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Perspective

Gender is dynamic for all people

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Abstract
Gender is dynamic across the life-course for all people. This is true for you, me and the collective 'us'. In this perspective paper, we invite you to reflect on how changes in the experience and expression of gender can be most appropriately viewed as a normal part of human development, diversity, and growth. We can find gender's dynamism in at least three areas: that the meaning of gender has changed over time; that there are significant cultural differences in the meaning of gender; and that one's own gender and relationship to it can change, evolve, weaken, and galvanise across a lifetime. From our position as interdisciplinary scientists, artists, and community advocates, each of us informed by distinctive and dynamic lived experiences of gender, we examine how the foundations of psychology may be limiting the capacity for the discipline to accurately reflect dynamic experiences of gender in the real world. We encourage you to ponder how we can address points of resistance to change in thought and practice and embed a more deliberately dynamic understanding of gender within our knowledge systems and structures. Ultimately, we seek to empower you, the reader, to take up the challenge of new ways of thinking and behaving in relation to gender.

Keywords Gender · Gender psychology · Gender dynamics · Cultural differences

1 The current state of play in psychology

Gender is an inseparable aspect of psychological disciplines and informs how theoretical and practical frameworks are formed and performed. Psychology has always been subject to broader societal narratives around gender; with a presumed differentiation between men and women baked into the foundations of psychological practice, and with it, the inherent power imbalances that play out in society at large [1]. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that gender is buried beneath the foundations of psychology, acting like the ghosts that might haunt a house built on a burial ground [2]. At its roots, psychology has attempted to situate itself as a kind of objective 'view from nowhere' [3], a science divorced from dynamic social influence and individual subjectivities. From this perspective, the evidence that gender as a form of human subjectivity and agency is ever evolving in both practice and meaning remains largely out of scope. This sits at the core of this metaphor of a house of psychology built on the burial grounds of gender; the formation of psychology as a discipline positioned itself as an immutable, immovable, brick and mortar institution, forgetting what lies just beneath the groundwork, permeating through the floors.

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As Gordon [4] suggests, we must allow ourselves to be haunted if we are to understand what is at the heart of any given matter. The history of psychology is rife with resistance to the spectre of gender, including attempts to render invisible or eradicate diverse gender experiences and expressions through lobotomies [5, 6], conversion therapy [7], 'gender critical' practices [8], epistemological erasures of women and other genders [9, 10], and deterministic and bioessentialist[1] notions of maleness and femaleness that nullify lived experience both within and outside those categories [11]. Kagan [12] states that psychology is in fact haunted by several such ghosts, and argues that we must form a more critical relationship with these theoretical and methodological issues if we are to improve psychology's efficacy and relevance as a discipline and therapeutic practice. Perhaps here the scientific has something to learn from the pseudoscientific; we need to grapple with ghosts, understand why we still experience their presence, and consider how we can connect with them meaningfully and bring their messages and knowledge into our own lives [13].

There is an inherent sense of grief in addressing psychology's relationship with gender. This is the grief of the countless many who have been let down by its restrictive and at times destructively gendered methodologies; the grief of those stories and knowledges lost to a ligatured, westernised lens; and our own personal grief as we come to terms with the shadow sides of this discipline. We are forced to deal not only with how cisgenderist and heteronormative narratives have dominated psychology as a science, but with the effects that this narrow, selective, and heavily biased history has had (and in some instances still has) on people living in every context across the world [14].

2 Gender dynamism

Contemporary discussions of gender have experienced a significant shift in recent years, moving from a perception of gender as something believed to be stable or innate and towards an understanding of gender as dynamic [15]. What the term "dynamic" stands for varies across disciplines, but at its core is an implication that this notion of 'gender' is not a singular or immovable category, and really never has been. Of particular interest to this paper is the broadening recognition of the ways gender is dynamic across our life-course. From birth onwards, our relationship to gender evolves and mutates, deepening in its contextuality and relationality [16]. In other words, gender is dynamic because our lives are dynamic; it is not simply a matter of inner self-perception, but also of affinity with others [17], and of responsiveness to the context(s) we find ourselves in [18]. This is a point where many studies stop short: authors may acknowledge that there is a period of "gender formation," but often view this process as something which reaches a final resting place at some point in late adolescence or early adulthood [19].

