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Finding Oneself in the Gazes of Others: An Exploration of Subjective Experiences of Gender Among Young Binary Transgender Men

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gender incongruence in young binary transgender men by engaging with historical and recent psychoanalytic theory on transgender identity. Four life-mode interviews were conducted with binary transgender youth assigned female at birth who had recently been referred to medical treatment for gender incongruence. Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). We developed three major themes: (1) relating to the past—challenging experiences of being ostracized and different from peers, which have been transformed after learning about transgenderism and gender-affirming care, (2) gazes on oneself—the participants' sense of self emerges from the gazes on themselves from the outside that have been internalized as a male identity on the inside, and (3) gender incongruence—the participants are struggling to unify conflicting gazes on themselves from the outside with the gazes on themselves from the inside, which leads to an estranged relation to their bodies and feelings of shame. We suggest that gender incongruence in young binary transgender men arises when the gazes from the inside and the outside are not sufficiently reconciled. The clinical task is to help young transgender men with their negotiations of gender within their concrete everyday life experiences.

Introduction

Transgender refers to people who move away from the sex they were assigned at birth and cross over culturally constructed notions of gender (Stryker, 2017). Some transgender individuals experience a lack of alignment between gender identity and birth-assigned sex. If this causes subjective distress, the condition is referred to as gender incongruence in ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2019) and gender dysphoria in DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the last couple of decades, an increasing number of transgender youth have been referred to medical treatment, referred to in the literature as gender-affirming care, to decrease gender incongruence (Kaltiala, Bergman, et al., 2020; Olson-Kennedy et al., 2016). The assumption is that transgender youth with gender incongruence who are supported in their gender identity exploration and offered medical treatment, if necessary, will thrive in a long-term perspective (Ehrensaft, 2021). Today, a majority of those referred are assigned female at birth (Arnoldussen et al., 2022; Kaltiala, Bergman, et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies indicate that the prevalence of co-occurring mental health challenges is disproportionately higher in the transgender adolescent population compared to their peers (Chodzen et al., 2019; Kaltiala, Heino, et al., 2020b).

The question of how to meet transgender youth seeking gender-affirming care to alleviate gender incongruence is currently being discussed among psychoanalytic practitioners (Blass, 2020). Most

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therapists would today agree that the analytic aim is not to change the patient's gender identity, thus acting in a nonreflective manner (Blass, 2020). Some clinicians are, however, concerned that medical treatment for youth under age 18 years is offered too easily, at the expense of exploration of possible connections between gender identity and co-occurring mental health challenges (Bell, 2020). Others stress the therapeutic need to consciously affirm gender identity and explore the implications of new and more diverse gender discourses circulating among youth (Saketopoulou, 2020), and furthermore, that psychoanalysts must scrutinize their own normative views on gender to avoid engaging in transphobic practice and research (Blass et al., 2021). The experience of being misgendered by family and friends and having a body that is incongruent with one's internal sense of self has been described as "a massive gender trauma" (Saketopoulou, 2014, p. 779). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the clinical encounter with youth with gender incongruence touches upon the degree to which gender identity can be consciously known (Blass, 2020). The aim of the present study is to further develop psychoanalytic theory on the relation between gender identity and gender incongruence by engaging with the subjective experiences of young binary transgender men seeking gender-affirming care.

Psychoanalytic theories on gender incongruence

The role of the body in the development of gender identity has been a key question throughout the history of psychoanalysis. Even though Freud (1925) delineated different developmental pathways between the two sexes during the oedipal phase due to anatomical distinctions, he emphasized that there are significant individual differences in terms of masculine and feminine traits across the sexes due to individual processes of identification. Thus, the development of gender identity includes the incorporation of masculine and feminine characteristics in both men and women. Robert Stoller was the first psychoanalyst to work actively with transgender children and youth in the 1960s. Stoller argued that a person's sex—defined as external genitalia, chromosomes, and hormones—is not determinative of gender, which he defined as "the amount of masculinity or femininity found in a person" (Stoller, 1968, p. 9). Instead, he suggested that the development of core gender identity, defined as a person's basic sense and "awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other" (Stoller, 1968, p. 10), is partly based on the perception of one's own external genitalia and a "biological force" related to the person's sex (Stoller, 1964, p. 453).

In line with Winnicott (1969), Stoller (1968) argued that the first sense of self originates from the primary relation to the mother. According to Stoller (1968, p. 263), both boys and girls must break free from their "mother's femaleness and femininity." However, while the little girl does not need to "surmount her relationship to her mother" to develop her femininity (Stoller, 1968, p. 263), the boy has "to break free from the pull of his mother's femaleness and femininity, a task that is so often incomplete, to judge by the amount of effeminacy, passivity, and forced masculinity" (Stoller, 1968, p. 264). Consequently, Stoller (1968) suggested that the preoedipal process of separation from the mother is a major event in the establishment of core gender identity, encompassing not only the basic sense of being male or female but also the development of masculinity and femininity in gender roles that continue to influence into adulthood. Furthermore, Stoller (1968) suggested that the development of exaggerated masculinity among males results from the same conflicting relation (Stoller, 1968). In this way, Stoller (1968) theorized transgender identity as rooted in the same dynamic as cisgender identity development.[1]

In the decades to follow, feminist scholars and psychoanalysts built upon Stoller in their efforts to understand the dynamic interplay between social forces and gender identity (Corbett, 2009). Perhaps the most important theoretical reformulation is the conceptualization of gender identity development as a matter of maternal identification and disidentification. Boys are especially prone to early separation, which might result in a split from "not me" affect states that are considered feminine, while girls

[1]Cisgender refers to individuals who identify with their sex assigned at birth. The term has been developed as a binary alternative to transgender.

tend to be alienated from masculine feelings such as autonomy and independence (Layton, 2004). Furthermore, the deconstruction of psychoanalysis's idealization of the unified, coherent, and unambiguous gender identity, originating from an uncritical adoption of heteronormative values rather than sex differences, has also prompted important developments in psychoanalytic understanding of gender (Goldner, 1991).

