

# **Deferral: The Sociology of Young Trans People's Epiphanies and Coming Out.**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents data characterising young trans people's experience during the period prior to coming out to parents as transgender. By analysing data obtained directly from young trans and non-binary people it produces a sociological characterisation of this period overall as the 'Deferral' period. The Deferral Period is further characterised as consisting of two parts; a 'Tacit Deferral' period, prior to epiphany as trans, and subsequent 'Discursive Deferral' period. The data indicate that both these deferral periods vary in length quite considerably but usually seem to be measurable in months and years. In particular these data contest the validity of concept of 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' and the way young trans people are positioned by 'passive victim' narratives in many academic and media accounts. The analysis of the different ways young trans people construct their identities, prior to and after epiphany produces a 'Timeline of revelation'. The data suggest many commonalities of experience among young trans people, and well as some differences and in particular the data exemplify how, young trans and non-binary people's own agency is key in negotiating barriers to transition.

**Keywords:** Deferral, trans youth, ROGD, agency, sociology.

## **1. Introduction**

There have been numerous media 'moral panics' (Cohen 1999) regarding trans children and young people in recent years, with the media accused of deliberately producing ignorance (Lester 2016) and disinformation (Duck-Chong 2018) about trans children and young people, portraying them as something 'new' or 'novel'.

Archivist Gill-Peterson (2018) has demonstrated that, although trans children and young people have only recently come to the attention of the media, they have existed, and gone to school, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This has resulted in trans children and young people being positioned either as an ‘experiment’<sup>1</sup> or as passive victims<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, the evidence presented in this paper, demonstrates the crucial importance of young trans people’s own agency in negotiating affirmation and acceptance through the notion of periods of what I have termed *tacit* and *discursive deferral*. This paper intends to characterise these, into two socioculturally-constituted periods through an engagement with empirical data. *Tacit Deferral* is characterised as the period prior to becoming explicitly aware that one is transgender, *Discursive Deferral* is characterised as the period following this but before coming out to those one is close to. Additionally the point at which young trans people experience this realisation is given the term *epiphany*. Epiphany is characterised the time when one realises, usually through the acquisition of trans-specific language, that one is transgender.

## 2. Literature Review

This study is a sociological one focussing on the lived experiences of young trans and non-binary people in society. However there appears to be relatively more material published in this area in the discipline of psychology compared to others. What is most important to the study of trans and non-binary people’s lives and the hostile cultural milieu this data reveal is the way Stryker (2006) identifies how trans and non-binary people have claimed performative speaking positions as opposed to being the objects of others’ constative utterances as identified by Butler’s (1990) characterisation of gender performativity.

Riggs (2019) acknowledges that many approaches to clinicians’ work with trans and non-binary children and their families are still rooted in what Ansara and Hegarty

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<sup>1</sup> Eg Turner, *J Sunday Times* 18 Aug 2018

<sup>2</sup> Eg; Bindel, *J Daily Mail* 24 October 2016

(2014) characterise as ‘cisgenderism’ and Messner’s (2000) observation that culturally the main ideological conceptualisation of gender amongst the wider public is still essentialism is also significant in this regard. There are also a number of studies that seek to construct taxonomies relevant to young trans people’s development and understanding of their gender identities. Devor (2004) characterised a fourteen-stage model of trans men’s and trans women’s development and Pullen Sansfacon et al (2020) propose a model of gender development trajectories of young trans and non-binary people that follows three possible paths. Most relevantly for this paper Kuper et al (2018) recognised that dysphoria can exist in children and young people before they can attach any words to describe it. The subjugated knowledges to which Stryker and Foucault (1997) refer still exist in different areas, such as for trans and non-binary children and young people.

The observed difference in ages for non-binary people in relation to binary trans people in terms of coming out and transitioning is illustrated by James et al (2016) and Reisner and Hughto (2019). The former evidences that non-binary people tend to *transition* at younger ages than binary trans people, especially when compared with young trans women, while in the latter research non-binary people tended to *come out* at older ages compared to young binary-identifying trans people. Two factors might explain this apparent contradiction: Matsuno (2019) argues that the development of non-binary identities are likely to take a less linear path than binary trans people.

A recent report by dating website Tinder is reported as suggesting that around 80% of its trans and non-binary users aged between 18 and 25 are out online but not offline (Wakefield 2020) underlines the difficulty sometimes of establishing an particular point of coming out, and suggesting that this may be regarded as an ongoing process taking place at different times in different arenas rather than a single event. James et al (2016) also showed that more than a quarter of trans people were not out to most of their immediate families and that 8% had been thrown out of the family home because of their transition, but with those transitioning more recently experiencing this slightly less. Fausto-Sterling (2012) suggests that explaining to parents the psychosocial processes of gender identification may help parents accept their children’s (trans)gender identities.