The perception of gender as having a kind of incubation period, with a distinct point of maturation, is something that has even been applied to the experiences of transgender[2] peoples. The process of 'transition' or 'gender affirmation', whether social or medical, is typically interpreted as a linear movement from one gender to another, correcting a presumed misalignment of 'identity' (or 'brain') and 'body', and overlooking the many ways in which gender is affirmed in less linear or continuing ways over the life courses [20, 21]. There is also a focus in popular representations on the process of "coming out" as transgender, which again posits gender as a type of authentic (read: fixed) truth about a person which only requires navigation when it comes to disclosure or "outness" [22]. However, by nesting our perception of gender within these fixed systems (e.g., being "in" or "out" of the closet, being "pre" or "post" transition), we fail to attend to the much more complex inner processes of change and self-discovery which continue to take place long after many more socially visible aspects of our selves have been "settled" [23]. Attaching gender formation to maturity—and therefore age—affects the social and medical dynamics of infantilisation and adultification especially in relation to transgender children [24].

It is also important to note that these lifelong processes are not exclusive to trans peoples; all people have at least some experiences of shifts in their relationship to, or expression of, gender over the life-course [25]. It is the latter that perhaps gives us the easiest access point into understanding that the dynamism of gender permeates all human experiences. We need only to look at one of the most obvious cultural signifiers of gender, that of clothing and other adornments, to see the ways in which most people will actively change the forms through which they express and affirm their gender

[1] The philosophy that biology plays a larger role in determining human experiences of gender than social, cultural, economic, or environmental factors.

[2] For definitions of terms including 'transgender', 'cisgender', 'transition', 'gender expression', 'gender identity' and other core terms related to the topics discussed in this paper, please visit: https://www.glaad.org/reference/trans-terms.

as they age. Cray [26], in their analysis of Davies' Adornments [27], suggests that while we have come to codify certain clothes, jewellery, and other im/permanent bodily markers as gendered, our use of these markers rarely forms a perfect triadic relationship between one's inner experience of gender, one's outer expression of the same, and others' perceptions of how the former two categories interact.

3 Gender across time and space

There is an inherent and often irreconcilable incongruence between what we understand ourselves to be, how we shape and dress our bodies, and what society perceives us to be. This is made even more complex when we acknowledge the intergenerational and intercultural differences in how these markers are understood: what is strictly feminine in one culture (e.g., skirts) may be masculine or unisex in others, and both cultures may have had their perceptions of these markers radically shift over the course of decades or centuries. Fashion and dress are not just matters of individual preference. Processes of gendering dress are as much social, cultural, and political as they are a personal choice. Consider that nineteenth-century British and American doctors believed, for example, that women wearing trousers would suffer serious health consequences [28]. Such views seem arcane to us, but were deeply held at the time and thought to be scientifically based. History is littered with such examples of the dynamism of gender, and its changing signifiers and meaning across time. From this perspective, it is easy to see that even a decision as mundane as what one wears each day carries with it a certain type of gender dynamism; we fashion our presentation with consideration to social ideals of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny just as we might consider the weather, time of day, company we may have, or our individual sensory preferences.

In addition to recognising the dramatic changes in ideas about gender and gendered expression through history, and across context, we must also understand evolving social norms and expectations. Often perceived as 'traditional,' the staunch binaries between masculinity and femininity in all areas of life, including labour, came to prominence in the particular socio-economic historical conditions of industrial capitalism. In nineteenth-century White western cultures, middle-class men's new opportunities for sustained public life was supported by an economic, labour, and social structure where middle-class women cared for the home and became the spiritual guides for the household [29]. This dichotomy was not 'traditional'; it involved a radical reduction in the roles that women had previously held in public life in support of the new economic and political demands of liberal capitalism. Gender roles and one's relationship to them have long changed from generation to generation.