In line with theories on "not me" affect states (Layton, 2004), gender incongruence has been conceptualized as unmentalized incongruence at the level of the body-self. The incongruence is marked by a gap between one's own body image and the gaze upon oneself by others (Lemma, 2012). In the clinical encounter, this leads to a "need to be seen" by the therapist, to mirror the incongruence (Lemma, 2013). Building on a Lacanian perspective, Salamon (2010) suggests that the psyche is lodged in the body. Therefore, the body should be taken as a starting point for experience, as conceptualized by Freud as a bodily ego (Salamon, 2010). However, this does not imply that individuals have unmediated access to the body as it is. The representation of the body is continuously influenced by experiences in relation to other people, which are reached through the image of oneself in the mirror—both literally and metaphorically (Lacan, 1966/2007). This indicates a conflicting relationship between the mental representation of the body and the actual body, contributing to a disruption in identity coherence that characterizes gender incongruence (Lemma, 2012). The subjective experience of the body, often referred to as embodiment, develops over time, is mediated by relations with other people, and is invested in social and cultural meaning-making frameworks (Salamon, 2010). Some analysts frame medical treatment as an opportunity to address the lack of alignment between gender identity and body (Saketopoulou, 2020). Simultaneously, it has been suggested that it might be helpful for certain transgender youth with gender incongruence to be assisted in the challenging task of configuring the self–body relationship and the meaning invested in various identity positions (Giovanardi et al., 2020; Lemma, 2018).

In a psychoanalytic understanding of the lack of identification with one's assigned sex at birth, Heenen-Wolff (2021) distinguishes between the formation of an early body ego through primary identification and the development of a sexual ego that emerges with the introduction of gender differences during secondary identification. Furthermore, Heenen-Wolff (2021) suggests that both cisgender and transgender identity develop when identification is processed in an "après-coup" movement—deferred action. In this context, après-coup refers to the phenomenon where the full significance of an experience is only realized after it has occurred, usually through evolving capacities for thinking and reflecting (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974). Consequently, subjective experiences of gender incongruence might arise when primary identification is revisited and translated following the introduction of gender differences in secondary identification (Heenen-Wolff, 2021).

The psychoanalytic field has a legacy of developing disrespectful and transphobic diagnoses and analyses of gender-nonconforming people, which have contributed to the stigma and discrimination faced by gender minorities (Slagstad, 2021). Stoller (1968) is problematic in many aspects, particularly because he argued in favor of a gatekeeper position that privileged the perspectives of clinicians at the expense of patients' autonomy when making decisions regarding medical treatment. He also regarded transgenderism as a pathological condition in need of correction. Furthermore, he mobilized psychoanalytic theory to justify his stigmatizing views on gender-nonconforming children and adults, without acknowledging that the underlying assumptions were embedded in heteronormative values (Goldner, 1991). As authors, we strongly oppose these stigmatizing attitudes and assumptions, and embrace current efforts to develop clinical and psychoanalytic strategies that enable transgender individuals to express themselves freely, without stigma and discrimination (Saketopoulou, 2020).

The psychoanalytic literature on transgender people with gender incongruence is dominated by case reports and theoretical reflections by clinicians (see, for example, Lemma, 2018; Saketopoulou, 2014). However, empirical studies that include the voices of young transgender men themselves are lacking. A significant portion of qualitative research on transgender men focuses on their experiences in seeking gynecological and medical health care, highlighting the importance of negotiating bodily aspects that may differ from those of transgender women

(Sbragia & Vottero, 2019). In our newly published work on young transgender men, we found that subjective experiences of gender incongruence among these youth are elicited by bodily sensations and emotional memories from the past, mediated through interpersonal relationships, the process of coming out, and negotiations of masculinity (Jessen et al., 2021). Our original objective was to understand more about the roles of the body and social forces in transgender identity development; in our sampling, we were only able to recruit binary transmen. In the present study, we therefore confine ourselves to exploring identity development of binary transmen in Norway. We do so by analyzing in-depth interviews with four young people on subjective experiences of gender incongruence in the light of psychoanalytic theories on sex and gender.

Method

Study setting and participants

The present study was conducted and planned by a working group consisting of one clinical psychologist (first author), two clinical psychologists and psychoanalysts (fourth and fifth authors), and one child and adolescent psychiatrist (second author) and one clinical psychologist (third author) working at the National Treatment Unit for Gender Incongruence at Oslo University Hospital (Jessen et al., 2021). Only the first author knew the identity of the participants. In addition, a reference group consisting of representatives from three client organizations guided the process; they participated in the initial planning of the project, helped develop the interview guide, gave regular feedback on the analytic steps, and discussed possible implications of the findings.

The four participants were assigned female at birth and between the ages of 15 and 19 years, and only one of them had started on medical treatment (puberty suppression). All participants were recruited through the National Treatment Unit for Gender Incongruence. The aim was to recruit participants who had been referred to the clinic within the last year to explore subjective experiences of gender incongruence among youth in their initial process of seeking care. Two of the participants were people of color and two were Caucasian. In the presentation of the results, however, we must conceal this information to protect participant anonymity due to the small population of young binary transmen seeking gender-affirming care. The participants were recruited as part of a larger study of 15 adolescents referred to gender-affirming care to alleviate distress related to gender incongruence (Jessen et al., 2021). The four participants were selected because their backgrounds in relation to family, friends, and coming-out differed from each other. Such heterogeneity is recommended when conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) because it offers an opportunity to study individually different experiences of the same phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

Interview schedule

We conducted semistructured, qualitative interviews because this approach offers an opportunity to balance openness toward individual differences with a focus on some overarching, core issues (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide consisted of two parts. In the first section, the participants were interviewed about their life story and important events that led to the referral for gender-affirming care. In the second section, we conducted the life-mode interview, which is suited to uncover subjective experiences of gender incongruence in daily life that are taken for granted (Haavind, 2019). As part of the life-mode interview, the participants were asked to describe the day before with as much detail as possible to the interviewer, both what they did and how they experienced the various situations in relation to gender. The aim was to go beyond ready-made narratives, to explore affective nuances in everyday experiences (Haavind, 2019). We slightly refined each interview based on input from the participants to improve the questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Procedure

The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author. Before the first interview, a pilot interview was conducted to test the suggested interview guide. The development of the interview guide was guided by input from the reference group, which suggested questions and formulations aimed at making the participants feel safe. Potential participants received a letter requesting their participation, including contact information for the first author. Thus, participants themselves contacted the first author if they were interested in participating. All interviews were conducted between December 2018 and June 2019.

