

9-2-2020

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1804439>

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Recommended Citation

McCarthy, Karen; Ballog, Meghan; Carranza, Maria Mayela; and Lee, Katherine, "Doing nonbinary gender: The occupational experience of nonbinary persons in the environment" (2020). *Occupational Therapy | Faculty Scholarship*. 14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1804439>

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Doing Nonbinary Gender: The occupational experience of nonbinary persons in the environment

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Doing Nonbinary Gender: The occupational experience of nonbinary persons in the environment

Understanding the effect of the environment is fundamental to grasping the occupational experiences of nonbinary individuals. Current research in occupational science addresses the occupations of the transgender population but often fails to distinguish between the binary and nonbinary experience. There is an absence of occupational science research that solely focuses on the nonbinary experience. This study focuses on nonbinary individuals and aims to illuminate the environmental factors that support or hinder occupational engagement for nonbinary individuals. A qualitative research design was conducted using both interviews and photo-elicitation. Data analysis from four participants over eight interviews resulted in three themes: binary environments and safe spaces, navigating binary spaces through doing gender and avoiding unsafe spaces, and undoing gender through occupation. The experience of occupations within the environment for nonbinary people involved being and doing nonbinary gender, which included avoiding certain places, doing gender, and undoing gender. Each of these responses depended on how safe and welcoming the environment was perceived to be. This study's findings illuminate that the process of doing nonbinary gender is a reciprocal relationship between the person, their occupations, and the environment. This study supports the complex nature of occupation for diverse populations that fall outside the dominant binary culture. Keywords: nonbinary; transgender; occupational science; environment

Introduction

Some people do not identify with the *binary* categories of man and woman, or male and female, but identify as *nonbinary* (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018). There is limited research within the field of occupational science focusing on nonbinary individuals and their occupations. This study explores the experiences of nonbinary individuals in the performance of their occupations and examines how environmental factors alter participation in those occupations. The guiding research question is: How does the environment impact the occupations of nonbinary individuals?

While some nonbinary people identify with the broader transgender community, others do not. Nonbinary persons do not identify as solely women or men, making them distinct from transgender persons who identify with one side of the binary (James et al. 2016). The Human Rights Campaign, a leading lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+¹) advocacy group, defines a transgender person as someone whose gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth (2019). Within the umbrella term of transgender exists two subgroups: binary, those who identify with the mainstream gender dichotomy of man and woman or male and female; and nonbinary, those who do not identify with the mainstream gender dichotomy (Human Rights Campaign, 2019; Simon, 2016). Converse to transgender, cisgender is a term used for individuals who identify with their gender assigned at birth (i.e., girl or boy) based on binary sex categories (i.e., female or male) (Human Rights Campaign, 2019; Simon, 2016).

According to the most recent statistics available, one million people in the United States (U.S.) identify as transgender (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). This recent survey fails to distinguish nonbinary as a category of transgender. However, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, a smaller survey, reported one-third of their 27,715 transgender respondents identified as non-binary (James et al., 2016). The U.S., on a federal level, fails to officially recognize nonbinary gender, with just 19 out of 50 states providing legislation requiring nonbinary gender alternatives on at least one

¹ For the purpose of this paper, the acronym LGBTQ+ is used when referencing the group of gender and sexual minorities, to be more inclusive, even when articles cited previously used the acronym LGBT or LGBTQ. The Q can stand for questioning or queer or sometimes both (Grinberg, 2019).

or more of the following government documentation: birth certificates, driver's licenses, and state identification cards (Intersex & Gender Queer Recognition Project, 2019).

A few of the terms that nonbinary individuals may identify with include: genderfluid, genderqueer (the gender counterpart to queer), agender, demigender, multigender, neutrois, pangender, third gender, bigender, and aporagender (Simon, 2016). Pronouns to replace the gendered *he* and *she* also vary based on individual preference. The most commonly used and gender-neutral pronoun of *they* and *them* will be used in this paper along with the traditional he/him and she/her binary terms as requested by each research participant. The terms used in this paper are not fully inclusive of the range of terms used by non-binary individuals but have been selected by the participants interviewed for this study and therefore most accurately represent them.

