



Existential Therapy and Non-Binary Gender Identities

Philosophical Considerations and Clinical Implications



Expectations for today's discussion

- Validity of individuals' self-identification
 - Fits within the framework of existential therapy's focus on autonomy (cf., Menzies & Menzies, 2024)
- Existence of nonbinary gender (e.g., Rohrer, 2024; Dembroff, 2018)



Basics of Nonbinary Gender Identities

- Terms
 - Nonbinary
 - Therefore, “nonbinary” is one term people use to describe genders that don’t fall into one of these two categories, male or female
 - (A4TE, 2024)
 - Cis-heteropatriarchy
 - “An assumed logic of deficiencies and static binaries undergirds the continued socio-cultural, legal and institutional marginalization of multiple gender and sexual identities that do not conform with heteronormativity, as well as the continued authority of masculine expressions over the feminine (Schilt, 2009; Woodson & Pabon, 2016, as cited in UnLeading, n.d.)



Problems with these definitions?

- Defining gender as nonbinary inherently locks its relation with the gender binary
 - Rohrer, 2024
 - “And of late we increasingly talk about being nonbinary, even as we clearly remain trapped in dichotomies, dualisms, and binaries.” (Rohrer, 2024, no pagination)”
 - Alternatives?
 - Rohrer: “Be negative space”
 - What might this look like for your clients/patients?



Existential Givens (Yalom, 1980)

- Death
- Freedom
- Isolation
- Meaninglessness

Will cover each in reference to nonbinary individuals



Death/Being-Towards-Death

- Nonbinary death as negation
 - E.g., Islekel, 2022
 - Situates gendered death within a framework of necropolitics (cf., Mbembe, 2003)
 - Necropolitics refers to the multiple ways in which contemporary politics works through the regulation and the maximization of death
 - Countless examples
 - E.g., Nex Benedict in the US
 - Blaming the individual for their death
 - High rates across transgender and nonbinary individuals globally (31% of trans individuals in India die by suicide, for example; Virupaksha et al., 2016)
 - Death-Bound-Subject
 - “The death-bound-subject is, by definition, one perpetually haunted by his own death, one forever on intimate terms with the paradoxically liberating possibility of suicide.” (JanMohammed, 2005, p. 229)



Pursuit of freedom

- “ Our imaginaries are constrained by fantasies of a benevolent settler state and teleological progress narratives, both of which undergird notions of American reproductive futurity. Regardless of whatever radical politics we claim, deep down many of us still “desire the state’s desire,”² and that captures us in the perpetual dichotomies of white supremacist, settler colonial, capitalist, ableist, heteropatriarchal frames.” (Rohrer, 2024)
- “One popular idea is that being nonbinary simply means being gender-nonconforming, or being androgynous. Terms such as ‘androgynous’, ‘gender fluid’ and ‘nonbinary’ are often used interchangeably in marketing campaigns and social media. But this won’t do either: many nonbinary persons are not androgynous, and many androgynous persons would not claim nonbinary identities. True, nonbinary persons are *often* androgynous. But, in many cases, androgyny simply is the catalyst for realising how thoroughly arbitrary and suffocating gender is: it cannot remain invisible to someone whose ability to fit within its structures is perpetually scrutinised.” (Dembroff, 2018)



Isolation/Desire for connection

- Nonbinary individuals may face significant marginalization even within trans communities
 - (Lykens et al., 2018)
- Traditional narratives of transition may contribute to marginalization due to the reification of the gender binary
 - E.g., Colman, 2022; Bettcher, 2015; Worthen, 2021)
- Feelings of “nothing to do about it”
 - Galupo et al., 2021



Meaninglessness/Search for Meaning

- Cis sense structures meaning in our society (e.g., Burke, 2022)
 - As an institution of meaning, an assignment is meaning made for me, that institutes and smothers “me,” even if I eventually come to take up that assignment such that it becomes meaning I make with others, i.e., I assume my assigned gender. This particular institution of gendered meaning is what I call cis sense. (Burke, 2022, p. 210)
- Meanings of gender are constantly measured against their legibility to cis sense in our society
- Identifying, and insisting on being treated, as nonbinary is an attempt to fight against this imposition of meaning
 - Dembroff, 2018)
- Alternatives?



Phenomenological considerations

- Consciousness is always consciousness of something (cf., Brentano, Husserl)
 - Implications for this? Does this necessarily mean nonbinary gender must already exist in the world?
- Phenomenological implications of cis sense?
 - How might these differ if one could be born into a world without cis sense?
- Small-group discussion
 - In your mind, what might a phenomenological approach offer in the therapy/consulting room for nonbinary clients?
 - What assumptions or norms that you hold might make it difficult to fully explore this with clients?



Vignette/Case Discussion

- Ashton (pseudonym, presentation based on several clients I have had) is 40, nonbinary, presents as more masculine, is married to their partner Nina (she/they, feminine-presenting), and has 3 children, two of whom identify as trans or nonbinary. While they have trauma they wish to work through, their main concern in seeking therapy is a wish to understand their gender identity and to unpack the internalized transphobia they have developed. Their community is affirming, but while the label nonbinary feels right to them, they struggle to understand what it *means* for them specifically, and how to understand it more fully within their daily life.
 - Types of strategies you would take?
 - Questions?
 - Concerns about your own transference/countertransference or biases?
 - Other points to consider?



Vignette

Discuss in groups, share back

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