Analysis

As a first step, the first author wrote a narrative for each participant that summarized their biographical data and the key experiential topics from the life-mode interview (Haavind, 2019). The aim of the narrative reports was to ensure that a focus on how the individual variation in subjective experiences of gender incongruence unfolds was maintained. To grasp the full breadth of the material and identify the experiential aspects of the interviews, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to identify patterns within the data. Themes do not necessarily "jump out" of the data material but require active analysis and engagement with existing research and theory to gain a richer understanding of what the participants are trying to communicate (Bowe, 2019). IPA was chosen because it allows us to introduce theoretical perspectives early on in the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). The introduction of theory is reflected in the development of the second major theme, gazes on oneself. Already in the first phases of the analysis, it became clear that the importance of other people's thoughts and feelings about gender was mentioned by the participants as a key characteristic to understand subjective experiences of gender incongruence. We aimed to analyze the data material bottom-up but used the concept of "gaze" (Lacan, 1966/2007) from psychoanalytic theory as a sensitizing concept to explore the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes that together contribute to subjective experiences of gender incongruence. Sensitizing concepts are ideas from existing theory and research that are used to inform the analysis, and we used the concept of gaze as a strategy to explore the data material and nuance existing theory and research literature (Bowe, 2019). Therefore, we reflected on analytic memos throughout the analysis, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009), to maintain the perspective of the participants and ensure that the analysis was transparent.

We followed the six steps for IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2009): (1) The transcript of the interview with participant Gabriel was read and reread several times to obtain a general picture of the participant's account. (2) Initial exploratory notes were written in the margin to immerse oneself with the data and suggest as many possible interpretations as possible and identify one's own prejudices. (3) Then we started to develop emergent themes based on the transcripts and the notes made in the margins. (4) In the fourth step, we started to search for connections across themes and suggest possible major themes. (5) In the fifth step, we moved to the next case, Oscar, and repeated the four steps all over again before we proceeded to Oliver and ultimately Theo. (6) In the final step, we looked for patterns across the cases.

The first author was responsible for the reading and rereading of the interviews and the development of the initial codes and tentative themes. The authors as a group discussed the initial lists of codes and agreed on the final themes. The reference group was also consulted during the process, being presented with short descriptions of each code. The reference group also offered different possible interpretations of the findings that informed the discussion of the results. The first author kept a record of the exploratory notes throughout the process to ensure that the contextual aspects of each participant informed the development of themes. The results presented in the present study represent the themes that were developed in the sixth step. In the sixth step, the themes were refined four times, starting with 32 and ending with three major themes and seven associated subthemes that form the basis of the results section. The main criteria for

including themes was that they captured key aspects of subjective experiences of gender incongruence in all four participants (Smith et al., 2009). The first 32 themes were not rejected but merged with themes that better captured patterns across the participants, corresponding to the sixth phase of the IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical considerations

The current study was approved by the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics South East (2018/1088/REK Sør-Øst C). All participants signed an informed consent letter. Permission from parents or guardians was obtained from those younger than 16 years. Measures were taken before, during, and after the interviews to ensure that the consent to participate was truly informed; participants were reminded about their opportunity to withdraw at any time, with particular emphasis on the fact that participation in research would not affect their clinical treatment. This was especially important since the participants were recruited from a clinical population and thus were regarded as vulnerable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In advance, we established an infrastructure at the National Treatment Unit for Gender Incongruence so that participants could contact their clinician if the interviews elicited traumatic or emotionally powerful responses. Additionally, the interviewer, trained as a clinical psychologist outside the National Treatment Unit and not involved in the clinical evaluation of the participants, was competent to continuously evaluate the participants' responses during the interview. Any information that could reveal the participants' identity was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms and approximate ages were used.

Results

The analysis resulted in three major themes: (1) relating to the past, (2) gazes on oneself, and (3) gender incongruence. These major themes included seven associated subthemes that were consistent across all four participants, as presented in Table 1. They reflect intrapsychic and interpersonal processes that contribute to subjective experiences of gender incongruence. The processes underlying each major theme were highly interconnected, and the interaction between these processes contributes to the ideographic expressions and experiences of gender incongruence in each participant. To illuminate how these complex dynamics develop and unfold on an individual and ideographic level, we present how the three major themes unfold ideographically in the case of each participant.

Gabriel (17 years old): "When I finish treatment, I will try to live as normal as possible"

Gabriel is 17 years old and lives with his parents and a sibling in the same village where he grew up. He describes his childhood as stable and traditional. He has been questioning his gender since early childhood but was corrected by his parents when he dressed as a boy. Gabriel does not identify as transgender or with the broader LGBTQ movement, and he hopes for the future to be perceived as a "normal guy."

Major theme 1: Relating to the past

Subtheme 1.1. Challenging and ostracized. Gabriel describes his parents as rather traditional and conservative: "I remember that my mother taught me how to walk like a woman, how you move your hips and your legs, but she gave up." Furthermore, he was not allowed to cut his hair short. Throughout his childhood, Gabriel played with both boys and girls: "I spent a lot of time with the boys, even though I could play with everyone. But as I got older, I started hanging out with just girls." It may seem that Gabriel's sense of gender belonging has shifted throughout his upbringing, and that he didn't feel at home among either the girls or the boys. Furthermore, he describes his village as a typical rural district that values normalcy: "The school is a bit old-fashioned, people from the village, bad attitudes, it scares me, I don't think they will accept it [to be transgender]." Thus, it seems that

Table 1. Overview of major themes and subthemes.

