failed to account for the fluidity and complexity of identity, resulting in the exclusion and under-representation of people with gender fluidity^[5]. An African-American transgender from the survey says "When you ask a person their identity, I think instead of giving them boxes and labels to choose from, the nicer thing would be to draw a line and let the person put in what they want for themselves"^[5].

In the Western world today, it has become an important part of the debates during the feminist movements of the 60s and 70s^[9] and it seems that today gender fluidity has great acceptance among young people^[10]. In a 2015 US study of more than 22,000 gender diverse adults, 2/3 described themselves as transgender, while 1/3 described themselves as non-binary, fluid, or genderqueer^[11]. These proportions were reversed in a study of adolescents, with 2/3 describing themselves as non-binary and 1/3 describing themselves as transgender^[12].

Youth and Gender Fluidity

Based on the theory of mind development^[13], children in middle childhood (6-12 years) begin to understand that individuals have unique beliefs, intentions, feelings, situations and perspectives. These relate to their cognitive developments, which are in turn influenced by the social context in which they grow up. Often, children's social environment has a binary view of gender and this leads to gender categorization also through clothing, toys, toilets, hairstyles, etc. Thus, some adolescents

adolescents internalize this binary view and adopt it throughout their lives. Others may also experiment as they are at an age of exploring and structuring their personality but still end up with a fixed expression of their gender. But there are some other adolescents for whom exploration and experimentation continue indefinitely and become part of their life experience with gender^[14].

It seems that one of the reasons why the percentage of young people who do not want to express themselves in a binary way has increased^[15] is because of social media, which has allowed young people from all over the world to get in touch with gender fluidity and ask themselves if it is reflected in their personality. Thus, there is a need for understanding and acceptance of this new reality by all adults who interact with young people to reduce the negative effects on their mental health.

Consequences on the mental health of TGD (Transgender and gender diverse) youth research conducted in 2020 in Chicago showed^[16] high rates of negative health outcomes in TGD youth compared to cisgender peers. TGD youth experienced high rates of negative psychosocial experiences, including lack of social support, victimization, and violence. TGD youth reported receiving the least support from families compared to friends and significant others. Another survey conducted by the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey in 2015 on LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) community at school showed that^[17] over 60% of the LGBTQ youth community have long experienced feelings of powerlessness compared to 25% of heterosexuals. Also, 67% have heard homophobic comments from their peers, 58% have felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation and 43% have felt unsafe because of their gender identity and expression. Only 12% of the LGBTQ community reported teacher intervention.

The Gay Lesbian Straight Educational Network National Survey (GLSN) is an international organization focused on creating safe schools. One of the largest surveys has been conducted by GLSN in the U.S. in 2011^[18]. The researchers try to examine how common it is for non-binary gender offensive language to be used in school, the degree of victimization of those people, the impact on their academic performance and mental well-being, and the interventions that can mitigate the negative effects. The results in terms of negative comments show that 84.9% of students heard "gay" used in a negative way (e.g., "that's so gay") frequently or often at school, and 91.4% reported that they felt distressed because of this language.

Concerning safety and victimization at school it seems that 63.5% felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and 43.9% because of their gender expression. This led to poor well-being because as it seems students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression had higher levels of depression than those who reported lower levels of those types of victimization^[18]. As for the teacher's intervention about half (53.1 %) of students who had many (six or more) supportive staff at their school felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, compared to nearly three-fourths (76.9%) of students with no supportive staff. For example, some student statements will be mentioned. "I just felt scared, alone, and if I told them, what would they think?" (Student 14/15 years old), "I thought it was always better to ignore them because I thought that maybe if I didn't pay attention to them, they would stop" (Student, 12/13 years old).

On the other hand, there is the parental context. Research shows that the mental health of young people who do not accept their gender binary is positively affected when their parents accept and affirm their gender identity and help them access supportive resources^[19]. Conversely, unsupportive parents are a significant aggravating factor.

Another factor considered is the role of the medical community concerning gender fluidity. There seems to be a lack of knowledge among doctors and psychologists about bisexual and non-binary identities. This may hinder their ability to provide appropriate care^[20]. A survey of members of the Adolescent Health Society and the Paediatric Endocrine Society in the USA^[21] confirms that 62% of specialists felt comfortable providing medical care to trans young. But of those only 47% felt completely confident in their ability to do so. So apart from the lack of knowledge and the absence of proper training of specialists, it seems that there are many disagreements within the medical community, such as the safety of hormonal treatments^[22]. More specifically, there seems to be a great division in the medical community about whether it is ethical and medically beneficial for someone to undergo a sex change and whether there is finally an appropriate age to take responsibility for oneself. As regards Gender Identity Conversion Efforts (GICE) in the European Union (EU), four Member States - Malta, Germany, France and Greece - have banned these practices, while several regions of Spain have imposed administrative bans^[23]. However, the conclusion is that no literature can suggest when it is the right time to undertake gender reassignment efforts. To be able to have more evidence about

the appropriate time, we need more research.