Significant controversies, misconceptions and misrepresentations have proliferated in relation to transgender children and young people, for example regarding what has become known as the ‘Desistance Myth’ (Temple-Newhook et al 2018, Olson 2015, Winters 2014). This is the false claim, often made by those campaigning against trans equality, that the majority of trans children do not<sup>3</sup> become trans adults (Tannehill 2017) a claim undermined by Telfer’s evidence in a landmark court case in Australia (Family Court of Australia 2017) putting the ‘desistance’ rate at less than 4%. Most recent research (Durwood et al 2016, Sherer 2016, Olson et al 2016) shows that trans children who are able to socially transition early and have their genders accepted and affirmed benefit from this in terms of social adjustment and psychological well-being. Moreover Olson et al (2015) demonstrate that trans children regard themselves *as* their affirmed genders in the same way cisgender children do. However, the period before trans children and young people come out has relatively little scholarly material even alluding to it (Devor 2004, Kuper et al 2018, Pullen Sansfacon 2020, Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, Kennedy 2013, Kennedy 2014). Additionally Kennedy (2012) reported how older trans people recall identifying quietly as trans from a very young age and experienced a tacit cultural barrier that prevented them from coming out, describing (2013) this process as ‘Cultural Cisgenderism’.

Descriptions of the tacit deferral period are however, in evidence in a number of recently-published autobiographies of young trans people (eg Bertie 2017, Kergil 2017, Violet 2018, Andrews 2016). The most common features of these are vivid descriptions of the ways these authors came to realize that they were transgender, their descriptions of coming out to their parents and the periods leading up to this. For example Kergil describes a lengthy period after epiphany when he<sup>4</sup> was unsure of whether to come out to his parents, poignantly describing his own feelings that he just wanted everything to be normal and how he knew his parents would be disappointed because they wanted a son as well as a daughter. His book title, ‘Before I had the words’ reflects how he also experienced gender dysphoria long before he had a term to attach to it.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2016/10/how-society-failing-transgender-children>

<sup>4</sup> For readers not familiar with accepted conventions regarding gendering of trans people they are always referred to using their affirmed genders. So in this instance although Kergil was assigned female at birth, his affirmed gender is male, so the pronoun “he” is used.

Bertie (2017) experienced being outed as a 'lesbian' a long time before coming out as trans. He talked to a counsellor at school about gender dysphoria at the age of 15 and came out to his parents at 16. Violet (2018) experienced a very negative response from her mother. She described feeling gender dysphoria from a very young age and started to find out more about trans people from the internet in an online community of young trans people where it was common knowledge that coming out to parents is often met with very negative reactions and hostility. These autobiographies illustrate the findings of Travers et al (2020) who conclude that factors such as parental support, support from other adults in positions of authority, peer and mental health support, access to affirming healthcare were important factors in building resilience as well as more generic things such as the absence of poverty, stable housing and food security.

However the young autobiographers' accounts contrast markedly with Littman's (2018) publication attempting to constitute a new pathology she describes as 'Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria' (ROGD), the characterization of which appears to hinge on the assumption of a very short time span between epiphany and coming out. Restar (2019) critiqued Littman's methodology in a number of different ways, and Ashley (2018) and Costa (2019) in particular criticised the exclusion of direct data in the publication from the population about which it seeks to theorize.

In contrast with the implied passive victim narrative in some academic publications Raun's (2016) research into trans self-representation on YouTube characterises what he describes as 'screen births' as a form of empowerment for young trans people coming out and transitioning. He reports how they document their transitions, often through hormone replacement therapy over a period of time, through videos posted online. Raun characterises this process as profoundly empowering as well as political, and a process that demonstrates their transitions, by showing, and making visible their transitions over time, the way trans people had previously been encouraged to conceal their prior identities. Eckstein (2018) also examines the importance of YouTube videos, in particular from the perspective of the way temporal relations are disrupted. Jenzen (2017) similarly showed that young trans people's online communities need to be regarded as becoming quite diverse but constituting an example of empowerment

of and agency on the part of young trans and non-binary people, and constituted in the face of online architecture that can make navigating online spaces as a young trans person difficult. The creative nature of these spaces with a great deal of online content being produced by community members themselves was also evident.

