Examining the role of childhood experiences in gender identity and expression: An interpretative phenomenological analysis using social learning theory

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the role of childhood experiences and memories in shaping individuals' gender identities, expressions, and life trajectories. Whilst some research has examined the role of gender stereotypes in people's life trajectories, no research has focused on people's retrospective accounts of their gender socialisation about their current understanding of (their own) gender. We conducted eight semi-structured interviews with 20-30-year-olds living in the UK to do this. We employed interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyse our data, which enabled us to investigate participants' memories of their gender socialisations, observations, and internalisations in childhood and their interpretation of these experiences. Using insights from social learning theory, this study provides further insights into the processes of observations, internalisations, and subsequent challenges to gender based on their retrospective accounts. We show the impact of hegemonic gender stereotypes in the participants' life trajectories and hobbies (mainly sports), showing the limitations created by the gender binary system. Notably, the present findings support social learning theory, as it shows how the internalisation of gender can be challenged by new forms of gender resocialisation, including the promotion of gender equity in sports, the possibilities of gender expressions and identities beyond the binary, and the free articulation and expression of these concerns in society. By showing how gender internalisations can be malleable, this research provides practical recommendations for tackling unnecessary gender divisions in childhood settings.

Keywords

Gender Sports Education Binary Stereotypes Social Learning Theory

Statements and Declarations

The authors have no competing interests to declare relevant to this article's content.

Introduction

Gender – particularly the gender binary – plays an important role in society. Gender, as a social categorisation of society, stipulates that people's assigned gender at birth (whether male or female, and sometimes intersex) should not only influence but determine a person's life trajectory in terms of gender identity (expectation to remain in the same gender), employment opportunities, social activities and spaces such as sports, and childcare responsibilities, to name a few. Furthermore, gender is often associated with (patriarchal) privileges and inequities such as the gender pay gap, the enforcement of gender roles and expectations, and cisgenderism (the expectation that people will always be cisgender) [29, 31]. For instance, a disproportionate number of women work in social care (e.g., nursing, childcare, etc.) compared to men, who tend to be overrepresented in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and hold managerial positions in most fields [10]. Similarly, trans and non-binary people are more likely to have lower incomes and live in poverty than their cisgender counterparts [34].

These gender expectations and trajectories – and subsequent inequities – are (re)produced in society in part due to social learning – that is, children learn through observations and may internalise their understandings of society, thus creating internal schemas of their gender (i.e., identity, expression, stereotypes, roles, and expectations) [8]. For instance, the division of gender is reinforced during all stages of childhood through clothing choices, language, encouragement for specific subjects (e.g., mathematics for boys; arts for girls), and other behavioural expectations [26]. In recent years, gender reveal parties (an event that announces and celebrates the assigned gender of a foetus) have wrongly solidified the notion that gender is stable and unchangeable [18]. As such, these events perpetuate the gender binary and the expected roles and life trajectories of children, even before they are born, showing how gender expectations are socially learnt and (re)produced [18]. These social divisions by gender can impact people's access to activities and spaces historically segregated by gender, for instance, in sports, where men are prioritised in sporting facilities and coaching time compared to women [33]. These inequities have been shown to discourage women from participating in sports despite having similar abilities and potential to succeed in this domain. Therefore, how people are treated based on their gender and what is expected of them perpetuates the notion that gender differences should exist. However, Hyde et al. [20] have shown that men and women possess similar abilities and skills on most psychological and physical variables. These so-called differences are social rather than innate. For instance, recent evidence suggests that children who attend gender-neutral preschools (where less emphasis is placed on gender segregation) are less likely to apply gender stereotypes, such as suggesting pink is a 'girl colour', demonstrating the social and learned aspects of gender differentiation [23].

Whilst some research has aimed to investigate the role of gender stereotypes in people's life trajectories [5], no research has focused on people's retrospective accounts of their gender socialisation and their current gender understanding of their gender with a social learning theory lens [8]. Specifically, we are interested in understanding the role of childhood experiences – their social learning – in shaping individuals' understandings of their gender identities and expressions [8]. This study aims to bridge the gap in research between how gender is learned in childhood and how adults feel about their gendered opportunities and expressions. Therefore, this research employs social learning theory through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the role of early socialisation in the ongoing process of gender identity development. It does this by allowing participants to reflect on their childhood memories and experiences relating to their understanding of (their own) gender. We conducted eight semi-structured interviews with people of all genders (men, women, and non-binary people) living in the UK. The transcripts were then analysed using IPA, with a particular focus on how individuals understand their experiences [32]. We will show how strict gender expectations were learnt and experienced through observations in childhood and were then internalised by participants. However, these experiences often limited participants' life choices and possibilities, propelling them to challenge these internalisations in their lives via gender resocialisations. For instance, unnecessary gender segregation in childhood was seen to solidify the notion that boys/men and girls/women are different – an assumption many participants carried into their further life choices but challenged in adulthood when they learned that gender expectations can be malleable. These gender expectations were retrospectively perceived as unfavourable by all participants, regardless of their gender. These findings provide a solid base for the study of early childhood experiences related to gender socialisation, demonstrating the need to create inclusive and equitable environments where everyone can learn and develop fairly without the constraints and limitations of gender. Practical applications of these findings aimed at reducing gender inequities, including how to tackle unnecessary gender divisions in childhood settings such as education or recreational settings, will be discussed.