Review of the Literature

Most individuals, unaware of nonbinary identities, associate the word transgender within a binary expression and fail to recognize nonbinary identities. Current research in occupational science typically follows this trend as well. In the field of occupational science, one published scoping review was discovered during a review of the literature that contained the identifier nonbinary, by Dowers, White, Kingsley, and Swenson (2019), covering 41 articles on restrictive or enabling environments for transgender individuals. Two of the articles included in the scoping review distinguished the identity of their nonbinary participants from the umbrella term of transgender but did not focus solely on nonbinary (Cannon et al., 2017; Lykens et al., 2018). Cannon et al. (2017) examined the digital lived experiences of transgender individuals and identified one participant out of five as nonbinary. Lykens et al. (2018) interviewed ten participants about their experiences in healthcare who were genderqueer or nonbinary. In Beagan et al.'s (2012) article, one participant out of five identified as trans with a

self-presentation of androgynous but not specifically as nonbinary. When reporting about gender transition in the workplace, Phoenix and Ghul (2016) used the term transgender without clarifying or acknowledging the difference between binary and nonbinary. To date, the occupational science literature, does not solely focus on the experience of nonbinary persons. This research attempts to address the gap in knowledge by spotlighting the experience of nonbinary persons and their occupations. In light of the minimal research on nonbinary individuals, this research will review the relevant occupational science literature on transgender persons.

Social, Cultural, and Physical Environments

Dowers, White, Kingsley, and Swenson's (2019) scoping review on the transgender experience of occupation and the environment supports the notion that the environment, whether social, cultural, or physical, shapes occupational engagement. Cisnormative environments with cultural ideology perpetuates transphobia and the binary construct, restricting inclusion and participation. These restrictions force transgender individuals to implement adaptive strategies; expressing or hiding their gender identity or avoiding normative gendered spaces (Dowers et al., 2019). The gender binary is "woven into selves, interaction, institutions, and culture" (Barbee & Schrock, 2019, p. 2), leaving "no social place for a person who is neither woman nor man" (Lorber, 1994, p. 96). This dominant culture creates a "binarily-gendered world" that nonbinary persons have to navigate (Barbee & Schrock, 2019, p. 3), and includes blatant harm and discrimination, (Baker et al., 2018; Timmins, Rimes, & Rahman, 2017), everyday discomfort, and social pressures to conform to binary definitions of gender roles (Bosson, Taylor, and Prewitt-Freilino, 2006). As much as social and cultural hostility play into the discouragement of occupational participation, physical contexts do so as well. Fiani and Han (2018) support this concept in their research of transgender and

gender nonconforming participants, in which “participants frequently mentioned beaches and bathrooms, both complicated in terms of self-presentation, anatomical discomfort/dysphoria, and/or safety” (p.8). Nonbinary persons can be excluded from occupations due to factors outside their control such as public bathrooms which can lead to occupational deprivation and marginalization (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004; Whiteford, 2000). For transgender persons, the environment, whether social, cultural, or physical, shapes occupational engagement, but little is known how the dominant influence of a binary culture impacts the occupations of nonbinary individuals.

Gender and occupation: doing, undoing, and redoing gender

The term *doing gender*, originally coined by West and Zimmerman in 1987, introduces gender as not who we are but what we do, where individuals actively construct their gender identities in interactions with others and are held accountable by others to act according to gender norms. Judith Butler describes doing gender as performative, where gender is displayed within cultural contexts (Butler, 1990). Originally used to explore the binary culture of gender expression, doing gender has been criticized as a “theory of gender persistence and the inevitability of inequality” but also praised for its implication that if gender is constructed, then it can be deconstructed (Deutsch, 2007, p.106).

The social environment plays a role in how gender is performed. Deutsch advised that “we reserve the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and use the phrase ‘undoing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference” (2007, p. 122). Barbee and Schrock (2019) used the terms *gendering* and *ungendering social selves* instead of undoing gender (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009) in order to focus on social presentations of the self.

West and Zimmerman (2009) argued that gender cannot be undone but can be redone, which involves changing gender norms and accountability structures to be less oppressive. Connell (2010) defined *redoing gender* as the process where the qualities of gender are redefined. Connell (2010) argued that transpeople simultaneously engage in both the doing, undoing, and redoing of gender and might be better described as *doing transgender*. Darwin (2017) conceptualized nonbinary presentations as *doing nonbinary gender* whereby nonbinary persons are strategically engaging in both *doing binary gender* by manipulating binary gender norms in order “to pass as the desired binary gender,” and *subverting the binary* to “contribute toward the redoing of gender to include options beyond man and woman” (p.330).

