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## Meanings and Experiences of Being Transgender: A Qualitative Study among Transgender Youth

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## Meanings and Experiences of Being Transgender: A Qualitative Study among Transgender Youth

### Abstract

Our aim in this qualitative study was to explore the meaning and experiences of transgender youth in their everyday interactions. Participants included 24 transgender youth from Yazd and Isfahan Cities (Iran). We selected participants through purposeful sampling method. Research data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed using theoretical coding techniques. The results showed that transgender people like to present their favorite identity in behaviors, wearing and social appearances, their social and domestic acceptance is deferred as the society defines transgender as a taboo and ostracizes persons. They felt themselves in a converse body and under pressure for coexistence by peers and neighbors. They attempt to save their desired identity through daydreaming and performing identity role in solitude.

### Keywords

Transgender, Trans, Meaning, Experiences, Qualitative

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### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all participants for their kind cooperation

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### Introduction

Gender and sexual orientation are important constituents of social identity. Transgender people are a case in point as they do not identify with the gender identity ascribed to them at their birth, hence wish exhibit a different societal image and they prefer or feel compelled to present themselves in ways that contradict social expectations of their designated gender roles (Balzer, LaGata, & Berredo, 2016, p. 4).

The prevalence of transgender in adult men and women is respectively 1 in 30,000 and 1 in 100,000 people (Sadock, 2011). Several reports on the epidemiology of gender identity in different countries, found an increase in its prevalence during the last decades (Garrels et al., 2000; Godlewski, 1988; Gooren, 1989; Landen, Walinder, & Lundstrom, 1996a; Olsson & Moller, 2003; Walinder, 1971). Although literature contains abundant studies concerning transgender adults (Aizura, 2010; Boellstorf, 2004; Bolin, 1988; Herdt, 1996; Kulick, 1998; Najmabadi, 2014; Roen, 2001), there are few reports regarding the prevalence of gender identity in Middle Eastern and Asian countries (Coleman, Colgan, & Gooren, 1992; Heiman & Cao Van, 1975; Kim Tae-Suk et al., 2006; Okabe et al., 2008; Tsoi, 1988).

Although transgender persons are legally recognized in Iran, the cultural and traditional attitudes toward gender categories are in work in every day social interactions. The trend is different in Iran where numerous social factors are at work (Ahmadzadeh-asl et al., 2010). A study conducted between 1989 and 1995 in Iran reported 57 transgender persons with the MTF:FTM ratio of 1.85:1 (Mehrabi, 1996). It has been almost three decades that sex reassignment surgery was legalized in Iran, and the number of such operations have been on the rise (Mohammadi et al., 2016). Many transgender people try to conceal their identity to maintain their social, domestic and economic status. Gender transmission or gender confirmation is an extensive interactive interpersonal process in whereby an individual is socially recognized, and the protection of an individual's sexual identity and expression is

created (Carroll, 2016). As transgenders (Trans) is still considered a social taboo, there are no accurate statistics available.

Transgender people encounter many challenges (Byne et al., 2016). For a long time, transgender people in many parts of the world have been victims of horrifying hate violence and crimes, and such horrible forms of gender-biased violence often go unreported (Balzer, LaGata & Berredo, 2016; p. 5). Over the past several years, there has been a surge of public interest in gender issues as the result transgender people have grown increasingly more visible. The emerging body of work in transgender studies demonstrates that different ways of “imagining” gender identities entail a set of exclusions and foreclosures as they produce social and political visibility (Valentine, 2007). Although transgender identity has many important subjective and social meaningful dimensions, few qualitative studies have been conducted to consider this experiences in Iran (Safavifar et al., 2016, p. 385; Mohammadi, 2016).

Our purpose in this qualitative research is to explore the meanings and experiences that transgender people have in the formation and expression of their identities in everyday social life. Employing an interpretive approach, it aims to examine the constructions of their identity and experiences as transgender.