Literature Review

Gender differences

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines gender identity as a component of gender describing someone's self-identification based on an inherent sense of their gender. Gender identities may include boy/male/man, girl/female/woman, or non-binary/genderqueer, to name a few – which may not correspond with the gender one was assigned at birth. It is the internal relationship with gender and, therefore, is not visible to others externally, though it applies to all individuals [3]. Gender expression is how an individual communicates gender to others within their culture [4]. It is often assumed that gender identity determines gender expression; however, this is not the case for many people, as many people's gender identity does not "match" their gender expression [3]. With this understanding in mind, the following literature provides an overview of the current understanding of how gender can be learned in childhood and how it can affect a person's relationship with gender. This literature review will highlight the research gap and address how this study aims to fill that gap and add a level of understanding to the existing literature. Furthermore, it will acknowledge the importance of considering the social learning theory when discussing childhood experiences and applying this knowledge to the findings.

Psychological research has historically assumed that gender identities, expressions, and related behaviours are either feminine or masculine – that is, they are binary [20]. This understanding of gender fails to acknowledge the significant overlap of gender-related behaviours. The gender similarities hypothesis [19] proposes that men/boys and women/girls are more alike than different. Hyde [19] demonstrated this through a meta-analysis of 46 studies on gender differences covering psychological aspects such as cognitive ability, personality variables and psychological well-being of people of all ages. The findings showed that 78% of gender differences were small or trivial in statistical value, apart from results regarding aggression or sexuality. Furthermore, Hyde [19] suggested that the social aspects of gender are rarely considered when discussing how gender inequities and so-called differences are (re)produced in society. Gender stereotypes are partly a product of these so-called gender differences, as this way of framing gender normalises the idea that men and women are inherently different.

Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes perpetuate assumptions and expectations about how people should express their gender, such as the expectation that women cook but men barbeque. These gender stereotypes are used by people worldwide (though they are culture-dependent), helping societies make quick decisions about people's categorisation in society – that is, that a person is either male or female [26]. However, they can also be harmful; hegemonic masculinity is often privileged, whereas femininity is portrayed as weak and helpless [26]. As such, perceived femininity can be detrimental in some settings, including in the workplace, health settings, higher education, etc. For instance, hegemonic gender stereotypes can create the expectation that women should hold feminine values such as compassion or agreeableness and be overly emotional. In contrast, men are expected to

be extraordinarily masculine and show strength, competitiveness, and assertiveness [25]. Gender stereotypes, therefore, make people feel pressured to fulfil these expectations in their daily lives, especially during childhood [13].

Gender stereotypes are prevalent in the workplace and often dictate the access women and gender-diverse people have to positions of power. For instance, women only represent 24% of the population in STEM, as shown by the WISE survey of 2019 within the UK [40]. Despite Hyde [19] and Zell [41] indicating no significant difference in mathematic abilities and performance between men and women, this is not reflected in the representation of women within STEM workplaces. Therefore, it is the stereotypes themselves that create these gender divides and considerable everyday life implications, such as lower expectations for women or feminine individuals, including lower pay, as well as lower quality of life, as suggested by Zell et al. [41].

There are also clear examples of unnecessary gender divides in sports. For instance, Schailee et al. [33] researched the perception of gender equity in sports among Generation Z (people born after 1995) undergraduate students in sports programmes across Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, and England. Schailee et al. [33] found that sports are still generally considered masculine and that when women participated in sports, most people assumed they were not heterosexual. Participants also felt a strong divide between coaching techniques for men and women; men were encouraged to be more competitive and were given advantages such as being prioritised for training hours and access to facilities. The present research will therefore explore some of the implications of gender stereotypes on the social, psychological, and material opportunities presented to individuals as they retrospectively discussed their gendered learning.

Gendered learning: Social learning theory

Social learning theory suggests that children learn passively through observing other children, parents, or other caregivers in their social circles for their behaviours and interactions [8]. This learning method demonstrates how children imitate other behaviours and look for reinforcement on whether this behaviour is ‘acceptable’ or not. As such, children learn through observations and may internalise their understandings of society, which creates internal schemas of their gender (identity, roles, and expectations). These schemas are known to develop long-lasting biases regarding their gender, which are likely to continue into adulthood [5]. Examples of these biases include the assumption that 'brilliance' and, thus, success are male traits [25]. These biases are evident in childhood research and are also reflected in adult career trajectories [10]. These schemas also reflect behavioural and personality expectations based on peoples’ gender and are evidenced through gender stereotypes [13]. Zimmerman & West [42], for instance, showed that men display more power and dominance in their conversation interactions than women, partly due to the social expectation and stereotypes that men should communicate in such a way. Social learning theory [8] provides a helpful framework to consider how our participants learnt about (their own) gender via observational learning and modelling. Furthermore, this study draws from social learning theory to explore, in a qualitative way, how participants have come to understand/learn about their gender (through observation) retrospectively and how they have conformed to (and internalised) these societal pressures.