Summary of major themes	Summary of subthemes
Major theme 1: Relating to the past The participants' childhood experiences of being ostracized by their peers are being reinterpreted in the present. In this way, these past experiences continue to exert influence on their daily lives.	**Subtheme 1.1: Challenging and ostracized**: All participants have, in various ways, felt ostracized from their peers throughout childhood.
	Subtheme 1.2: Transformative retelling For all participants, knowledge about gender-affirming care, medical treatment, and the possibility of gender change has opened up a new understanding of themselves and the various issues they have struggled with in the past.
Major theme 2: Gazes on oneself The gazes on oneself from the outside refer to different ways of being looked at by other people, or the commitment to different identities through cultural narratives that enable new ways of looking at oneself. The gazes are sources of meaning. Identification with cultural groups and narratives represents gazes on oneself from the inside. The distinction between external and internal gazes can be somewhat ambiguous at an experiential level.	**Subtheme 2.1: Sources of meaning** The different gazes on oneself *from the outside* come from various sources of meaning that contribute to increased self-knowledge. The gaze can be quite concrete, such as when the participants look at themselves in the mirror. However, it manifests in numerous forms, including sources such as books, films, popular media channels, or comments from friends and family.
	Subtheme 2.2: Identity The participants' commitment to an identity as men has led to new gazes on themselves that inform their sense of self. The cultural narratives and social groups with which the participants identify represent gazes on othemselves *from the inside*.
Major theme 3: Gender incongruence The various conflicting gazes on oneself contribute to subjective experiences of gender incongruence in everyday life. These conflicting perceptions might lead to a disrupted sense of self in various situations, resulting in an estranged relationship with the body and the internalization of shame and stigma.	**Subtheme 3.1: Conflicting experiences** The participants are striving to unify the various gazes on themselves from the outside with the gazes on themselves from the inside; they struggle to be recognized as men by others and to recognize themselves as men, especially when they view their bodies from within.
	Subtheme 3.2: Estranged body The participants struggle to reconcile the gazes on themselves from the inside with the gazes on themselves from the outside, resulting in a feeling of disconnection from their bodies.
	Subtheme 3.3: Internalizing stigma The participants appear to have internalized dominant gender norms and accepted negative beliefs about themselves, leading to feelings of inferiority and shame.

Gabriel has grown up in a family and local community that directly and indirectly sanction those who deviate from traditional norms.

Subtheme 1.2. Transformative retelling. Gabriel wasn't aware of the opportunity to live as a man until he learned about gender-affirming care: "You don't really think you can do anything about it because you're unaware of the options." Later, Gabriel has reinterpreted his childhood experiences, now believing that his gender ambivalence during childhood was an early sign of his male identity: "Typical things like I didn't want to wear girls' clothes . . . and it has never been a phase." Thus, on one hand, Gabriel appears to have been androgynous and ambivalent regarding gender throughout his childhood, without a clear male identity. On the other hand, it seems necessary for him to now clarify that his current male gender identity is not a phase but rather a continuation of his resistance against a female gender identity.

Major theme 2: Gazes on oneself

Subtheme 2.1. Sources of meaning. Before he was referred to gender-affirming care, Gabriel and his parents consulted with a local doctor: "The most important was that he [the doctor] explained gender

dysphoria to my parents as a professional, and for parents, I think it's important to hear about it from professionals." Thus, it seems that the doctor provided a professional gaze on gender incongruence that legitimized Gabriel's experiences as valid and worthy of medical treatment.

Subtheme 2.2. Identity. Gabriel is heavily invested in the identity as just a "normal guy," which affects how he thinks about the future: "When I finish treatment, I will try to live as normal as possible." He tried once to connect with local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth, however: "They talked about gender identity in a hysterical way, they colored their hair, that wasn't for me." Gabriel may not have been able to relate to the gaze offered by the local LGBTQ peers. He is concerned about being associated with his LGBTQ classmates by other peers: "I don't want them [other classmates] to think we [Gabriel and LGBTQ people] are all the same, just because we are transgender. I try to think that what they [LGBTQ people at school] do have nothing to do with me." In the end of the quote, Gabriel indirectly acknowledges that he is transgender, even though he often contests this group affiliation during the interview. Thus, it seems that belonging to a group is a complex negotiation for Gabriel between his own feelings and the gazes on himself from the outside. Furthermore, Gabriel's engagement with an LGBTQ youth group indicates that he has been curious about exploring gender nonconformity. However, that may have clashed fundamentally with his identity as a "traditional" and "normal guy."

Major theme 3: Gender incongruence

Subtheme 3.1. Conflicting experiences. As previously mentioned, Gabriel now identifies as a man: "I would have preferred to have just been a boy from the beginning and lived a normal life." However, he feels more comfortable among girls and LGBTQ classmates: "I feel I belong to the boys, but at the same time, it is easier to talk to girls." Perhaps these conflicting feelings complicate his identification and sense of belonging. Furthermore, the bodily changes during puberty posed challenges for Gabriel, forcing him to view himself in new ways: "I didn't think much about menstruation, but developing breasts was more uncomfortable because it's more visible. It's something you find unnatural; it becomes more about your own thoughts than what others think." It seems that the visible pubertal changes established a gaze on himself that served as a new source of meaning, indicating the relational nature of gender incongruence. Gabriel elaborates further on how these experiences unfold in daily life: "I don't like showing off the body, especially the feminine parts, because then you feel a bit like a girl, even though you are not." Thus, it may seem that Gabriel perceives his body as more female through the the gazes of others. Consequently, he then finds that his male identity becomes less certain. These quotes illustrate a potential tension in Gabriel's experience: Although he identifies as a man, the mere gaze of others directed toward gendered body parts seems to confuse him and elicit feelings of gender incongruence.

Subtheme 3.2. Estranged body. Gabriel describes himself as "born in the wrong body" and talks about his body in a somewhat distant manner. For instance, when asked about whether he has considered seeking peer support from others with gender incongruence, he compares his condition to a bone fracture: "You don't say, 'I have broken my ankle, and therefore I am going to meet others that have broken their ankles.' I'd rather go there, get treatment, and be done with it."