These concepts of doing, undoing, and redoing gender can be explored through the occupation of dress. An example of doing gender is found in the examination of Goodman, Knotts, and Jackson’s (2007) research on the occupation of *doing dress* as part of women’s construction of gender identity. Goodman et al. (2007) state that although dress is a personal choice, a person must negotiate between their identity and the context in which the identity is expressed. Darwin’s (2017) study indicates that individuals opted out of the binary dichotomy by dressing in a genderless manner, jeans and t-shirts (undoing gender); while, other individuals’ approach included mixing gender cues by wearing clothing items and colours that are typically identified with both genders to avoid binary attributes or to move between the binaries (doing and undoing gender). Fiani and Han (2018) found that there was a clear distinction of how binary and nonbinary individuals used clothing; nonbinary individuals making a concerted effort in their clothing selection mindfully considering gender presentation and perception by others while binary individuals dress followed more implicitly within binary cultural norms (i.e. girls wear dresses). Within the occupational science realm,

Casey, a transgender nonbinary individual, used the occupation of dress to go between the masculine and feminine expression of self (Beagan et al., 2012). Although there is some literature about the occupation of dress, little is known about how other occupations are involved in doing nonbinary gender.

Methods

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, to increase understanding of a phenomena within the context in which it exists (Given, 2008), allowing for a holistic understanding of how the environment impacts the occupations of nonbinary persons. A combination of semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014) and photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004) was used to allow for in-depth descriptions of personal experiences with an under-researched population.

Participants

Four participants (Table 1) were recruited via purposeful sampling where researchers, through personal connections, located two participants who met the criteria: adult (18+ years old), identify as nonbinary (either transgender or not), have access to electronic resources to take and send photographs, have access to email, and be fluent in English. Researchers then used chain sampling and asked participants to connect them with other potential participants. Chain sampling is often used when the population under investigation is 'hidden' due to potential discrimination and sensitivity of the topic (Browne, 2005).

Exclusion criteria included binary transgender individuals, individuals that identified as non-human (otherkin), people lacking resources to take and send pictures,

and non-English speakers. The participants were not asked if they did not identify as transgender.

Table 1 Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Job
Anya	she/her	47	University Administrator
Alex	he/him	42	Preschool Teacher
Jasper	they/them	58	Writer/Psychotherapist
Star	they/them	45	Disabled Art Therapist

Data collection

Qualitative data collection was completed using two semi-structured interviews per individual (totaling eight interviews) with open-ended questions relevant to the research question. Each session included one lead interviewer and one co-interviewer.

The first semi-structured interview consisted of a series of questions that attempted to reveal impacts of the environment on occupations deemed meaningful to the participants. Probes were also used by researchers to elaborate on previous comments and clarify meanings during interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were asked to share about a typical day, personal life history, their nonbinary identity, the environments they spent time in, what occupations they performed within each environment, their level of comfort and discomfort within various environments, and factors that supported or limited their nonbinary identification.

In the second interview, participants provided photographic material representing an environment that influenced their occupations. Using photo-elicitation

interviewing (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), the photograph was used to aid the participants in sharing their experiences and to guide the interview process. Participants were asked to describe the photograph, why they chose it, their feelings about it, how they engaged in occupations in that place, what factors supported or hindered their identity expression, and to share how they would change the environment depicted in their photo to be more supportive.

Data analysis

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by two or more researchers. Codes and themes were developed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The authors immersed themselves into the data with repeated reading of the interviews. Initial codes were generated by the authors by looking at the interview transcriptions for "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data" that was "meaningful...regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). The authors sorted the codes into potential themes that summarized recurring or poignant messages being communicated. The qualitative software package Dedoose Version 8.0.42 was used to organize the data (Dedoose, 2018). The initial themes and underlying codes were discussed by all authors for consensus and relationships between the themes (main overarching themes and sub-themes within them) were established. The authors reviewed the themes at the level of coded data extracts, in relation to the entire data set. The final themes were defined and established, determining the relevance of the themes to the impact of the environment on the occupations of nonbinary persons.