### 3. This study

Resonating with Bond Stockton (2009) who first used the term *deferral* in this context, although without differentiating it further, I am introducing these two new terms, *tacit* and *discursive deferral* in this paper to facilitate discussion about transgender children and young people; these refer to two distinct periods, identified from data, that transgender children experience prior to coming out to parents. To flesh out a little further these terms outlined in the introduction, the key distinguishing element in the *Tacit Deferral* period is the feeling of gender dysphoria despite not having the language with which to understand and express it, often described by trans people as a time when they felt different but did not know why. Characterising the period following epiphany but before coming out as *Discursive Deferral*, this is the time, after acquiring terminology such as ‘trans’, ‘transgender’ or ‘gender dysphoria’ during which young trans people negotiate, usually in online spaces, and come to understand their identities, find support from others in similar positions and engage in self-learning about what it means to be trans as well as preparing to come out to others (See fig 1 on p22 below). Indeed, the process of *epiphany* can therefore be characterised as the transition between tacit deferral and discursive deferral. Epiphany allows trans children and young people to understand themselves *as trans people* and also raises their awareness of potential issues of social acceptance and discrimination, not least from their own families. The main theoretical starting-point for this study drew on the concept of cultural cisgenderism (Kennedy 2013, Pearce 2018), a highly institutionalised (ie regular or ubiquitous) but weakly discursively saturated (ie tacit or unspoken) cultural process of passive discrimination against trans people. A ubiquitous process which erases and others trans people as not genuine, non-existent, and inherently problematic. In the light of the literature the main research focus here

is on producing a characterization of trans children's and young people's experiences of the time periods prior to coming out to parents.

Data were drawn from a series of audio recorded, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 16 young trans people by the author who also identifies as trans. Of these, seven were trans men, four were trans women and five were non-binary people. The study was a follow up to Beemyn & Rankin's (2011) study of trans people of all ages which indicated that trans people born in recent decades were less likely to conceal their gender identities at younger ages than those born before this time. So participants were selected from the age range 18 to 26 in order to understand the nature of epiphany, identification, learning about themselves, the coming out process and adaption to life in the quotidian amongst this younger generation. Data collection and transcription was completed prior to the publication of Littman (2018) and was part of a wider cross-sectional qualitative research project. Prompted by the Littman publication, data have been re-analysed drawing on an emergent thematic analysis (Robson and McCartan 2016) of this interview material drawing on the concept of cultural cisgenderism. Data that represented deferral was selected and subsequently coded in relation to the two stages, Tacit and Discursive Deferral, as well as in relation to experience of Epiphany.

This study employed data that had come from a larger and wider study of the lives of young trans people for a doctoral thesis in sociology relating to the lived experiences of trans identities and self-learning. Most of the data referred to here were not used in the finished thesis but were taken from memos and notes made during data analysis. All this data, of course, came directly from the young trans people themselves, an ethical consideration as well as a methodological one. All but one participant interview lasted considerably longer than an hour, with the longest lasting two hours and ten minutes. Prior informed consent was obtained directly from participants who were all over 18. This avoided the possibility of their being gate-kept from participating, by parents or others, something that might have resulted in a skewed sample potentially excluding those whose parents were uncooperative or opposed their transitions, which was the case for a significant number of participants. One non-binary participant also disclosed an intersex condition. All were white apart from two, one of whom was mixed race. Participants lived mainly in the south of England,

except for two who lived in Denmark. Pseudonyms reflecting participants' cultural heritages and affirmed genders are used throughout.

It became apparent that it could be difficult to categorise most participants according to existing taxonomies of sexuality as Stryker (2006) acknowledges. Indeed the existence of trans and non-binary people problematises Queer Studies' homonormativity. For example one participant originally identified as a gay man but after transition, a bisexual woman, another identified as a lesbian to and subsequently a pansexual man. One participant identified as asexual as a result of experiencing domestic violence at the hands of a former girlfriend, a non-binary participant found it difficult to characterise their sexuality other than reporting that they could not enjoy sex with someone who regarded them as their birth assigned gender, something expressed by a couple of binary participants also. Some did not regard their sexualities as changing at all. It almost seemed that, for most participants, sexuality, rather than constituting something central to their identities, was reported as something to be navigated in a not dissimilar way to other elements of their lives like family, friends, education and work. In terms of their physical transition two trans men and one non-binary person declared that they had had top surgery, most reported that they were taking hormones, although three were not, one of whom reported being medically unable to do so, and another described experiencing trouble with resistance to this from her GP. One reported self-medicating in the past. Only one participant reported having had genital reconstruction surgery at the time of data collection.

In terms of parental support, there was a huge variation between participants' experiences, but only one reported full, active parental support from the time he came out, while one other reported relatively passive support after explaining what it meant to be trans. Two reported that they were estranged from their parents entirely, two reported initial resistance followed by support later, although the duration of this opposition was very different, and the rest reported varying degrees of parental opposition and outright hostility, from them not being welcome to come home for Christmas to a trans man being forced to detransition while at home during university holidays. One reported acceptance from his father and opposition from his mother, another reported the opposite. This variety of different experiences may be explained by the way this study recruited participants, all aged over 18, through social media,



trans self-help groups and word of mouth, purposely to avoid institutional settings and possible parental gatekeeping. The main limitations of this study are twofold. It does not apply straightforwardly to children who come out as trans or non-binary at a very young age, like well known trans advocate Jazz Jennings for example. Although these children may appear relatively few in number in relation to those coming out in later childhood and adolescence, their numbers and their experiences are not insignificant. Whether there are further nuances in terms of the way trans people experience deferral and epiphany could be the focus of further research. For example the way some participants considered themselves to be cisgender gay or lesbian prior to epiphany, and some did not, might be a useful avenue of further inquiry.