Subtheme 3.3. Internalizing stigma. Gabriel seems to feel ashamed about the dilemmas he struggles with: "Some people like to say that they are transgender, while I think it's a pretty weird thing about myself." Gabriel elaborates further: "It's a bit sad to think about that if I had been normal, we [straight male classmates] would have been good friends, but because of this [being transgender], it will not happen, and I feel it is because of me and not them." Thus, it seems that Gabriel experiences gender incongruence as a fault originating from within himself rather than as a result of a complex interaction between different gazes from the inside and the outside.

Oliver: "We agreed that we think I'm a boy inside"

Oliver is 18 years old and lives with his single mother. He has little contact with his father. Oliver did not question his gender when he was a child, but was occasionally teased by schoolmates for his boyish expression. However, it was not until his body started to develop during puberty that Oliver began to identify as being "born in the wrong body." Furthermore, it was clarifying for him to meet his current girlfriend because she identified as heterosexual and perceived him as a man. It seems that his initial gender ambivalence has been replaced by a binary and traditional identity as a man.

Major theme 1: Relating to the past

Subtheme 1.1. Challenging and ostracized. Oliver was bullied in school because he was a "boyish" girl: "Sometimes I behaved very boyish. And sometimes I didn't feel very girly. Or kind of in between [. . .] that is pretty hard to go through, because you never know if people will accept you . . . for what you look like." Oliver's mother supported him throughout childhood, but his father's family was hostile. As a child, Oliver didn't know how to respond when other people asked about his gender: "At that time, I was not sure whether I was a boy or a girl in the body of a girl [. . .] They [other people] probably understood that I was born in the wrong body before I did."

Subtheme 1.2. Transformative retelling. As a child, Oliver always had a vague feeling that something was wrong with his body. However, it wasn't until his body started to develop and the socially constructed differences between boys and girls became more pronounced in early adolescence that he was able to understand his experiences more deeply: "I always thought there was something wrong [with the body], but I never understood how, because you don't know anything when you are little. You don't start thinking about your body until you eventually realize what's happening."

Major theme 2: Gazes on oneself

Subtheme 2.1. Sources of meaning. For Oliver, exploring intimacy and sexual relationships has enabled new frameworks of meaning. For example, he met a girlfriend who clearly defined him as a man: "We agreed that we think I'm a boy inside." This new gaze on himself from the outside was enlightening and removed some of the vague feelings around gender that Oliver had been struggling with.

Subtheme 2.2. Identity. Gradually, Oliver started to explore a masculine gender expression: "If you feel that you are who you are [a boy], then you start to think step by step how to take it further . . . out there." Thus, it seems natural for Oliver that the emerging identity as a man should be manifested in behavior and expression.

Major theme 3: Gender incongruence

Subtheme 3.1. Conflicting experiences. According to Oliver, he is mostly perceived as a man by others. Only his girlfriend and a handful of his friends know that he was assigned female at birth. He feels confident that his girlfriend recognizes him as a man: "She knows [because] she has already seen the body, then I don't care." Still, it can be challenging for Oliver to relate to his body from the inside: "It gets a bit complicated when it comes to having sex, when you think that you are a boy on the inside and then you have the body of a . . . woman." Thus, it seems that even though Oliver and his girlfriend have resolved the question of his gender at certain levels, they still need to negotiate different gazes on himself and his body when they are intimate.

Subtheme 3.2. Estranged body. The conflicting gazes and the lack of feeling whole seems to make Oliver feel alienated in relation to his body: "it's still wrong [the body], the mistakes are there anyway."

Subtheme 3.3. Internalizing stigma. On the outside, Oliver lives a seemingly unproblematic life as a man. However, Oliver explains that approximately two to three times a month he becomes overwhelmed by anxiety and sadness: "I keep all problems to myself on the inside, until it bursts like a bubble [. . .] and then I have a breakdown." Thus, according to Oliver's own description, his unresolved gender-related issues seem incomprehensible to him.

Oscar: "I look different in my head"

Oscar is 15 years old and lives with his parents in an ethnically diverse part of a big city. He did not question gender in his childhood but was, in his own words, a "boyish" child who struggled to find his place among his peers; the girls were too "dramatic" while the boys were "fighting too much." Oscar was never corrected by his parents in terms of his gender expression, but gender was never talked about explicitly. Furthermore, he disliked his body throughout childhood because he was "a little chubby."

Major theme 1: Relating to the past

Subtheme 1.1. Challenging and ostracized. Oscar entered puberty earlier than most of his peers. This was initially a positive experience: "I appreciated the fact that I grew taller than the others." Oscar felt that he was allowed to occupy the role of a masculine girl during this period. However, things changed: "The boys started to grow, and I quickly became one of the short ones." As puberty progressed and his body developed, Oscar struggled increasingly to cope with certain body parts: "In the beginning [of puberty], I refused to wear a bra and only wanted to wear baggy clothes that covered the breasts." Thus, it seems that bodily development during puberty made Oscar's relationship with his body more troublesome.

Subtheme 1.2. Transformative retelling. Oscar encountered knowledge about transgenderism around the age of 13 years, after he read a book about the topic: "[the book] described gender incongruence very well, what it means to be transgender, and that's when I began to realize that I fit into the trans category." Against the backdrop of this new information, Oscar began to reinterpret his challenging childhood:

> When I look back, I notice that there are things I have done since I was little, and it`s obvious [now] that I would have been a trans boy when I was four or five years old . . . Before, I thought I disliked my body because I was a little overweight, but now that I know about gender dysphoria, I understand why.

Major theme 2: Gazes on oneself

Subtheme 2.1. Sources of meaning. The new understanding of himself as "transsexual" has led Oscar to think differently about his body: "I began to imagine what it would have been like . . . to be born in the body of a boy." Furthermore, through the same channels where he accessed knowledge about transgenderism, Oscar also encountered information about typical male facial features. Consequently, he now compares himself to these ideals: "I have a pretty round face with big cheeks, I think it looks too feminine." He also experiences that his body is too feminine when he compares himself with classmates: "A close friend of mine, a very masculine boy, he is tall with broad shoulders, I wish I looked more like him."