### **Review of Literature**

Gender identity reflects the features, functions and feelings of masculinity or femininity as acquired in the process of socialization. Although human identity has many dimensions, the most central and determinant of these factors is the social definition of masculinity and femininity. In recent years the studies about transgenders increased in different approaches. Safavifar et al. (2016) have conducted a qualitative study on the religious experiences of Iranian transgenders. Its findings were categorized into four conceptual categories: a sense of guilt; achieving a sense of submission to God’s will to please Him; practical commitment to religion; and rejection by the religious communities. Mohammadi et al. (2016) conducted a study to scrutinize the experience of people after sex reassignment surgery in Iran. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, it surveyed the experiences of seven male-to-female transgender participants. According to the results, the main theme, “being satisfied in an insecure world”, emerged from three sub-themes, i.e. “the promotion of life”, “living in the restricted world”, and “seeking for acceptance”. In "Transgender, Transsexual, and Gender Variant Individuals," Paz Galupo, Stuart, and Siegel (2015) examined the heterogeneity of a person's gender and his/her gender identity as identified at birth through a descriptive method. The results of this study indicate that the identity of transsexual people derives from medical, juridical, and social determinants.

Claudia Castañeda (2015) explores transgender medicine for its attention to children through a close Foucauldian reading of clinical guidelines. She believed, “the child as a proto-adult is constituted as a mutable body available for adult re-configuration as it traverses a developmental trajectory from immaturity to maturity.” This results in a discourse according to which the sufferings of transgender young people are natural (i.e., developmental), and medical intervention is therefore necessary (Sadjadi, 2013).

Other authors have explored the ways through which parents appreciate and respond to their children’s gender identities (Meadow, 2011). They show that parents must work to understand and articulate their children’s gender variance. Towle and Morgan (2002) conveyed the risks of applying a concept of gender universally and historically while asymmetrically invoking notions of culture and immanence to advance a project of gender rooted in Western ideology. While working with transgender children, we must confront the

challenge of engaging with the children's own experiences of gender without inscribing them in a framework of medical knowledge, parental expectations, or transgender activism.

Although the studies on transgender raised recent years, the qualitative ones are few. We were interested in the topic after we met a transgender student in the university. We found that transgenders like to live far of other student's eyes by trying to hide their Trans identity. Marjan wrote her thesis in master of Social Work about transgenders, and then we carried a series of observations and interviews that resulted our interest to the experiences of them. We met several transgender persons and found that they have faced challenges in their family and community. At first, we thought that transgender as people by different interests have difficulties in community, but we found that their challenges started almost in their family. Social pressures were not just on them, but their family experienced social pressures by kinship and neighbors. In this study, we tried to explore the Transgenders experiences and challenges in family and community that are rarely considered in past researches. Accordingly, we used the qualitative approach in order to having their interpretation and meanings.

### **Methods**

This is a qualitative study that utilized generic qualitative research method. Given the limited number of transgender people and the difficulty in identifying them, qualitative method was appropriate for this purpose. This method was selected due to the lack of knowledge about the perceptions of transgender people and provides an opportunity for the participants to freely express their unique experiences, thoughts and feelings (Krippendorff, 2004).

### **Procedure**

The process of collecting data began by searching for centers where transgender people referred for surgery or counseling. One medical and counseling center in Isfahan allowed us to approach people referring to it. After explaining the objectives to participants, 24 people consented to interviews. Snowball sampling as a type of purposeful sampling whereby more subjects were encouraged to participate by those who had already enrolled was employed to maximize the number of participants. The participants' medical records were reviewed to ensure that they were all transgender. The interviews were mostly conducted in a friendly atmosphere at the home of transgender people or in a calm corner of a park. The interviews were recorded after obtaining the participants' informed consent.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2003) with 24 transgender participants in Yazd and Isfahan. They were from two male-to-female and female-to-male transgender groups. Every participant interviewed for two times and the interviews continued to data saturation, where we found the repetitive answers. All interviews conducted in form of a dialogue by the second author and lasted between 60 and 110 minutes. The interviewer explained the purpose of the study, discussed the level of involvement for the participants and encouraged them for interviews. The interviews usually commenced with general questions including, Can you talk about your experiences as a transgender? How do you feel about yourself? What problems and challenges did you encounter in everyday life? Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by Marjan. The audio tracks were

transcribed as soon as possible and analyzed alongside with the field notes. We had taken down notes and observation, after having finished to present our general questions.