Ethical considerations

In recognition of the marginalization and discrimination experienced by the selected group (Baker et al., 2018), measures were set in place to manage the sensitivity of the

material covered. On first contact, participants were informed of the intent of the research prior to collecting signed consent forms. Interviews were conducted within the environment selected in collaboration with each interviewee to minimize discomfort and cultural influences that marginalized their nonbinary expression. The decision to stop the interview at any point was reiterated and therapeutic resources outside of the study were provided to cope with surfaced emotions. To protect privacy, participants selected pseudonyms, identifying markers within the transcribed interviews (such as names and places) were omitted, and faces were blurred in photo-elicitation photographs. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dominican University of California, Institutional Review Board.

Rigor

To increase credibility and confirmability, the researchers used member checking for quotes, results, and discussion. During data analysis, two researchers reviewed each interview to confirm consistent coding and all four researchers discussed and reached consensus for all themes. Findings were sent to participants via email to affirm that the findings reflected their experiences.

Findings

After a thorough analysis of the interview transcriptions, three prominent themes were identified with subthemes (Table 2). The first theme, *environmental impact*, explored the impacts of the participants' environments, including both binary and safe spaces. The second theme, *navigating binary spaces*, highlighted how participants navigated binary spaces through doing gender and avoiding unsafe spaces. The third theme, *undoing gender*, explored how participants engaged in undoing gender through occupation.

Table 2 Themes and subthemes

<i>Main Themes</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>
Environmental Impact	Binary Environments Safe Spaces
Navigating Binary Spaces	Doing Gender Avoiding Unsafe Spaces
Undoing Gender Through Occupation	

Environmental impact

Factors of the environment impacted the occupational experience of the participants. Specific aspects included whether the environment was a *binary environment* that reinforced a dominant binary culture where participants felt unsafe or unwelcome, or whether the environment was a *safe space* and inclusive of nonbinary identities allowing participants to be their authentic selves.

Binary environments

Binary environments include the social, physical and cultural environments to which participants are exposed to. Participants felt marginalized in the binary culture and frustrated by the vast role that gender played in all aspects of life. Star commented on the dominance of gender in everyday life:

Um, we're always gendering each other. That's why I say I have a gender, and it's nonbinary... there isn't really a space for post-gender experience just yet. Like when somebody is submerged in this world where everybody has a gender. (Star, they/their)

Participants felt overwhelmed by binary physical spaces that reinforced cisgender cultural expectations. Alex elaborated that certain physical places, like binary bathrooms, embraced the binary culture and reinforced adherence to its standard in occupational engagement.

I think when you force people to separate like that and, like, you go to the women's bathroom and all the women are, like, putting on the makeup and you know, like, doing their hair and the mascara and whatever. And it's just, like, it kind of forces you to be around that in a way that, like, you just don't really have a choice. Um, and it just doesn't feel awesome. (Alex, he/him)

Likewise, even within LGBTQ+ environments where nonbinary people would expect to be inclusive (such as the Castro District in San Francisco), Alex reported feeling “gated” off from the cis-normative society and secluded to the confines of the LGBTQ+ space.

And so, it's a little bit of like, yes, it's exciting and it's a party, but it's also like, it's overwhelming and it's also a ghetto. It's like a,... it's a gated world, you know what I mean? It's very confined and it's like, here's your little ghetto. Just, just stay there. (Alex, he/him)

Physical symbols within the environment contributed to discomfort. For example, when an environment perpetuated the normative nuclear family structure and binary gender roles, participants were less inclined to attend those locations (see Figure 1).

Um, well I think that when people are putting photos up on the wall or paintings, they are not thinking about “how is this gonna make people feel?” right?... I would ask them to think more of like, “oh, is this image like you know, how is gender

represented in this photograph?’ And “is gender very dominant in this image?” ... then if you still choose to put it up, which is fine, just, like, be aware that that’s what you’re putting on your wall. (Alex, he/him)

Figure 1 Photo of Alex’s friends’ home depicting a wall of binary family photos.



Participants not only felt discomfort in some environments, but also felt a strong sense of fear for their safety especially in public social spaces.

So, I guess there is, in general, there is a feeling of, it's subtle, but it's pervasive. A feeling of danger when you go out in public. Maybe not explicit danger, like physical violence, but there is a... sense of not being completely safe just when I go out in a big city. (Anya, she/her)

Each negative aspect of the binary culture was experienced in social spaces, such as public spaces, businesses, neighbourhoods, and other peoples’ homes, that were not in the immediate control of the individual. Participants felt a range of emotions while being in the binary environments, from being uncomfortable, overwhelmed, segregated, to fear for their safety.