Subtheme 2.2. Identity. It seems that because of these new ways of looking at himself, Oscar now identifies as a "guy" or a "trans guy." Still, he struggles at times to recognize his male identity when he looks at himself: "The binder flattens my chest, but not completely. In addition, I have a feminine face. I just wish these things were more masculine." Thus, it may seem that Oscar's new identity as a man has affected how he now looks at himself and evaluates his body, and that his identity as a "guy" sometimes increases gender incongruence.

Major theme 3: Gender incongruence

Subtheme 3.1. Conflicting experiences. Oscar experiences that "I am a boy on the inside and a girl on the outside, and it doesn't match." As previously mentioned, he struggles to recognize his "inside" when he compares himself with other men. At the same time, it does not necessarily help to be alone: "When I go out, I generally feel more like myself than when I relax at home . . . because when I am out [with other people] I look more like what I should look like." Thus, it may seem as if Oscar is struggling to reconcile the complex interaction between the gazes directed at him from the outside and those from within. Furthermore, it seems that the way he gazes at himself from the inside has evolved as he encountered knowledge about transgenderism, but also based on the way he is perceived by others from the outside.

Subtheme 3.2. Estranged body. Although Oscar had a challenging relationship to his body in his childhood, it seems that the new gaze on himself as a man has made him feel even more detached from his body: "I simply don't feel at home in my body, it's as if the brain and the body are two separate things, as if the body is not a part of me." Furthermore, when he looks at himself in the mirror, "It's just a weird version of myself, I look different in my head, the mirror image does not reflect who I am, a guy."

Subtheme 3.3. Internalizing stigma. It seems that Oscar tends to blame himself: "If something goes wrong, I get mad at myself, I often think I should have done something different." Furthermore, Oscar feels uncomfortable in arenas dominated by men: "I feel like I don't fit in, that I should not have been in the men's bathroom . . . [I] get body aches, and I hope that the guys don't notice me, I just want to shrink."

Theo: "You don't start thinking about your body until you eventually realize what's happening"

Theo is 19 years old and grew up with his single mother in a small city. Theo describes himself as a lonely child who was once referred to the local mental health service for children and youth because his mother was concerned that he isolated himself from peers. He is now in the middle of a gap year to focus on his treatment and says that he lives quite isolated from others.

Major theme 1: Relating to the past

Subtheme 1.1: Challenging and ostracized. Theo did not question his gender identity as a child or behave in a gender-nonconforming way. However, after Theo hit puberty, his body became problematic: "I was never comfortable with anything that had to do with being a girl or a woman. I remember that I always used big sweaters, and I never wanted to be dressed in clothes that were tight."

Subtheme 1.2. Transformative retelling. Around the age of 13 years, Theo became increasingly interested in LGBTQ issues, and he gradually realized that his body issues could be understood as a sign of transgenderism: "I always thought there was something wrong [with the body], but I never understood why, because [. . .] you don't start thinking about your body until you eventually realize what's happening."

Major theme 2: Gazes on oneself

Subtheme 2.1: Sources of meaning. When Theo was 13 years old, he gradually started to question his gender: "First, I learned about trans people, but it didn't immediately say 'click, this is me,' it was [more] kind of, 'this sounds interesting,' then I did more research, and after a while, I recognized more and more of myself in the [transgender] category." Immediately after he told his mother about feeling

born in the wrong body, she arranged an appointment with their family doctor to begin medical treatment.

Subtheme 2.2. Identity. At the same time, it also appears that his strong disidentification with women has been a driving force in his gender identity development. He cannot imagine being a woman when he reaches adulthood: "I do not want to be seen as a butch lesbian again." According to Theo, he was initially read by others as a masculine, lesbian woman when he first came out as a man. Theo elaborates on his identity: "I don't want to be seen as a very masculine man [. . .] but I still want to be seen as a man." Thus, there seems to be a dialectical relation at play; he disidentifies with the category of women and identifies with the category of men.

Major theme 3: Gender incongruence

Subtheme 3.1. Conflicting experiences. According to Theo, he is never perceived as a man by others. However, he aims for "a normal life, and to just be myself [but] I don't want to force people to understand that I am a man [. . .] that would have put pressure on myself as well, I just want to be automatically perceived [as a man]." Thus, Theo wants other people to recognize his identity as a man, but this should happen spontaneously. Theo feels that he ends up too much in the spotlight if he has to "force people" to recognize him as a man. This is a complicated balance, because in order to be perceived automatically by others as a man, "I feel pressured to behave as masculine as possible, if not, I won't be perceived [as a man] [. . .] [but] I can't always behave very masculine, that won't work all the time, because I am not very masculine. It is an eternal struggle consisting of many compromises." Thus, it seems that Theo is facing a dilemma between his desire to behave spontaneously and follow his impulses on one hand, and his aim to present as a man without attracting much attention on the other. Theo's balancing act can be understood as a conflict between different gazes on him from the inside and the outside. Furthermore, these gazes seem to be mediated through affirmation by other people.

Subtheme 3.2. Estranged body. In Theo's everyday life, the body is a great source of discomfort: "For example, I have voice dysphoria [. . .] when I speak, it doesn't feel like it's me who is speaking." Therefore, Theo often tries to mentally block out when he has to relate to his body.

Subtheme 3.3. Internalizing stigma. Theo strives to create a better future for himself, without discomfort and gender issues: "For me to be comfortable, there really isn't much other people can do. It just has something to do with me personally, and my body." Theo therefore states that he needs hormones to change his body in a way that makes it easier for him to be perceived as a man. Thus, it seems that Theo takes on a significant personal responsibility to reconcile the conflicting gazes from the inside and the outside.