## **Participants**

The participants included transgender youth residing in Isfahan and Yazd and were selected through purposeful sampling method. The inclusion criteria included a minimum age of 18 years as well as being transgender. Transgender defined as who is not satisfied from their gender identity and like to be in another body, included male to female or female to male. Some of the participants are clients for surgery. Most of the participants were selected from the city of Isfahan. The main reason for this was holding pre-operative psychotherapy courses to confirm the transgenderness of people that was very organized which made it easier for them to assess. In Yazd, however, subjects must refer to psychological and medical centers in cities like Mashhad, Isfahan, and Tehran because a similar center does not exist in the city.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis started after the first interview and simultaneously continued with the data collection process. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a theoretical coding method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) employed in three stages of open coding (minimization, comparison and categorization processes of data), axial coding (concepts and categories that were represented in the open coding step, and were connected to each other in a new combination) and selective coding. First, authors repeatedly read the interviews to become familiar with the text. Significant meaning units were identified, condensed and coded. The codes were then grouped into subcategories and abstracted to categories. To improve the validity of the categories and to illustrate the transgender experiences, original direct quotations are presented.

## **Trustworthiness**

The researchers attempted to increase the trustworthiness of the study by selecting eligible participants; through close, accurate, long-term, and continuous interactions; by making use of the complementary ideas and suggestions of colleagues, reviewing the transcribed interviews, and re-visiting the participants (Krefting, 1991) for additional information. Moreover, Guba and Lincoln (2005) criteria of credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability were used to ensure the reliability of data. Three methods were used to achieve the credibility criterion. At first, accreditation was done by the members, which in this confirmation, was done using the criteria of control by the members, which means validating the data by maintaining the relationship with the research environment. In the second method, they tried to exchange views with their counterparts who did not deal with relevant research on the questions raised in the research and its findings. And thirdly, an external inspection was conducted by colleagues through monitoring all stages of the research. Transformability refers to the degree of generalizability or the transfer of qualitative research results to other fields and environments. In order to meet the transferability of data, we tried to select the subjects from two groups of sex change of male-to-female and female-to-male. In order to increase the reliability of the research, the researcher focused on the changing conditions of the research project, the changes in the investigated phenomena, and, generally speaking, the changing field of research, and

accurately described these changes. They discussed the obtained data in different parts of the analysis as well as at the end of the analysis for data verification.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed verbal consent was sought from the administrative body of Isfahan counseling and treatment center. Besides, all information, scripts and recordings were kept completely confidential by the researchers. The identities of participants were not disclosed and aliases were replaced to comply with the privacy principle. An informed written consent for conducting the interviews and recording them was sought from people who agreed to participate, and they were free to suggest their convenient place for their interviews. All participants were ensured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their information by using pseudonyms in published reports. The participants were also briefed about the approximate time of their interview(s).

### **Results**

By end of interviews, we had transcripts about participant's everyday life. The transcripts analyzed by theoretical coding in three types included open, axial and selective coding. Finally, the constructed concepts categorized in six main categories that represent the experience and actions of transgender participants. Six categories emerged from analyzing the data included attempts to display desired identity, performing identity in solitude, prominence of identity, converse body, daydreaming and pressure for coexistence.

#### **Attempts to Display Desired Identity**

Transgender people yearn to exhibit the identity they actually desire in public sphere. Their genuine gender identity tends to be suppressed due to its disparity with their bodies, but there are always fissures where the actual identity is manifested through their behaviors and desires. Since their childhood, they seek to play in the role of their opposite physical body. As they are aware of this disparity, they are constantly suffering and their behaviors are not consistent with their gender roles. This challenge and the desire for smooth socialization makes the transgender person modify their corporeality to conform it to their in identity.

Maryam, a 21 year old, male-to-female transgender, who experienced her six month of her new identity, thus expressed the disparity she previously felt:

Since my kindergarten years, I learned that I was different from others. When I was in the neighborhood with my boyfriends and they played boy games like football, I would step down and go to girls and play with them. I was always the mommy in games. I always had a doll, but my parents did not buy it. I was saving my money to buy one.

The purpose of identity expression through behaviors, wearing and appearance by transgender people is changing other people's perceptions and moving the minds of others away from the body to an identity which is not visible.

#### **Performing Identity in Solitude**

The gender-related cultural and social expectations always engulf subjects and might impede the expression of the manifestations of inner desires. Individuals need a safe space to

freely express themselves without a fear of prejudices, a space that permits the performance of their identity without being blamed and humiliated. Transgender subjects recognized this place during their childhoods and before their full awareness of their bodies. Many of them sought refuge to bathrooms or similar places where they can easily relax and come into terms with their identity because of their permanent fears of being blamed by their families and of not being allowed to live in their inner solitary worlds. When they find a chance, they perform their identity either through coquetry or by wearing conspicuous make-up where they feel safe. Identity performance varies with people depending on their families and reception in their environment. They usually perform their identity in the safety of their privacy.