Ethics always needs to be specific concern in research involving trans people, and since there appear to have been a disproportionate number of ethical issues raised about research in this area (Adams 2017, Conway 2007, Riddell 1980) this was taken particularly seriously. Prior ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethical review panel, and ethical guidance from the British Sociological Association formed its basis. Issues regarding anonymity were addressed specifically and full prior informed consent was obtained. In particular the author considered that avoiding epistemological violence during the analysis was particularly important. As characterised by Teo (2010), epistemological violence refers to an interpretation of the data, in the context of the social sciences, which produces Othering through interpretations of inferiority or problematization, particularly when interpretations which do not do this are viable.

#### **4. Empirical data analysis**

Data analysis focussed on the parts of the transcripts where epiphanies, coming out and the times before these events were reported. The data is presented in three sections; Tacit Deferral, Epiphany and Discursive Deferral. Initially data relating to the period of Tacit Deferral will be examined.

#### 4.1 Tacit Deferral

In their interviews, most participants described coming out to their parents but reported knowing they were different in some way well before this time. A typical example is Shane, a trans man who knew he was different from a very young age, but did not have access to the vocabulary with which to express it.

I knew I was different... from a kind of a young age because, I always played with the boys when I was at school, I didn't have any female friends... and that was from primary school, about 8 or 9. But I come from quite a conservative small town so it's... I didn't hear about the word 'transgender' until I moved out when I was 18.

In Shane's case his access to the vocabulary that may have enabled him better to understand his circumstances was blocked by his parents, who closely monitored his internet access at home. The tacit experience of gender dysphoria from a very young age was described by another non-binary participant, Phil, who reported that his mother '...told me that I started rejecting dresses at age three' described how he signed his primary school homework with a variety of male names.

I was angry about being perceived as a girl but I didn't really identify as a boy that much, like I did things that implied that, so I mean... I found some stuff in my mother's attic, like notes from my... Like I had 7 or 8 different names that I had through infancy, and I would have a boy's name and they'd be like 'No that's not your name.'

Trans man Wesley initially identified outwardly as a butch lesbian in order to give himself more space to behave and dress in a more comfortable way for him.

I was always a tomboy as a child, and I did say to my mum quite a bit when I was a child, 'Oh I wanna be a boy.' And I did play with boys' toys quite a bit and when I was kind of 12 or 13 I came out as gay... and I think coming out as gay became almost a pathway to dress in a more butch way, and you know, cut my hair short, because it was really, really long...

James, a trans man, described how he, like Phil, firmly rejected feminine clothing from a very young age;

My mum... she couldn't get me in a dress from the age of about three. I would refuse; the tantrums just were not worth it.

However another trans man, David appears to have originally misinterpreted his gender dysphoria and considered himself to be a lesbian, describing subsequently the realization that he wasn't.

I've felt different since as long as I can remember. I do remember one day when I was walking to school in seventh grade, something... not sure why... I thought... it was just a random thought, gender identity and sexual orientation, I would probably think of myself as a butch lesbian or masculine lesbian; 'But that's just wrong... Does not compute...!'

James vividly described the way he felt before his epiphany as a trans man;

I think for a while I just felt like I was on autopilot, just kind of drifting along not really sure what I was doing. I think people would probably say that though I was there I was not always completely there, I was just slightly disengaged in life, but not quite knowing what the problem was...

Again, here James described how he tacitly understood he was different but needed access to the relevant vocabulary before he could rationalize his situation discursively and start to make informed decisions about his own life. Thus there was nothing 'sudden' about his decision to come out as a trans man.

## 4.2 Epiphany

Because his internet access was monitored by his parents Shane described what happened when he started university and first had unmonitored connectivity,

... I was on a website about sexualities and I was like 'Oh yeah! I'm trans.' I went and looked it up, and I was like 'Oh great there's a word for what's wrong!'

In contrast Phil described how he experienced a discursive epiphany at the age of 12, when he first encountered the term 'transgender'.

I remember when I found out about the word transgender, and it was totally by chance it just appeared in a newspaper, it was an article about like, you know how there's this thing about how pink used to be for boys and blue used to be

for girls or something...it was an article about that, I was like 13, maybe even 12, and I found this article and they were saying, "these children weren't transgender." It was just an offhand mention of that word, and I was like "What does that mean that sounds like... The context of it was like...suggestive of something so I Just googled it...and then I found out what it meant

The acquisition of such vocabulary is characterised as a 'lexic key' (Kennedy 2014) that enables use of the internet to come to understand more about one's situation, make contact with other young trans people in the same situation and find out what options might be available to them. This acquisition of vocabulary is significant because the existence of a term that describes their experience also suggests there must be others like them. Vocabulary acquisition is usually something that occurs in a very short space of time, in contrast to the feeling of dysphoria, which was reported as existing and intensifying over a much longer time period, often being recognised in retrospect from a very young age.