Safe spaces

Participants sought out social spaces that felt the most inclusive and safe. Safe public spaces included locations that intentionally promoted, displayed, and welcomed gender diversity. Alex stated that gender neutral bathroom signs were “a little tiny gesture, but

it goes such a long way.” Alex perceived that it might be a tiny gesture for the business but proved impactful for nonbinary persons. Alex, who provided a photo of a coffee shop’s restroom with three genders on the door, stated that the symbols indicated inclusivity and therefore comfort for him as seen in Figure 2. In turn, he was more likely to attend the coffee shop and engage in social participation with co-workers and friends there. These gestures created an inclusive space which created comfort and the sense of being seen.

Figure 2 Bathroom door at Alex’s local coffee shop with inclusive gender signs.



Nonbinary persons also found safety and comfort in their chosen group of peers, at home, and in nature. Across all four participants, social engagement with their peers invoked comfort that allowed for enhanced occupational participation. The sense of community through groups and friendships contributed to their network of support and emotional safety. Star stated:

I definitely have people that I sometimes refer to as gender friends. They are the people in my life who are either trans or nonbinary or gender queer and, um, I can have conversations with them about experiences without them misgendering me. They understand what I am talking about, um, they don't project ideas of a particular gender upon me, um, or if they do, I can say "Hey that was uncomfortable" and they'll know why I'm saying that. (Star, they/them)

Virtual environments could also be a safe space where participants felt comfortable in online groups with other queer people.

There's an online community where I'm a part of a group of [location] disabled queer people and that's an interesting place where both of those identities are supported, I feel comfortable with my gender there. And everybody else reflects that very actively. (Star, they/them)

Participants also constructed their own space in their private homes which provided safety and a sense of an oasis enhancing their occupational participation in social engagement, work, creative occupations, sexual participation, house management, and dress. The majority of the individuals' comfort level was the highest in their private homes and spaces as demonstrated in Figure 3. Alex constructed his space by eliminating pictures of couples demonstrating the gender norm, having pictures with groups of people, and images without people. Alex shared about a safe environment, "My home with my housemate is definitely like an environment that I can... relax and feel like people see me and I can sort of take off my costumes and just be me." This environment helped Alex be himself and decreased the performance aspect of gender while at home.

Figure 3 The inside of Jasper's private cabin, "It's a really welcoming space."(Jasper, they/them)



In an effort to minimize binary gender experiences, all participants relished in the genderless aspects of nature. Some participants cultivated their own personal space in nature (see Figure 4 & 5).

I frequently retreat to my backyard where I emotionally re-energized by putting my feet on the grass and just being with nature.... nature is just naturally itself without judgment. It just is.... And this is... how I wish humanity could be someday with regards to gender, allowing every being to blaze their own path or gender through the world.... I am not judged in nature and nature accepts me just as I am. (Anya, she/her)

Unlike communal spaces within society, nature was a space where participants did not need to change who they were or perform gender to feel accepted. Anya (she/her) commented that “Nature feels like a container to me. That sort of holds, holds me, uh, exactly as I am.... I don't get that in society.”

Figure 4 Jasper's space in nature.



Figure 5 Anya's space in nature "my place of refuge, um, place of healing, place of rejuvenation."



Navigating binary spaces

Participants described an internal assessment of the environment's inclusivity or exclusivity that required negotiating one's energy, effort, engagement, and nonbinary expression based on various environmental factors. The perception of being accepted or judged influenced the individual's response, which included *doing gender* and *avoiding unsafe spaces*.

Doing gender

Depending on the environment, some participants found it necessary to do gender in which they dressed or behaved in ways that aligned with binary gender norms. For some, doing gender was necessary when they felt unsafe. Alex described feeling compelled to put on a female gender performance in Italy which he perceived as having more traditional, binary gender roles:

The way for me to now be in Italy comfortably, ...is to put on my drag queen, like, female persona. Because every woman in Italy is basically a drag queen. Their makeup--they're like overly done with makeup. They're wearing the fanciest clothes. You know, they're like these, they're like big women, like, you know like beautiful big women, so you have to, like, you have to sort of take on this character to, like, be able to really function. (Alex, he/him)

Workplace environments, especially those with traditional gender norms led participants to conform to those norms to be more accommodating at work. Alex commented about their role as a preschool teacher and how they changed their behavior to match gender expectations:

I think I have this persona at work where I'm like very [with a softer voice] thoughtful and kind and gentle and very, like, exactly what people want a preschool teacher to be like. (Alex, he/him)

Alex frequently described the occupation of dress as a “performance” that he felt pressured to participate in if he wanted to keep his job or minimize his own discomfort in social environments. Anya also described how they do gender in order to avoid the bother of having to deal with social judgment.