Tracing the lineage of our current beliefs about gender norms is a complex task. Cultural and social meanings of gender change rapidly over time—such as the much-cited example of pink being recognised as a masculine and gender-neutral colour until the twentieth century—and historical associations in fashion were often not about gender at all. Clothing colour could be related to children's *age* as much as their gender. The colour white, for example, was considered the most appropriate colour for babies: it had no gendered significance but only an age-based meaning [30]. Racialised and colonial views about bodies have also heavily influenced White western culture's gendered norms. Historians have pointed out that the valorisation of hairlessness for women is derived from profoundly racist taxonomies of cleanliness, exoticism, and sexual objectification of women of colour [31], as are associations between slenderness and women's beauty [32]. These gendered and racialised ideas were not just cultural phenomena but historically backed by the scientific and social research of White intellectuals from fields as diverse as anthropology, physiology, education, gynaecology, and biology [33].

Cisgender masculinities were just as susceptible to gender dynamism as were cisgender femininities. Early twentieth-century eugenic discourses, found in medicine and mainstream political thought, argued that desk work and technology had made White men physically and mentally weak—they believed they had been feminised by industrial capitalism [34]. As a reaction later in the twentieth century, White masculinities tended toward militarised displays of physical prowess and emotionlessness. Others developed counter masculinities such as the Black 'sissy', a cultural identity for cisgender straight men, cisgender gay men, and gender non-conforming people with feminised elements in voice and body language. The purpose of this gender was not just subversion of White cultural norms; the 'sissy' held a political role in Black liberation: it was an insurgent element against White men's control and the hyper-masculine stereotypes of Black men [35].

Race, gender, age, economics, labour, and spirituality all connect to the dynamic possibilities of gender. But gender dynamism can be as liberating as it has been controlling. Wiradjuri trans non-binary scholar Sandy O'Sullivan describes

the collective effects of White gender norms as the 'colonial project of gender' [36]. British coloniser's criminalisation of ancient genders such as *hijra* in India and their complex social, cultural, and spiritual elements are one example of this colonial project [37]. The contemporary hegemony of the gender binary cannot be separated from the colonial destruction of Indigenous people's cultural, social, and economically expansive genders, sexes, and kinship relations.

There are also clear generational differences in the lexicon for understanding gender that impact—and are impacted by—how individuals of different ages understand their embodied lives [38]. Generation Z (born 1997 onward), for example, have been described as holding more complex ways of understanding gender than any recent western cohort, driven in part by coming of age in a digital era where the distinction between offline and online is obscured and information for understanding oneself is more available than ever before [39]. In forging identity, this generation place a particular importance on aspects of identity that have been fought for by minorities and that majorities can no longer evade. In doing so, they are leading a revolution in how such identities are responded to, and in the case of gender, increasing flexibility and choice. Generation Z are most likely to report expansive gender identities even compared with their nearest age-counterparts, Millennials [40]. Despite using a more complex lexicon than previous generations, 55% of Gen Z believe that gender identity labels can be too restrictive and limit their ability to communicate their authentic selves [41].

4 Gender across the life-course

There are also many life phases or milestones which are nearly—if not entirely—universal and which often involve a certain level of gender negotiation and exploration. Early childhood is the first and often most powerful example of this; children 'play' with gender, crossing boundaries around dress and behaviour and ways of relating to and emulating others, often to such an extent that they become at odds with the rigid gender frameworks that are foisted upon them [42, 43]. This fluidity is something that is often suppressed or binarised by systems such as formal early childhood education, which create gendered 'self-fulfilling prophecies' [44, p. 587] that enforce gendered expectations and bioessentialist perspectives on gendered identities and bodies rather than meeting children at whatever (de)gendered place they find themselves [45]. For human beings, the first few years of life, by its very nature, involves the gathering of information in a piecemeal manner until one can cobble it into a rational framework. Our understanding of gender also develops in exactly this way; we spend our earliest years consciously and unconsciously collecting information on how gender is discussed, expressed, and embodied. The more experience we gather, the more certain we become in our position on gender, and the place(s) in which we settle is often a matter of the quality and depth of data we have gathered and our own inner connection or disconnection from that information.