Discussion

The in-depth analyses of the present study indicated that subjective experiences of gender incongruence in young binary transgender men are not uniform and consistent across time and place, but emerge as a lack of alignment between the participants' different gazes at themselves from the outside and the inside that vary depending on the context. The first major theme underlines the temporal aspects of gender incongruence as a phenomenon that is transformed over time and in dialogue with past experiences of being ostracized and feeling different. In the course of time, the participants have committed to an identity as male, which contributes to a dynamic interaction between gazes on themselves from the outside and the inside, as indicated by the second major theme. The third major theme indicates that the participants are striving to unify the gazes on themselves from the outside with the gazes from the inside, to establish and maintain a coherent sense of self. In the following, we

first discuss the findings from the present study on gender incongruence in young binary transgender men as a tension between gazes from the outside and the inside in relation to existing psychoanalytic research on transgender people. Second, we suggest that Stoller's early theories on gender identity development as a preoedipal achievement should be revised and extended by a Lacanian perspective on the self as an ongoing negotiation in the realm of the symbolic (Lacan, 1966/2007; Salamon, 2010).

The first major theme, "Relating to the past," indicates that all participants have struggled with *challenging experiences of being ostracized* (subtheme 1.1). They have strived to achieve a sense of belonging among peers without succeeding, which in turn made them feel incomprehensible to both themselves and others. The importance of the past and the reinterpretation of formative relations to other people in childhood resonate with Stoller (1968) and his conceptualization of gender identity as a developing process that builds upon early object relations that influence on how the participants relate to other people later in life. Furthermore, it seems that the participants had a challenging relation to their body before puberty. However, perhaps the pubertal changes increased these challenges and forced the participants to relate to their anticipated future as adults. For all participants, learning about transgenderism has *transformed their interpretation of the past* (subtheme 1.2); they began to understand that their nonnormative and ostracized childhood was an early sign of transgenderism. Perhaps the need to reinterpret previously unmentalized aspects of their childhood reflects residual "not-me" affect states that previously have not been mirrored by family and the wider psychosocial environment, because of underlying gender norms that structure the early infant–parent interaction (Layton, 2004; Lemma, 2013).

Which processes contribute to a sense of self among the participants? The second major theme indicates that the participants' gazes on themself work through different *sources of meaning* (subtheme 2.1), for example, books, media, and comments from other people. Knowledge about transgenderism and gender-affirming care has contributed with new sources of meaning that serve as gazes on themselves from the outside. The second subtheme (2.2), *identity*, indicates that these gazes from the outside are being internalized; the participants identify today as binary (transgender) men. However, after the participants started to identify as binary men, they began to compare themselves with stereotypes and narratives being offered about how men should behave and express themselves. Consequently, the participants seem to feel emasculated because they compare themselves with (cisgender) men. These gazes on themselves are experienced as they come from the inside. However, it seems that they arise by looking at others and interpreting identities and cultural narratives around masculinity. Furthermore, all participants seem to struggle to recognize the new gazes on themselves from the inside in the gazes on themselves from the outside. This lack of feeling whole can be exemplified by Oscar's experience of being a "boy on the inside and a girl on the outside," or Theo's struggle to be perceived as a man without compromising with his gender expression. Thus, it seems that the participants are struggling to reconcile the gazes on themselves as men from the outside (subtheme 2.1. *sources of meaning*) with the gazes on themselves from the inside, experienced as an *identity* (subtheme 2.2).

Gender incongruence has previously been described as a gap between the notion of one's own body and the gazes on oneself by others (Lemma, 2012). The second major theme of the present study might build further on this insight; the gazes on oneself from the outside seem to be characterized as a process of looking at oneself more of as on object, which in turn is internalized as an identity. It seems to be a development through dialectical spirals of reflection between the gazes from the outside and the gazes from the inside. Based on the results, we therefore suggest that gender incongruence in young binary transgender men is marked by a lack of alignment between gazes on oneself from the outside and from the inside, where the distinction between what emerges from the internal and the external is blurred on an experiential level. In psychoanalytic literature, identification has been defined as a process characterized by the assimilation of an aspect of the other that wholly or partially transforms the subject, and thus constitutes and specifies the personality (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974). Building on this insight, perhaps the participants' gazes on themselves by others are sifted

through an internal psychic apparatus experienced as gazes on themselves from the inside. The reinterpretation of past experiences in the light of new gazes on themselves described in the first major theme might be a part of this iterating dialectic between the past and the present. Furthermore, perhaps this can be understood as an après-coup movement, when experiences from primary identification processes, referred to as core gender identity by Stoller (1968), are processed to be reconciled with emerging secondary identifications and the introduction to gender differences in adolescence (Heenen-Wolff, 2021; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974).

The third major theme indicates that the various gazes on themselves from the outside and the inside result in *conflicting experiences* (subtheme 3.1) that characterize gender incongruence in young binary transgender men. For example, the participants seem to have internalized quite stereotypic norms guiding what kind of men they identify with (e.g., "I am just a normal guy" was a recurrent self-description). At the same time, they describe themselves as men with interests and ways to express themselves through clothes and behavior that are characterized as feminine by others. Perhaps these tensions lead to an ongoing conflict in their representation of who they are. While the mere presence of other people might increase conflicting experiences, participants also find relief in relations with family or partners who affirm their representation as men. Some even experience that conflicting feelings intensify when they are alone, with only their own gaze upon themselves. Perhaps this indicates that the seemingly private sense of self in terms of gender is deeply relational.

The conflicting gazes from the outside and the inside leave the participants in various states of feeling *estranged* from their body (subtheme 3.2). Thus, it seems that the participants have put on hold relating to their bodies, because they struggle to recognize their gazes on themselves from the outside when they look at themselves from the inside. If the psyche is lodged in the body and takes the body as a starting point for experience (Salamon, 2010), perhaps the lack of reconciliation between the gazes hampers the dialectical spirals of reflection that is required to further develop a gender identity and a sense of self. This resonates with the findings from a previously published article based on the same data material, where we suggest that young transgender men should be supported in their daily negotiation of the dialectics of gender incongruence (Jessen et al., 2021).