And there in the beginning I did and for the first year and a half I remember I would just dress in masculine clothes and not really worry about presenting differently 'cause I didn't want to get..., I knew I... couldn't deal with the hassle on that particular day or something. So, I just decided to present as male. (Anya, she/her)

Avoiding unsafe spaces

Another way that participants navigated binary spaces was to avoid certain locations entirely. They avoided spaces when discomfort caused by binary cultural norms limited their self-expression and typecast them into a gender during interpersonal engagement.

Alex described his strategy regarding visiting people's homes:

I definitely avoid some people's homes. For sure. Like I'll go once, and then if I don't get, like uh, queer-friendly vibe, like, I don't wanna go again. I'm not comfortable hanging out there. (Alex, he/him)

The physical environment became restricted to areas where participants felt safe. Three out of the four participants expressed limiting their travel to areas they knew would not impose cisgendered expression upon them or areas that felt unsafe. Jasper shared about limiting their travel occupations:

Well, I avoid places. Um, places I avoid. Yeah. Like am I vacationing in Alabama? No. That sounds Yucky. Do I want to travel to a country where trans people are killed? No! Um, so those places are just off the list. (Jasper, they/them)

The environments where participants felt comfortable were limited, with some areas eliminated due to lack of safety and a culture that is not inclusive to gender diversity. Star elaborated on how they were asked to leave their women's spiritual group as a result of their decision to use they/them pronouns.

And she's like, "well, it's clear that you don't belong here at camp"...So this was like a spiritual home for me and all of a sudden, I was just booted out because, pronouns. I still hear from other people from that group and they're like, "well, I never said you couldn't be here, and you should come back"...I really don't know that I will ever feel comfortable there again. (Star, they/them)

Even though Star was later asked by members to return to the spiritual group, it became an environment where they did not feel comfortable to engage in their spiritual occupations. Each of the participants had to navigate binary spaces and determine which environments felt welcoming and safe, or which to avoid completely to protect themselves.

Undoing gender through occupation

Even if unattainable in the current binary culture, participants were motivated to move past the label of gender by undoing gender. Star shared, "I don't have a choice to step into, jump into a post gender world, even though I would love to." Their choices were often formed by the desire to counter cultural norms and challenge gendered expectations to be seen as their authentic identity. Jasper reflected on how this shaped their occupational choice of doing drag:

I always knew that people would reflect me a little bit better if I changed my hair a lot or changed my appearance or name in ways that they expected of trans-masculine people. And I finally did because it was so frustrating to not be reflected. I have to fuck with people's minds, their conceptions of gender to get them to see me. At least some people see me, or at least see that I'm some kind of queer. (Jasper, they/them)

In this example, Jasper made a blatant effort with their appearance to subvert binary distinctions of gender, undoing gender for the observer. Alex used the occupation of drag performance with the intended outcome of obscuring people's perception of his gender, undoing gender.

I was, like, onstage naked, just in my underwear...but what was really interesting is that there was this whole transformation moment...we were on stage and then we got off stage and then people were like, "Oh yeah we couldn't tell if you're a man or a woman"...it was a legit, like, people couldn't really tell. (Alex, he/him)

Participants chose to participate in occupations without gender which allowed more flexibility for self-expression. Jasper and Star engaged in a specific style of social dance that did not emphasize binary dualistic partners.

Disorientation is actually an important part of the dance. a lot of that kind of throws the traditional gender stuff on its head, like, uh, people who are not

men often can do the lifting...Uh, so there's no like leader and follower, uh, and there's no gender stereotype about like who's going to do something that requires strength, uh, or agility or whatever. (Star, they/them)

Star chose to engage in a form of dance that was more fluid and improvised. If Star was to participate in a dance class with more traditional gender roles, they decided to change the tradition of who leads in order to undo gender.