Trans man, Harry described his own active search for answers to why he didn't feel like a girl, by using the internet, and fortunately he discovered material written by young trans men to which he could relate;

...when I turned 14, over the summer in between year nine and year 10, I went on the Internet and just typed in things like 'I don't like being a girl, I don't like...' Things about not being a girl and those searches led me to people's blogs who are transgender.

It was more than a year before Harry would come out to his parents, although he was out to his school friends before that. Steve also took his time between epiphany and coming out because he was concerned about the stigma of being transgender. In his case he waited until he had finished his first year at university before telling his parents,

...as soon as I found out I didn't really want to believe it in a way but I was like there's no... there's nothing I can do I have to do this now, and I just... I tried to stop myself but couldn't, it was just... you know... who I was. [...] I tried to... I didn't try to go overly feminine or anything, I just tried to hold back from being overtly masculine as much as I could...

Young trans woman, Samira's experience was different; she described how her

epiphany took two years of gradually coming to the realization she was trans, reading online material about trans people.

It took me a couple of years, it was seeing, all, you know, Carmen Carrera's posts writing about trans power and all that and I was... I could really connect with what you're saying, the thoughts, the feelings and I was like... I always knew deep, deep down, but it's accepting it in yourself...

This two-year period constituted a kind of internal struggle for Samira, believed by those around her to be a gay man, something that appeared to influence her to the extent that she needed time to move beyond it. Her experience of understanding that it was easier to be accepted as a feminine gay man than transgender is echoed by other participants.

### **4.3 Discursive Deferral**

Typical of the participants Harry waited more than a year before telling his parents, because he believed they would find it hard to accept him as a trans man. He recruited the cover of presenting as a butch lesbian to permit him to present in a more masculine way,

...I knew they would freak out about it so I wanted to ease into it but then by the time I was 15 I was identifying as transgender female-to-male and I told my friends to call me 'he' and use my new name.

Wesley also recruited the appearance of a butch lesbian in order to engage in some of the performative aspects of masculinity before discursively coming out as a boy and using male pronouns, which he did when he was in the 6th form, much to the annoyance of his mother.

I didn't fit the picture of what she wanted, er... gender, gender's more complicated... because she doesn't understand, for example that gender and sexuality is separate, she's kind of... of the opinion, for example that you can't be a gay trans man, or, you know lesbian trans woman...

Hannah, a young trans woman, also recruited sexuality as a cover to enable her to act in a less masculine way without discursively coming out as a girl. Starting secondary school she came to understand her gender identity,

... from about 11, secondary school basically, and... it was noticeable that I wasn't the same as everyone else, everyone else was a bit different to me, I couldn't relate to them in the same way that they all could seem to relate to each other...

Her response to finding herself in this situation was to adapt to the circumstances as best she could given her situation,

I... came out as gay just to sort of give myself a little bit of freedom in that respect, and although I was claiming to be something I wasn't I didn't have to pretend to be masculine or anything...

She explained her reasons for concealing her gender identity until much later; that she was fearful of the reactions of those around her,

By about 12 was when I sort of knew I was trans but I was afraid of coming out, I was afraid of coming out and afraid how people would react so I was really... it was out of the question to pursue it...

Hannah did not come out to her parents until she was 15 and had survived two suicide attempts, but it took a further three years before she was able to convince them that she was not going through a 'phase'.

Phil described coming out to his mother at 13, at a time when his peers were exploring sexuality,

I just didn't have a sexuality at all and I came out to my mum, 'I think I'm a boy...' I can't remember what I said to her exactly because the vivid memory was of her response because it was; 'Can't you just be a lesbian?' And I was like, it hadn't even occurred to me, it wasn't even like... I was like... I don't care about that, like it's so irrelevant to my life...

Yet ultimately Phil came to identify outwardly as a gay man. Gender dysphoria often appears to be misinterpreted as homosexuality by parents, and sometimes by the young trans people themselves during tacit deferral. What is interesting is that, while David, in the tacit deferral section above, himself initially misinterpreted his gender dysphoria for sexuality Phil did not, his mother did when he came out to her. It is evident that sexuality constitutes the main initial misinterpretation of feelings of

gender dysphoria or gender non-conforming behaviour for many participants, and many of their parents.

A significant factor seems to be language. In many instances young trans people described how they experienced gender dysphoria despite not being able to express this in language. It was evident for many that gender dysphoria was present in a pre-discursive form. The way this appears to manifest itself, for example trans boys rejecting dresses at a very young age, usually appears to be interpreted as signifying something else; a tomboy, an effeminate boy or a butch lesbian. As James put it;

I think they were waiting for me to come out of the closet. Then I did, but it wasn't quite what they were expecting.