Adolescence is also a period of significant shifts in our relationship with gender. Oftentimes research on this phase of life is positioned as intensification, wherein previous understandings of one's gender are simply amplified and built upon [46], with adolescents attaching themselves strongly to binary gendered stereotypes [47]. However, many adolescents may in fact retain much of the gender ambiguity and fluidity they experienced in childhood, failing to be categorised into binary gender roles and expectations [48, 49]. The notion of a linear escalation in genderness as we progress from childhood to adolescence and finally into adulthood is predicated on several sociocultural factors which, when inspected more closely, are much more indicative of the lens through which gender is measured than of a fundamental truth about gender and maturity. For example, Andersen et al. [50] compared gendered differences in competitiveness between a matriarchal and patriarchal society. They found that while a patriarchal society produced differences (with girls being less competitive), the same binary could not be found in a matriarchal society, where competitiveness was not typically a gendered behaviour. This goes against standard narratives of competitiveness and gender that are upheld by other research, wherein womanhood is a signifier of lack of competitiveness which is then a signifier of womanhood [51–54]; an ouroboros[3] of gender logic. Gender stereotypes, and our adherence to them, are therefore far from universal; for much of psychological (and other) research on the topic of gender development, genderness is in the eye of the beholder.

Though we are wary of hinging our argument on any kind of biological essentialism, a significant milestone in later adulthood which also carries with it a shift in one's relationship to gender is that of menopause/andropause. Often, there is an embodied dimension to discussions of these experiences, as normative perceptions of gender tend to be grounded in normative assumptions about embodiment, including fertility, sex drive, and body shape, with meno/andropause

[3] A circular symbol that depicts a snake or dragon devouring its own tail that is typically used to represent a never-ending cycle of change, destruction and rebirth.

becoming a significant disruption to these identifiers [55–59]. This disruption is commonly positioned as a 'crisis' [60–62], a threat to a person's innate sense of masculinity or femininity. If the rich body of knowledge on transness and gender non-conformity has taught us anything, it is that feelings of peril or catastrophe in the realm of gender, at their core, are indicators of the instability of gender as an inborn identity [62–64]. As Gambaudo [65] notes, while the onset of menopause has been woven into hegemonic narratives of gender, namely its role as a life milestone that is purported to be both gender-affirming and exclusive to females, critical perspectives on this psychophysiological shift suggest that menopause can also instigate dissident narratives which challenge the role of biology in determining gender. Indeed, there is a growing understanding that ageing can produce an inner and/or social androgyny, wherein gender roles and identities begin to merge across the gender binary [66], at least within the White, highly educated samples studied to date. Meno/andropause therefore provides us with a powerful indicator of this move towards androgyny; the loss of those empirical biological markers most often attributed to binary genders (e.g., high oestrogen for women, high testosterone for men) creating a space of gender ambiguity and fluidity from which many personal and social discoveries can be made.

5 Points of resistance

Having explored the dynamic nature of gender across multiple timescales and considered the ways psychology as a discipline continues to contend with itself to rectify its history of cisgenderism and gender normativity, we can begin to unpack how we might resist these narratives and form a pathway forward. Firstly, there are many myths that need to be dispelled: the notion that trans peoples' gender experience is radically separate to that of cisgender people; the idea that gender experiences can only be understood using linear, stable modes of measurement; and the assumption that current methods of research and practice are sufficiently robust to not have to engage with this compelling evidence of the way that many peoples and societies experience gender.