I mean I also like tango and other like classical partner dances and I usually lead even though, you know, that's not the typical gender thing for someone who's assigned female at birth. (Star, they/them)

Singing was another expressive occupation that allowed for an undoing of gender. Anya felt that singing in a social space was a platform to resist gender limitations and challenge other people's perceptions.

I feel like when I sing to music and I don't feel like I have to do, I don't have to only be in female registers, I actually can still just be down there on the male registers and enjoy it. Like I can enjoy it...Um, So I'll, you know, go down and go up and um, and sure it, it causes, some people confusion because I, you know, I do dress feminine most of the time and I've had surgeries, I have breasts and long hair and then, but then there's this deep masculine voice sometimes. And so I, but it also, I don't care. I don't care what they think [laughs]. (Anya, she/her)

In addition to dress and leisure, undoing gender also applied to house management occupations. Participants shared that they would resist being assigned chores based on perceived gender roles. Alex shared how they would resist these binary roles:

If I notice that there's a party at the house and all the women are cleaning and dealing with the kitchen and all the guys are on the couch, like, I'll say something about it. And like, oh why are all the dudes watching tv and not helping in the kitchen? You know? And then I'll say something about that. I don't like for that to go unnoticed. (Alex, he/him)

Occupations within certain environments had different gender expectations, such as who performed it and how. The participants were motivated to resist gender, even when it was uncomfortable or made others uncomfortable. Participants altered how they performed the occupation within a particular context and also actively sought out spaces where they could actively resist the gender binary.

Discussion

In this discussion the impact of the social environment on doing nonbinary gender will be addressed, as well as introducing the concept of “being” in safe spaces, and a discussion of the transactional nature of doing nonbinary gender through occupation.

Doing nonbinary gender in binary social environments

Darwin (2017) referred to doing nonbinary gender as both *doing binary gender* and *subverting the binary*. Doing nonbinary gender differed in social/public environments or private spaces due to the level of safety and comfort the participants experienced.

Participants felt that binary social environments imposed gender expectations through social participation and physical markers. Binary bathrooms provided a clear example of where binary culture was imposed by creating an environment that was exclusively for women or men. These environments reinforced traditional gendered occupations, such as applying make-up in a women’s bathroom, and constrained nonbinary individuals to binary participation or required negotiation of how to fit occupations considered of the other gender into the binary environment. This finding supports that cisnormativity restricts inclusion and participation in occupations (Dowers et al., 2019). Similar to Barbee and Schrock’s (2019) study where the environment was described as a “binarily-gendered world,” participants felt they lived in a dominant binary culture.

In this study, doing nonbinary gender in social spaces depended on whether the environment was safe and a place participants could be their authentic self. They responded to binary environments by avoiding certain places or group membership. Participants also responded by doing gender and “performing” dress in order for others to respond with more comfort, to increase safety, and to meet others’ expectations in the workplace. Barbee and Schrock (2019) also noticed that for nonbinary persons “conformity was rooted in navigating others’ intolerance” (p. 21). Similar to findings from Dowers et al. (2019), when the social environment consisted of cisnormative cultural ideology that perpetuated the binary construct it resulted in transgender individuals responding with adaptive strategies: expressing or hiding their gender identity or avoiding normative gendered spaces. It can be argued that participants were denied potential occupations such as travel and group membership, which could be a form of occupational deprivation resulting in distress, adding to the existing occupational science literature by Beagan et al. (2012).

In addition to avoiding places and doing gender, participants engaged in undoing gender. Many participants enlisted occupations, such as dress, to challenge gender norms and disrupt the status quo. This was similar to the findings in Barbee and Schock’s study, where “presenting as nonbinary in a binarily-gendered world often means making others feel ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘unable to classify you’” (Barbee & Schock, 2019, p. 13). Drag was used to simultaneously do and undo gender, by expressing gender and subverting gender to challenge gender norms. Both undoing and redoing gender attempt to challenge the binary and reduce gender difference, while the concept of redoing gender argues that gender cannot be undone (Connell, 2010; Deutch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 2009). While nonbinary actions could be seen as both undoing and redoing gender, participants highlighted their purpose of moving towards a

post gender world, while acknowledging this was idealistic in the current cultural climate. Therefore, the term undoing gender best aligns with the participants' intended outcome of their actions.