So, the data indicate that these misinterpretations regarding sexuality can also be applied by young trans people to themselves, and in different ways. So some came to regard themselves as lesbians for example, even though, after transitioning, they came to identify as gay men, in contrast others realised they were trans early on but recruited gay or lesbian identities in order to avoid having to conform to rigid gender stereotypes. In some cases they felt the stigma of being trans or non-binary, rather than gay or lesbian would result in their being rejected, bullied or disowned by those around them.

What also appears to be significant from this data is that the timing of these different stages is not linked to any specific chronological age, sexuality or gender identification. For example Phil (who identified as non-binary) and Hannah (binary trans girl) experienced epiphany at the age of 12, Harry (trans man) 14, Shane 18 (trans man) 18, Caroline (non-binary) 18, Jake (trans man) 19 and Brett (non-binary) 25. None described coming out to parents immediately following epiphany; the quickest was many months afterwards. Yet all participants, in some way, described following the pattern; tacit deferral > epiphany > discursive deferral > coming out. This suggests that it is a socioculturally-produced pattern, produced by both a cultural erasure of trans people as a cultural resistance to acceptance of trans people.

## 5. Discussion

What is meant by ‘knowing’ is a key issue here. It is evident that many participants were experiencing high levels of gender dysphoria before acquiring the vocabulary with which to express it. In effect they were doing things that were non-cisgender but were unable to identify explicitly as trans. It seems that trans children and young people usually feel different from others but do not know why. In some instances they feel a disconnect with their assigned gender but cannot put their finger on the reason for it, others seem to misinterpret this as signifying something else, like homosexuality. This is the ‘*Tacit Deferral*’ period.

Epiphany appears to be a significant time for trans people when this sense of gender dysphoria changes from being non-discursive to discursive. Epiphany can occur in an instant as it did for Shane, or over an extended period, as it did for Samira. Epiphany then inaugurates the *Discursive Deferral* period, in effect the time when *Tacit Deferral* becomes *discursive*, the time when everything that may have been a mystery to the individual throughout tacit deferral can start to make sense. The acquisition of language allows that which young trans people experienced tacitly, to become something they can think about in a more conscious way.

The length of the second stage, discursive deferral, may vary also, but its length can be regarded as less arbitrary in the sense that it is usually the individual trans person’s decision about whether and when to come out. In the case of Caroline, a young non-binary participant who came out to their parents while working and living away from home for the first time, this period was just a few months. In contrast, another young trans woman participant, Fiona, was so estranged from her parents that it seems unlikely that she would ever be in contact them again, much less come out to them. So while the tacit deferral period appears to be measured in years, the discursive deferral period appears to be measurable in months or years. It is important to re-emphasise here that the two deferral periods are not age-related, nor do they appear they dependent on gender identity or sexuality.

The discursive deferral period means that it becomes possible to communicate online with similar people. This means it is possible to share others’ experiences prior to



coming out, and to make sense of previous non-discursive – but also non-cisgender – experiences. So differentiating between the tacit and the discursive therefore facilitates a greater understanding of the process of epiphany and the time leading up to it. Discursive deferral makes accessing such communities possible in a way that tacit deferral cannot. To refer back to the theoretical framework for this study, that of the effects of cultural cisgenderism (Kennedy 2013), it is evident that cultural cisgenderism can be regarded as the cause of the experiences of participants. The tacit deferral stage can be regarded as the consequence of the ubiquitous but unstated nature of cultural cisgenderism as a cultural process. Participants do not come to understand themselves as transgender because that knowledge – in explicit form – is denied them by this cultural process. In the discursive deferral stage they are cautious about coming out to parents because the ubiquitous and unstated nature of cultural cisgenderism affects communication with parents and other family members. It is difficult to talk to family members because they do not know what the reaction is likely to be and difficult to find out without coming out.

The effects of cultural cisgenderism are such that it is often assumed that being ‘opposed to trans people’ is the norm, something possibly reinforced by the media. Shane describes his experience of the way one of his relatives attempted to recruit that assumption to delegitimise him while he was helping her move house;

I went round to help her move all her stuff and the old people came into the new property... just to pick up their post, and I’m standing there like this (indicates bearded face) with a beard like this (indicates again) and she was just saying ‘Oh this is my daughter’. I’d never met these people in my entire life...