Mahshid, who could only perform her identity in her solitude due to her suppressive domestic life, noted:

As a child, I wore feminine clothes; I used to wear skirts. I followed what my mother did when I was alone. I was more comfortable when I was lonely. I also delighted in my solitary feminine activities like dancing, putting on makeup, music and coquetry.

Sometimes they find comfort in exceptions, a family member who is aware of their individual differences, and makes their life easier.

We found that transgender people were not free to perform their identities, and they are reprimanded as soon as their transgressions are observed. Therefore, they try to express their genuine gender identity secretly, isolation and far from others.

### **Prominence of Identity**

Transgender people find a disparity between their genuine identity and the one with which others associate them, so they start to re-identify and perform appropriate behaviors. This discrepancy causes an internal tension for them. In their transition from female to male gender identities, transgender participants exhibited great concern and sensitivity about the public endorsement of their new identities. They have insisted on their male identity and acted accordingly even in their conversations with girls. In male to female transitions, participants were very comfortable in their physical interpersonal contacts, like shaking hands, to fulfil the expectations of being accepted as a girl.

Talking about her behavioral inclinations, Maryam noticed these expectations:

As a child, I like to play with dolls. When I grew up, I was prone to being a bride rather than choosing a wife. It was horrifying even to think about it. I always wanted to be a bride. I watched princess cartoons, was interested bridal outfits, artworks and handicrafts like making flowers and crown about which I learned by attending classes and through watching TV shows. I even know how to make flowers and started to cook since I was in the fourth grade of my primary education.

Transgenderstry to express their identity in all their behaviors and roles, and behavioral expectations are tailored to their hidden identity. Normative societal expectations compels transgender subjects to publicly foreground their genuine identity.



## **Converse Body**

It is frequently assumed that gender identity naturally follows from one's sex. Yet, identity does not always have the ability to follow the body, it rather makes the body follow it. Breaking from societal homogeneity, these people have a sense of being different from others with occasionally disturbing consequences. The difference in transgender people is the opposite. They have experienced a situation in terms of these differences of circumstances,

Sometimes, these differences are not only perceived by transgender people, but also by others including neighbors and friends which frequently leads to their being labeled. As Ehsan remarked,

Since childhood, I showed masculine behaviors, I was even introduced as bad guys from the neighbors, because I was a transgressor. My mates were all boys, and I was even blamed for my cover, but I thought it would change over time and I did not care much about this. But it became more serious in my high school years and I fully realized my difference from others.

## **Daydreaming**

The lack of awareness in the family and stigma of transgenerness in the society have caused them to control the interested behaviors, in the dark night without any prejudice and disturbance from others, they do dream about their favorite identity. Most of these people do not talk about these issues because of inappropriate perceptions or encounters with them, and they partake in night dream for their favorite identity

Sadegh confessed he was attracted to his college high school teachers:

I had a lot of sexual tendency to young teachers at school. I dreamed about them at night. In these dreams, I fancied wedding and I was hoping that these conditions would end and I can start as a boy.

Due to the different body tendencies in transgender people, they have been attracted to the behaviors and encounters of their classmates during the day and their sympathy with their homogeneous. The lack of conditions for expressing it during the day has made daydreaming possible for the night's relaxation and the time to be free to satisfy the gender roles that they wished during the day to dream at night with the same role.

## **The Pressures of Coexistence**

Most people find a chance to associate with their peers in school and university, but transgender people cannot easily connect to others as they cannot find enough common grounds between themselves and their peers. This might go so far as having problems with school and university administrations. Such problems were more evident among male-to-female transgender persons one subject was concerned with peer harassment at school, despite his attempts to conform to the accepted norms. His differences inevitably led to being ridiculed or even physically abused at school. These challenges compels such 'misfits' to pretend behaviors that do not actually match their inner world. But as soon as they lose it, harassment might ensue.

By living among people and in the process of coexistence of a transgender person with others, they have a tendency toward some of their classmates or colleagues. Mahsa that was a male to female transgender and live among her classmate boys said:

When I was in my high school years, I felt tendency about my classmates, they were attractive to me, and I was attracted to their behaviors and attitudes. I desired to be with them. I became friends with one or two. Of course, they attached to me because of my girly behavior.

Likewise, Amir observes, "In high school and pre-college, my colleagues were all girls. Their talking, behavior and tune were very beautiful. I liked to look at them and approach them. I have been friends with one of them lately."