Being in safe spaces

Participants created and sought out spaces that provided departure from the dominant binary culture. Socializing with peers in person or within online communities as well as occupying home and nature were spaces where participants could just be. While there is always a performative aspect of gender (Butler, 1990), in these safe spaces their experience of being became more salient than the actions of doing or undoing gender. Wilcock (1999) describes occupation as a “synthesis of doing, being, and becoming” (p.1). One way to conceptualize doing nonbinary gender is to examine the interacting dimensions of occupational engagement using the occupational science concepts of doing and being (Wilcock, 2006). Doing can be defined as the active process of engagement in purposeful occupation, often used as a synonym for occupation (Hitch, Pépin & Stagnitti, 2014). Being “incorporates an individual’s occupational identity and also a sense of being in the moment and experiencing feelings related to occupation” (Kay & Brewis, 2017, p. 352). Wilcock (1999) described being as “nature and essence, about being true to ourselves” (p. 1). The environmental factors of being in a safe space, shifted the participants experiences and brought the essence of being to the foreground. Applying an occupational science perspective to doing nonbinary gender, adds a dimension of being to our understanding of the nonbinary person’s experience. Doing and being are both part of the occupational experience of doing nonbinary gender.

Doing nonbinary gender through occupation

The findings provided in this research contribute to nonbinary literature by adding an occupational science perspective to doing nonbinary gender. Participants negotiated the way they dressed, danced, sang, and engaged in daily tasks, as a transaction within an environment, in order to undo gender. Participants altered their hair, dressed in drag, or mixed clothing items obscuring people's perceptions of their gender. Participants also were attracted to or altered the way they engaged in dance or singing in a different way challenged by masculine and feminine roles. Altering the form of the occupation, within various environments produced a transaction in an attempt to undo gender. This transaction is how the participants experienced doing their occupations.

This study revealed the process of doing nonbinary gender as reciprocal in nature with the environment and the person mutually engaging. Participants were not singular in undoing gender. The nonbinary person and the binary context were continually changing and influencing one another in a holistic transaction process (Brinkmann, 2011; Garrison, 2001). The environment also contributed in doing/undoing gender through the display of binary symbols, gestures of inclusivity in public spaces, or the absence of binary symbols in natural environments resulting in spaces that welcomed the diversity of nonbinary occupational expression. The transactional perspective allows space for an internal negotiation where individuals find meaning through the assessment of the open system of transactions within the cisgendered world.

Limitations and implications for future research

This research team was composed of four cisgendered women. Continuous reflection and dialogue guided by Agyeman's article (2008), on researching marginalized

populations, provided opportunities to mitigate binary biases. This included reflections on gender behavior assumptions and becoming ‘sensitized’ to potential nonbinary challenges by disclosing personal experiences regarding gender identity while acknowledging an outsider perspective. Additionally, a nonbinary collaborator consulted the research team regarding nonbinary language use, research focus, and appropriate interview questions. Future research would benefit from the inclusion of nonbinary persons as part of the core research team for increased understanding of nuances in culture and language used by the participants. In addition, it is recommended that research focus on specific environments common amongst the participants for a comprehensive analysis that may illuminate disparities experienced by nonbinary persons, such as visiting health care providers.

This research failed to directly ask its participants about the impact on sense-of-self and their health or wellbeing. Safe spaces were reported to be a place of refuge and restoration which relate to wellbeing, but not all persons have access to nature, autonomy over their home space, or inclusive peer groups. Future research would benefit from more directly exploring this link to health, wellbeing, and implications for occupational deprivation for those who are unable to fully participate in occupations for reasons outside their immediate control (Whiteford, 2000).

Conclusion

Occupations are affected by both the individuals as well as supportive or aversive environments. This study highlights the nonbinary experience of navigating gender expression, through adapting the form of occupational engagement in response to the dominant cisgendered binary culture. Participants responded to environments by avoiding places and doing/undoing gender. The nonbinary experience went beyond the performance aspect of doing/undoing gender, and included being, where nonbinary

persons were able to live authentically in safe spaces such as peer groups environments, homes, and nature without fear of judgment. Participants will continue to engage in avoidance and doing/undoing gender until nonbinary gender is fully respected and embraced within the dominant social culture. Ultimately, they wish to create a more fluid and dynamic world where all can live their true identities by being and doing gender authentically.

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