This suggests that his mother was making the assumption that these complete strangers would also be as opposed to trans people as she is. An assumption based on her judgement of the prevalence of anti-trans sentiment in wider society. So although trans people are being talked about more in the media, this tends to be predominantly negative. The effect of this is to make young trans people assume that wider society (including quite possibly their own parents) is more transphobic than it is. Thus, while this element is highly discursively saturated rather than tacit, it contributes to the cultural environment that is likely to make young trans people feel uncertain about the possible reactions of their parents. At local level cultural cisgenderism is reinforced

by the assumptions young trans people make about wider society's transphobia based on their judgements of both wider cultural attitudes as well as the reactions, on an individual level, of their parents.

To review, as can be seen in fig 1, below, tacit deferral is characterised as the time prior to experiencing epiphany as a trans person. This epiphany is characterised therefore as necessarily constituting an acquisition of relevant language. Discursive deferral is constituted as the time between epiphany and the point of coming out. Both these periods appear to vary in length quite considerably.



*Fig. 1 Timeline of Revelation*

In many instances it is likely that trans children and young people will be unable to predict whether their parents' attitudes to them coming out will be positive or otherwise. For many the possibility of rejection and all that potentially comes with it is a real unknown quantity, as Violet (2018) and Kergil (2017) describe. It can include anything from being disowned and forced out onto the street to coercive measures to force conformity to one's assigned gender. Because the possibility of being ejected from the family home exists it means that coming out to one's parents can constitute an unquantifiable risk the stakes of which can feel particularly high; one may well be fine but if one is not, the consequences can be severe.

The data also suggest that the period of confusion or misunderstanding that constitutes tacit deferral often contributes to the process of epiphany by providing experiences that can be reinterpreted and reanalysed to help with this process. Shanes' exclamation, 'Oh great there's a word for what's wrong!' demonstrates how the past seems suddenly to make sense to him. Steve also describes how the past started to make sense to him when he met another trans person;

Well I had no idea what it was until I was friends with this one trans woman [...] and she would talk to me about her childhood and that kind of thing and I strongly identified but the opposite way... She was like "I liked flowers" and I

liked Spiderman... and then, over the next couple of months I just, spoke to her about it a lot...

In this instance it appears that Steve is realising that the term 'trans' applies to him, and that his past gender non-conformity was more than just gender non-conformity. The coming-out process, in contrast, is a situation where it is unlikely that the individual one is coming out to will have access to any significant prior tacit experiences to help this understanding (or if they do it is likely they will have interpreted them as signifying something else). Consequently it will almost always come as a surprise to them in a way that one's own epiphany as a trans person does not. One's own epiphany to oneself that one is not cisgender can be characterised as a relief or revelation. For the person one is coming out to, it is likely to be more of a shock. An additional problem associated with coming out seems to be that describing the way one feels in gender terms can suffer from a discursive deficit in that there are few terms of expression available with which to accurately describe the way one feels. This can make it seem vague. This can contrast with the intensity of feelings of gender dysphoria that are anything but vague, as Maines (2016) manages to describe it,

[trans children] don't get to focus on what we want to be when we grow up... I don't even remember. All I remember is that I needed to be a girl, and I couldn't move on until that was affirmed and validated.

So while there is often an overpowering need to transition that, as Maines explained, is intense enough to make it impossible for her to move on in her life, the language with which to express this can seem relatively weak; 'I think I'm a girl.' 'Mum, I'm a boy!' are phrases that fail to do justice to the powerful feelings of the need to transition that young trans people often feel. It is perhaps the existence, online, of material like Nicole Maines' TEDx talk that has, in recent years, helped young trans people to come out more easily, by giving them supporting referents. So while it is usually impossible for young trans people and trans children to come out to others during the tacit deferral period, it would appear that young trans people have every reason, during the discursive deferral period, not to come out to parents early. This is not only because of the discursive deficit but because they soon learn that parental reactions can be such an unknown quantity and the stakes very high indeed, so, in the

absence of this knowledge, deferring coming out becomes the rational thing to do. Eckstein's (2018) conceptualisation of the complex temporality of transition potentially represents a way of understanding the difference between the way a parent might perceive their child coming out to them as sudden, while the trans child or young person - doing the coming out - has experienced a complex, involved, and potentially asynchronous development of themselves and their understanding of their own gender identity including interactions with people at different stages of physical or social transition. The parent has not experienced this, and as such the perception will be overwhelmingly of a precipitous change. In contrast the young trans or non-binary person in question coming out to them may be regarding coming out as the latest stage in a very long journey that began in infancy and which they are looking forward to progressing with in the future. The contrast in experiences, expectations and temporalities is likely to make communication difficult.

The discursive deferral period can also be regarded as predominantly a consequence of cultural delegitimisation of trans people (Kennedy 2020) brought about through general level practices such as media misrepresentation (Barker 2017, Braidwood 2018) or local level practices such as transphobic bullying making coming out appear risky and dangerous. In contrast tacit deferral can be characterised as mainly produced by cultural erasure stemming from cultural cisgenderism which limits the access young trans people or trans children have to the language they need to make sense of their circumstances. So during the deferral period young trans people are under considerable pressure; weighing up the risks on the one hand, of developing unwanted secondary gender characteristics as puberty progresses, something that may make medical transition harder later, against, on the other hand, the possibility of parental rejection.