A Lacanian perspective on the body and the development of a sense of self might help us further understand post-oedipal gender identity development in the case of young binary transgender men. Within this framework, the child is gradually separated from the first symbiotic relationships with its primary caregivers and enters the realm of the symbolic (Lacan, 1966/2007). The symbolic refers to language and narratives and offers identification with ideal images that bridge the child's initial experience of body and self in bits and pieces (Elliott, 2020). The gazes on oneself from the outside (subtheme 2.1) can be understood as entering the realm of the symbolic, while subtheme 2.2 refers to the process of identifying with available narratives and recognizing this from within. However, the enabling process of symbolic identification with an idealized position in the external world comes with a price: The formation of a unitary sense of self, in the case of the participants—a commitment to an identity as a man—depends upon the disavowal of affect states and longings that are repressed into the unconscious (Salamon, 2010). This is indicated by the participants' attempts to reconcile these conflicting gazes (subtheme 3.1), and their experiences of being estranged from their own body (subtheme 3.2). Consequently, these disavowed and unmentalized affect states—often located in relation to the body—are an ongoing source of gender incongruence.

The participants' identification as binary men has contributed to a much-needed sense of direction in life. However, this process also seems to have increased subjective experiences of gender incongruence. According to Lemma (2016), the body occupies a central role in the experience of a sense of self; despite the physical transitions it undergoes over time, the representation of the body secures stability. For transgender youth, medical treatment serves as a means to experience coherence in the representation of the self over time (Lemma, 2016). At the same time, we should keep in mind that individuals do not have unmediated access to the body as it is, regardless of whether they are transgender or not. The corporeal body is always represented and negotiated in the mind (Salamon, 2010). The present study suggests that this negotiation in young binary transgender men is

characterized by an ongoing dialectic between gazes on oneself from the outside and the inside. Furthermore, it suggests that the early representations and fantasies of the body rooted in primarily identification are continuously reinterpreted in an après-coup as secondary identification unfolds and the participants increasingly identify as male (Heenen-Wolff, 2021). The participants in the present study do all have a binary identity. Emerging research indicates, however, that binary transmen might be more influenced by heteronormative scripts in relation to body and sexuality than nonbinary individuals, and that nonbinary individuals experience less gender incongruence (Anzani et al., 2021). Perhaps the conflicting gazes on themselves from the outside and the inside, which characterize gender incongruence as described in the present study, reflect specific challenges associated with a binary identity in transgender men and a deeper investment in heteronormative scripts.

Despite vivid descriptions of stigma and discrimination because of their gender-nonconforming behavior and expression, the present study indicates that subjective experiences of gender incongruence are characterized by a tendency to internalize the stigma (subtheme 3.3). It seems that the participants are caught in a paradoxical conflict: On one hand, their acquired gender identity and sense of self as male have been developed through different gazes from the outside, while on the other hand, they end up feeling ashamed and "unnatural" when they struggle to recognize their representation of themselves as men when they look at themselves and their bodies from the inside. The quest for the individual to be authentic, seeking the inner truth about oneself without recognizing the importance that social norms play in identity formation, has been identified as a hallmark of modern societies (Taylor, 1991). It seems that the challenging process of reconciling gazes on themselves from the outside and the inside is experienced as a fault originating from within themselves rather than from heteronormative ideals and lack of recognition.

Limitations

All participants were between the ages of 15 and 19 years, a time characterized by exploration and lack of stability. Perhaps the paradoxical and chaotic nature of gender identity and gender incongruence described in the present study reflects that the participants are in the midst of adolescence, a period usually characterized by intensive identity exploration. Furthermore, all participants identify as binary transgender men. This is noteworthy, considering the high prevalence of nonbinary identifying individuals among transgender youth (Twist & de Graaf, 2019). Moreover, gender incongruence in transgender women might manifest differently than what has been described in the current study. A final limitation of the present study concerns race. As stated in the method section, two of the participants are people of color, but we had to conceal information about their racial background in the results section to protect anonymity. However, we acknowledge that the racial background of the participants in the present study influences how they are gendered by others, and consequently how they experience gender incongruence. Therefore, we encourage future research to specifically target the experiences of transgender youth of color to better understand the role of racial background in gender identity development and gender incongruence.

Concluding remarks

Because gender identity in young binary transgender men continues to develop when primary identification is translated in an après-coup movement into secondary identification (Heenen-Wolff, 2021), we suggest that Stoller's (1968) theory on gender incongruence should be considerably revised with a Lacanian perspective on the formation of a unitary sense of self as a fragile and temporarily compromise between disavowed affect states that are repressed into the unconscious (Salamon, 2010). Furthermore, gender identification in young binary transgender men with gender incongruence should be understood as primary identification that is later processed through dialectical spirals of reflection between gazes on themselves from the outside and the inside,

processes that presuppose the disavowal of certain internal states. One important clinical implication is that young young people with gender incongruence should be assisted in the enigmatic development of a sense of gender—lodged in the body—that is stable enough to continuously negotiate gazes on oneself from the outside and the inside in everyday life. Although the current study focuses on the experiences of binary transgender men and their specific negotiations with masculinity, there may be general insights to be gained about gender identity development. Our study illustrates how gender identity develops and plays out on a more particular level in young binary transgender men with gender incongruence. According to a Lacanian perspective, a complete reconciliation between the gazes from the outside and the inside is by definition impossible, regardless of being transgender or cisgender, man or woman (Salamon, 2010). Perhaps the difference is that the gap between the gazes from the outside and the inside is less accentuated among cisgender individuals, because of heteronormative ideals that regard certain bodies as more typically male or female (Salamon, 2010). Perhaps the development of a coherent gender identity, among both cisgender and transgender individuals, is better understood as a process involving disavowed identifications and evolving mental states, with the body serving as the starting point of experience. Furthermore, this suggests that these aspects of gender identity and a sense of self are related to the tension between gazing at oneself as an object from the outside, while at the same time being the experiencing subject on the inside (Elliott, 2020).

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