So, exposure to stressors factors such as stigmatization, rejection, violence, and discrimination leads to an accumulation of psychological stress and, by extension, to a deterioration of the mental and physical well-being of gender minorities. This is the Minority stress model of sexual minority health (Meyer, 2003) ^[24], which is important to understand if we want to help young people who struggle with acceptance of their identity.

What could be done?

In Canada, there is a program that takes place in schools. It involves organizations led by non-binary or gender fluid students along with other supportive youth to build community and advocate for issues that affect them in and out of schools. This is the GSA (Genders & Sexualities Alliances) program ^[25]. So, it seems that GSA provides a safe space for LGBTQ youth in middle and high schools. This program addresses broader social justice issues related to gender and education. Research has therefore shown that the presence of a GSA has a positive and lasting impact on the health, well-being and academic performance of students. It also protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Research conducted in 2015 in Canada showed that many young adults reported that eventually through the program they had supportive friends who helped them overcome their difficulties when before they thought they were marginalized ^[26].

A major systematic review conducted in 2022 ^[15] found some appropriate interventions that can be made to help young people who are struggling with gender issues or who feel helpless. First and foremost, the introduction of a curriculum that includes perspectives on accepting children of different sexual orientations is needed and will lead to a reduction in victimization. A parental system that will provide social support for young people. Also, peer support enhances the sense of security and a positive environment. Very important is for principals and teachers who have the power to take action and raise awareness of students and parents for example through community events (e.g. community art gallery). Finally, of vital importance is the need to recognize a “hidden curriculum” that operates outside the formal academic courses. There is a strong emphasis on completing the curriculum while children have not yet learned basic rules of behaviour and respect for their peers regardless of gender. This could be done through various games and role plays depending on

the grade level and clearly by introducing and acknowledging the role of psychologists and their huge contribution to the school environment.

In the eastern world marriage is allowed and it seems that the rights of homosexuals are more recognized than in the member states of the European Union. More specifically, in Western/Northern Europe it seems that marriage is allowed compared to Southern/Western Europe where there are still many restrictions on the expression and acceptance of these people ^[30].

What is happening in Greece regarding the rights of LGBTQ+ people?

As far as Greece is concerned, on the one hand, there has been an improvement in both social views and institutional attitudes. The cohabitation pacts are legally recognized. In 2015, civil partnerships are also legalized for same-sex couples. In 2017, a new law was enacted concerning the change of legal gender. In 2014 comprehensive laws were enacted to punish hate speech and crimes against LGBTQ+ people. Mental health services such as individual and group Psychotherapy and counseling are offered. Examples of associations where these services are offered are the helpline - 11528, the Rainbow Therapists groups, the Colorful School and the Bisexual Support Association ^[27].

On the other hand, however, there are shortcomings in the areas of mental health ^[27] and in the knowledge of specialists ^[28]. There are no guidelines and codes of conduct for psychologists and therapists. There are even specialists who not only do not accept gender fluidity but encourage gender reorientation as they interpret it as a pathology. There is a lack of access to certain categories of LGBTQ+ people in the labor market due to negative stereotypes and social prejudices. And most importantly, while the constitution has had anti-discrimination laws in place since 2005, there is insufficient access to the social security system and health services ^[29].

Conclusions

The high percentage of young people who are now experimenting with their gender is evident. If families, schools and society in general do not accept the way young people want to express themselves, the negative consequences for health, education and well-being are evident. The role of experts in particular is to explain to young people who are wondering about their gender, exactly what gender fluidity is and why they do not need to feel unaccepted.

But no matter how hard they try, if society does not fully recognize their rights and allow them to express themselves by reducing the level of oppression, nothing will change. I would like to conclude this paper by quoting the words of Alexandra Vassiliou, scientific manager of the Orlando LGBTQ+ team in Greece. "I have met many therapists, young and new to the profession, but also experienced ones, with years of practice in the profession, who have all the good intentions and will to support people in their right to self-determination and a life with dignity. That is, professionals who are not homophobic/transphobic 'in opinion'. Unconsciously, however, operating within the homophobic and transphobic mental health field, which is dominant in Greece, they unknowingly reproduce views and positions that are not only unscientific but also deeply abusive ^[21]."

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