The compulsory coexistence of transgender people with others due to lack of behavioral and mental similarities has led to tough time for these people. Transgender people suffer to have to perform roles, to which they do not feel they belong. they suppress their identities and behave according to societal norms and anticipations to avoid conflicts, and only slightly manifest their disparities.

### Discussion

Gender identity reflects the features, functions and feelings of masculinity or femininity as acquired in the process of socialization. Through this interactive process, social subjects recognize themselves as men or women. Although human identity has many dimensions, the most central and determinant of these factors is the social definition of masculinity and femininity. Gender identity is a concept that a person has as a woman or a man, as it is reflected in "I am a boy or I am a girl"

According to Sandra Bem's theory, a 2 years old child has a gender identity, meaning he or she identifies with boys or girls. More accurately, he or she obtains and internalizes a gender schema about the behavior of boys and girls This organizes and interprets human interests and activities. The gender schema also helps children to classify; that is, in imposing a gender-based classification, children evaluate the use of different methods of cultural definitions of gender in order to address the gender suitability and exclude any behavior that does not conform to it In the case of transgender people, the challenges of identity begin from the early years of life, and the sense of gender disparity increases over time. Transgender people's perception and definition contradicts their physiology. People with completely masculine features might believe that they are women and their body does not fit them. When they notice these disparities for the first time, several challenges and questions occur to them. This is aggravated when they encounter the reactions of others by their attempts to impose a normative gender on them.

As our participants noted, The existence of a different orientation and the paradox of gender and sex are recognizable since childhood in games and being with peers at school and neighbor. With the advent of puberty, a person's dissatisfaction with their gender identity is intensified as they are subject to different attractions. Different social experiences, increases the intensity of these differences and strengthens the belief of being created in a upside down body. These contradictions makes them attempt to make sense of their biology in order to achieve self-confidence. Although they find themselves in a converse body and pressure of coexistence, they attempt to play desired roles and living with prominence identity.

According to Bem (1981), having both male and female characteristics, androgynous people have a large array of behaviors which allow them to deal with more effective behaviors according to their conditions. Therefore, androgynous people are considered to be flexible in their interpersonal relationships. Enjoying a higher level of mental health and characteristic perfection are not restricted by dogmatic gender roles and they feel more freedom in effectively responding to different situations. Bisexual people are completely flexible and act as men in their masculine skills and as women in their feminine tasks (Bem,

1981). At a wider level, there is the likelihood of this thinking about transgender people and, we will find that the identity of these individuals is completely different and based on their position, they do not put themselves in the socially accepted gender categories. There are even situations in the lives of these people in which introducing themselves in the physical categories has significant benefits to them. But for these individuals, the secret identity that runs counter to their bodies is more important and will not replace any situation. Transgender people said that they never can forget the real Identity and used several action strategies in favorite to the mental needs such as performing identity in solitude, representing the favorite identity with wearing and appearance and idealization themselves by daydream.

When the identification process is in its inchoate stages, transgender people suppress their identities and behave according to societal norms and anticipations to avoid conflicts, and only slightly manifest their disparities in their behavior. In this case, performing identity in solitude and daydreaming is two main action strategies by them. Indeed, they preserve their digressive behaviors before their thorough disillusionment with their biological gender. This is an attempt to secure their social support. But this suppression is not permanent, and others will soon notice them, too. Families are prone to deny their trans children at first; instead, they try to amend their behaviors through providing gender-specific toys, encouraging them to observe of behavioral norms, and encouragement of gender-specific behaviors. Meanwhile, people deem their behaviors abnormal as they do not know much about this gender category. Their crossing of sexual and gender borders is considered as rule breaking which makes them antisocial or offenders in public.

Although the attitude toward transgender is changing during recent decades in different societies, they face with challenges. We showed a part of their experiences, and like any qualitative research, the generalization of the research results is not possible.

For have better life for transgenders, we suggest that childhood screening should be performed to identify and care for transgender people from early years of person's life. This process alongside with domestic awareness facilitate the identification and socializations processes. Our inquiry can have some implications about transgenders. The main one is for families that live with transgender member; we shall aware that the family is first sphere of hope and life for transgenders. Living condition for transgenders become well if their family and parents had sufficient information about trans. The health and education administration can educate families about trans needs.

The main limitation of this research was to have participant's permission for collaboration in interviews. Although we had their permission before first interview, they have preferred to withhold some information.

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