## **6. Implications**

The two deferral periods are differentiated by the presence or absence of the discursive. However they are also differentiated by epistemology and its relationship to the performative. Tacit deferral can be regarded as an effect of the epistemological, the lack of availability of knowledge in the discursive, about oneself. Discursive deferral is more about the performative, it reflects the struggle to arrive at

the position where one can – safely - declare one’s own gender to significant others. Power relations become more significant at this point. The most significant implications from this relate to the way young trans people’s time prior to coming out is regarded. By distinguishing this time as either tacit deferral or discursive deferral we can make sense of this period and consider its effects and causes.

While it would appear that the experience of epiphany as transgender is, to a significant extent, arbitrary, coming out seems to be determined by a range of competing variables such as advancing puberty, the individual young trans person’s judgement about their parents’ likely response to them coming out, support from others, including friends and relatives, and other considerations such as community environment. So unlike epiphany, coming out is often the result of an extended period of careful thought and, in some instances, planning. The agency evident here contrasts markedly with media narratives that constitute young trans people as passive ‘victims’.

There are of course also implications for Littman (2018). In her publication the methodology is based on obtaining indirect, mediated data from parents of trans children. The central assumption in her analysis seems to rest on the notion that a significant number of trans children and young people come out to their parents as soon as they realize they are trans. The data from the present study demonstrate that this is unlikely to be the case. What is more, prior to the discursive deferral period, trans children and young people usually appear to experience a lengthy period of tacit deferral, which, in many instances, they report extending back as far as they can remember. The combination of both these periods suggests that gender dysphoria is rarely, if ever, something that begins suddenly (ie ‘rapid-onset’) but is something that, for most trans people, has existed for a very long time either in tacit-but-misunderstood or discursive-but-concealed form.

The present findings contrast with Littman’s publication that records only the *appearance to others* of suddenness. The evidence presented here demonstrates that it is impossible to say, with any degree of reliability, whether any young person has suddenly become transgender or if it merely *appears* to others that way, which is entirely different. To obtain valid data regarding this time prior to coming out it is

necessary to ask trans children and young people directly about it, and even then whether accurate information is or is not forthcoming is likely to be influenced by their assessment of the questioner's motives and trustworthiness. This study calls into question the assumptions upon which Littman (2018) depends, and suggests that, rather than fitting the 'passive victim narrative' of the media, trans children and young people need to be regarded as active participants in the construction of their own lives.

## **7. Recommendations**

Medical professionals, teachers, youth workers, parents of trans children and young people need access to reliable information about being transgender and all children need accurate information about trans people from a young age. Positive and affirmative support for trans children and young people and to their parents, for example in the ways recommended by Telfer et al (2018) and The Lancet (2018) is crucial. Given the misinformation and negative mythologising of trans children on both social and mainstream media, evidence-based, informed public education about trans people in general, and trans children in particular is particularly important.

It is also recommended that, despite many media and anti-trans activist groups falsely referring to it as though it is valid, medical and mental health professionals, educators and other professionals working with trans and non-binary children and their families need to make clear that ROGD is not an accepted diagnosis and is not recognised by any medical authority. Indeed it has been expressly rejected by WPATH (WPATH 2018). In addition if they are to be considered valid and safe, guidance materials and support for school staff coming into contact with trans or non-binary children and young people in particular must robustly challenge the myth of ROGD. Teachers and parents need to understand that, while a child coming out as trans may seem sudden to them, the likelihood is that, in one way or another, they have understood themselves to be trans for a significant time period and experienced gender dysphoria for considerably longer than that. Educators, medical professionals and parents also need to know that coming out to them may constitute not merely a considerable act of courage but also an act of spirited resolve, and something they have probably been agonising over for a while. So it is important that educators and medical practitioners

understand the position of the child from the child's perspective. In reality these children and young people are probably managing bravely in a very difficult situation.

More research is needed, not merely about the periods prior to coming out as trans but also about the causes and effects of media disinformation campaigns against trans and non-binary children and young people including the way it has weaponised the myth of ROGD against them. Agnotological studies about the nature and effects of different forms of media bias against trans people in general and trans children in particular are also recommended. Research also needs to be carried out *with* trans and non-binary children and young people that neither objectifies them as passive, nor systematically excludes them from direct representation in the research process. The reality is that, in the construction of their own lives, the struggle against gendered impositions, cultural erasure, violent opposition, orchestrated hate campaigns and media disinformation, trans children and young people, usually out of brutal necessity, demonstrate uncommonly high levels of qualities that all good teachers and parents seek to foster in every child; patience, intelligence, resourcefulness, determination, courage, resilience – and above all – agency.

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