It is imperative to consider societal perspectives on gender as they relate to trans peoples. In a sense, the concept of transness in many western societies has been shaped in such a way that trans peoples have become a vessel for any matter of gender non-normativity. In some ways, the existence of trans peoples has been used to further galvanize pre-existing norms that govern how gender is understood and expressed; the positioning of transness as something rare and unusual has been utilised as a counterweight to 'normal gender', a kind of exception that proves the rule. There are myriad flaws in this position. As discussed in the previous section, gendered expression, identity, and behaviours are not static and innate, but form a part of a cumulative process which may deepen, lessen, or bifurcate one's experience of their gender as one progresses through life. Some people may become more gender-assured or gender-questioning or may move towards being increasingly genderless or genderful [67]. Gender as an aspect of one's existence may gain or lose importance, become less or more certain, and may be in flux with regards to how it affects one's relational and inner worlds. This is not a uniquely transgender experience, but a human one.

Positioning trans peoples as having an entirely separate experience of gender denies fundamental facts which have been expressed by trans communities for decades. Namely, the notion that if one's experience of gender is that of a woman or a man, it is no more relevant to divide these experiences based on sex-assigned-at-birth than it is to do so along the lines of economic, racial, or any other demographic differences [68]. Yes, there may be differences between the girlhood of a trans woman and that of a cisgender woman, but there are many more similarities and points of affinity. The historic (and present day) perspective of pathologising transness, and therefore essentially providing a diagnosis of gender [69], has certainly contributed to the perpetuation of this false dichotomy. These attempts at segregating trans experiences from "real" gender experiences deprive all of us from the opportunity to meaningfully engage with the radical truth that is unveiled by trans experiences; that gender (for all people) is both as real and material as it is finicky, complex, and socially constructed.

It is this notion of complexity that returns us to the practicalities at play in psychological research and practice. Much of the discipline of psychology continues to view and measure gender using a binary system [70, 71], despite mounting evidence within the discipline that confirms gender as exceeding and complicating this binary in multiple ways [72]. This in turn affects the efficacy of evidence-based therapeutic practices, as this 'gender narrowing' [73] lens limits researcher and practitioner capacity to fully comprehend lived experiences of gender. Part of the task of resistance then, from an academic perspective at least, is to reconsider how gender is measured, defined, and valued in research.

6 Accepting the challenge

Despite this history of suppression and erasure, trans peoples (like many feminist researchers and advocates before them) have continued to push for the expansion and deepening of psychological understandings of gender [74]. This has come in myriad forms: in-person and online protesting [75], fierce community-led advocacy [76], as well as the increasing number of trans peoples working within these disciplines who are contending with these issues through their practices and research. This pushback is not simply a matter of ideology, but represents a call for increased scientific rigour and accuracy in the field of gender psychology.

What is needed, going forward, is an explicit commitment to recognising gender as dynamic in every aspect of psychological practice. In research, this requires working in collaboration with the organisations who can connect us most reliably to the best practice in describing, engaging and representing experiences of gender, and they are those representing communities of diverse gender experiences. Community consultation is already recognised as best practice in psychological research, and this must be extended to encompass any research or clinical work that seeks to define, measure or understand gender. Clinical approaches to psychological practice also need to be informed by the expertise of communities, but these will be shaped by the professional and regulatory authorities who represent, educate and advocate for clinical psychology as a discipline. These authorities must work in respectful and open dialogue with those who hold expertise in gender as a dynamic system, beyond the gender binary, particularly those with lived experience. Across these new ways of working is a shared challenge and opportunity: how to hold space for a concept as significant as gender to be something which has characteristics that mean it is far more ambiguous, mobile and surprising than our organisational and cultural practices can easily account for. Contending with the messy realities of what gender is, and always has been, is both our obligation in honouring lived experience, and our window of opportunity for psychological practice to remain relevant and rigorous over time.

7 Conclusion

This paper has presented three aspects of gender's dynamism: that the meaning of gender has changed over time; that there are significant cultural differences in the meaning of gender; and that one's own gender and relationship to it can change, evolve, weaken, and galvanise across a lifetime. By acknowledging the complex interplay between our conceptualisations of gender and our bodies, which continue to change over time, and intersections between the individual and social processes that shape gender, we can facilitate processes of investigation within the discipline of psychology that are better attuned to lived experiences, and therefore provide reliable evidence to inform both research and clinical practice.

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