



An Interpretive Exploration of Positive Body Image Experiences Among Nonbinary, Gender Fluid, and Genderqueer Individuals

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Positive body image refers to an “overarching love and respect for the body” – including those aspects that do not align with cultural ideals – as well as an appreciation for the body’s uniqueness and its capacity to function in varied ways (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b, p. 121). Positive body image is characterized by several core features, including body appreciation, body acceptance and love, a broad conceptualization of beauty, adaptive appearance investment, inner positivity, and filtering information in a body-protective manner (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Characteristics that promote or develop from positive body image include unconditional acceptance from others, media literacy, spirituality, and self-care (Tylka, 2012). The exploration of positive body image originated by exploring the realities of college women and adolescent girls. However, researchers have begun to explore positive body image among individuals with diverse social identities (Tiggemann, 2015). One group whose positive body image experiences remain largely under-explored, however, is individuals who identify as nonbinary, gender fluid, and/or genderqueer. Thus, the purpose of this work was to deepen understanding about the positive body image experiences among nonbinary, gender fluid, and/or genderqueer individuals by answering the question, “How do nonbinary, gender fluid, genderqueer persons form and maintain a positive body image?” We adopted a queer theoretical lens, which resists normative construction (Jagose, 1996) and which requires an understanding that evaluations of the body are shaped by gender identity. Additionally, privileging binary and heterosexual or heteronormative belief systems about bodies is resisted with this framing (Hyde et al., 2019).

Participants included 15 individuals who identified as nonbinary, gender fluid, and/or genderqueer “most of the time,” reflecting the fluidity of gender identity. The participants were classified as having positive body image according to their scores on the Body Appreciation Scale-2 [BAS-2], which was used as a pre-screening survey (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 54 ($x = 27.5$ years), were predominantly White, and were predominantly “normal weight” based upon their body mass indices. Open-ended interviews focused on participants’ body image experiences. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach for reflexive thematic analysis.

Participants’ journeys to positive body image were uneven and were sometimes long, such that their passageways to positivity often included encounters with negative body image (e.g., eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and gender dysphoria) at various junctures across their lives, consistent with prior work suggesting that body image may reflect a continuum of

experiences (Melnyk et al., 2004). Although all participants conceived of themselves as having positive body image and scored in the positive body image range on the BAS-2, their feelings of body positivity were sometimes commingled with some feelings of body negativity at the time of their interviews. Among participants, others played a pivotal role in shaping both negatively and positively charged embodied experiences. Realizing a positive body image also sometimes involved emotional work and was supported by experiences that demanded considerable self-reflection, such as therapy and work toward embracing gender identity. We identified six themes as central to participants' formation and maintenance of a positive body image.

Staging Resistance. Participants spoke about the importance of staging resistance against (a) cisgender/Western culture standards and norms of beauty and (b) stereotypes about what it means to look nonbinary (e.g., adopting an androgynous appearance) as figuring centrally in the formation of a positive body image. Resistance also was manifested in the form of avoiding social comparisons with cisgender bodies and/or only comparing the body with "like others" (e.g., other nonbinary or transgender individuals).

Representation. Participants emphasized the importance of feeling represented or "seen" to constructing a positive body image, noting that they experienced this sense of representation by meeting or seeing others in the media who shared their gendered or embodied experiences. Representation also was evident through identifying terminology to characterize their gendered or embodied experiences, seeing other nonbinary, gender fluid, and/or genderqueer individuals accept their bodies, and having their gendered or embodied experiences recognized as authentic.

Reframing Negative Body Information. Participants formed a positive body image, in part, by neutralizing negative thoughts about the body and shifting their mindset. For instance, one participant noted, "if someone doesn't like my body, that is a 'them problem', not a 'me problem.'" Another participant reframed their previously experienced gender dysphoria, noting "that's just how I am and that's how I was born...that's my biology...totally normal, fine."

Holding Inclusive Ideals for Being. Participants perceived nonbinary, gender fluid, genderqueer ideals as more flexible and inclusive than cisgender ideals, which supported the impression that many different ways of appearing/looking and being were valued. In turn, participants felt freed to "be themselves" and to rise above the pressure to look a certain way, which helped them to find self-acceptance.

Practicing Self-Care & Compassion. Participants' self-acceptance and positive body image also were grounded in practicing compassion toward the self by affording the self the same kind of love, kindness, and care extended to others (Neff, 2003). This compassion was manifested in showing the self warmth and understanding, but it also took the form of self-care practices such as routines of fitness, healthful/intuitive eating, rest, grooming/dressing (e.g., bathing, applying hormones, wearing comfortable clothes), meditation, and/or therapy.

Using Dress. Participants used dress to create a satisfying presentation of the self by (a) managing body image through dress (e.g., wearing clothes to hide or complement the body) and (b) constructing a satisfying gender identity presentation (e.g., wearing compression garments/binders, using transitional hormones, seeking "top" surgery).

Receiving and Giving Social Support. Participants enumerated the value of receiving social support to forging a positive body image. Social support from the queer community, significant others, and therapists/medical professionals provided emotional/affective support that helped participants to find strength to confront experiences of marginalization and to realize self-acceptance and positive feelings about the body and self. Participants appreciated the role of social support in promoting positive body outcomes and shared a desire to pay forward this possibility to similarly-situated others, extending support to other nonbinary individuals.

The present work adds to the body image literature by providing information on positive body image among a gender diverse and previously underexplored sample. In some ways, findings mirrored prior work exploring the ways in which individuals form and maintain a positive body image, including showing the self and body compassion and care, filtering information in a body protective manner, broadly conceptualizing beauty, and realizing acceptance by others (e.g., by feeling seen) (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Also similar to prior work, factors that helped participants to form positive body image assisted in maintaining positive body image (i.e., in a cyclical manner) (Tylka, 2012). In a palpable way, however, findings additionally reflect how the processes of forming and maintaining positive body image were uniquely situated within the context of gender identity. Findings also highlight the role of dress in contributing to positive body image among gender diverse individuals.

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