As previously mentioned, no qualitative research explores how early gender socialisation may have influenced people's life trajectories, especially one that retrospectively explores this topic, asking participants to reflect on their childhood experiences. Therefore, the current study aims to fill this gap by investigating people's memories of their childhood and their interpretations of these memories about their gender through the lens of the social learning theory. The present study examines how childhood experiences and early socialisation can influence how people perceive and understand (their own) gender. We also aim to explore how participants understand those early gender socialisation experiences about life trajectories, including access to employment opportunities, social activities and spaces such as sports, and other (gendered) aspects of social life.

Research Methodology

A qualitative IPA methodology was adopted for this study. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst a sample of 20-30-year-olds of various genders. All participants were based in the UK and were recruited via opportunity sampling. This research approach aimed to explore the participants' lived experiences of gender socialisation, examining how these early experiences (and observations) may have contributed to the internalisation of gender stereotypes. The interview schedule created for this study, therefore, aimed to answer our research aims by asking participants to discuss the following domains: (1) their current gender expression and identity, (2) childhood experiences of gender, including stereotypes and early discussions of gender, and (3) how childhood experiences may have influenced their life trajectories. The use of IPA enabled the researchers to explore the experiences and feelings associated with the events (in this case, the childhood memories) as well as the events themselves, moving back and forth between the participants’ and the researchers’ interpretations of these experiences – also known as ‘double hermeneutic’ in IPA research [37].

Participants and recruitment
This project received approval from the University of Suffolk's ethics committee on 11 November 2021. We followed The BPS 2018 Code of Conduct, ensuring the protection of the researcher and participants and any potential ethical issues were addressed [6]. All participants were given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity, and data was stored privately on password-protected devices to maintain confidentiality.
Eight participants were recruited using opportunity sampling, with recruitment taking place through social media adverts and the University of Suffolk's research participation system (SONA). Eligibility requirements were set to anyone aged 18-30, of any gender, and anywhere in the UK. The age group was selected to ensure participants were in the same generation and, therefore, differences in upbringing would not be greatly influenced by societal changes over time [17]. No gender or location specifications were enforced to ensure voices from all genders and backgrounds could share their experiences and create a broader range of data. Opportunity sampling was selected so that all the potential participants within this target audience could participate in the study [11]. This sampling technique allowed for a broader range of experiences to be included within the study and a more rounded and reliable collection of findings [7]. Table 1 (below) displays the demographic characteristics of the participants, including pseudonyms, as well as self-reported gender, pronouns, sexuality, and age. Three participants self-identified their gender as man/male, four as woman/female, and one as a dyke. Four of the participants used language associated with being heterosexual/straight to describe their sexuality; three identified as pan/bisexual, and one as a dyke.

Table 1. Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender (pronouns)	Sexuality	Age (years)
Eric	Man (He/him)	Heterosexual-just	24
Amelia	Female (She/her)	Pansexual	20
Britney	Feminine/Female (She/her, they/them)	Bisexual	23
Luka	Dyke (She/they)	Dyke	25
Peaches	Female (She/her)	Bisexual	24
Violet	Cisgender woman (She/her)	Heterosexual	30
Peter	Male (He/Him)	Straight	25
Enrique	Male (He/Him)	Heterosexual	22

Participants' demographic information, including pseudonyms, self-identified gender, pronouns, sexuality, and age.

Data collection
Data was collected through semi-structured interviews to gain detailed insight into the participants' experiences, which is pivotal in IPA research [32]. The researchers used literature to inform the interview schedule creation, highlighting critical areas of childhood influence to explore with the participants, covering education, parenting and sports. Furthermore, it explored different areas of gender, such as terminology, expression choices and stereotyped pressures. Through this process, the schedule was developed to encourage participants to first think about their gender identity and expression, then move on to memories and then current life experiences. Specifically, questions first urged participants to discuss language surrounding their gender identity and expression. It then moved on to exploring their childhood memories regarding gender, focusing on encouraged/discouraged childhood behaviours or hobbies and the feelings that these generated. The final section of questions discussed current feelings of pressured gender behaviours and thoughts of childhood influence. The choice of a semi-structured interview schedule was developed to encourage participants to speak freely, compared to other methods, such as diary entries, and allows for a more time-efficient way of discussing and reflecting on lived experiences [36]. Despite memories being subjective due to people's ability to report false memories, should the memories be embellished, it can be assumed that the emotions related to the events hold some subjective truth [9]. Furthermore, highly emotional memories are shown to enhance recollection of said experiences [22].

Data analysis
All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded manually by the researchers. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data by engaging in close reading, focusing on the interpretation of experiences from the point of view of the participants as well as from the interpretation of the researchers, following the recommended guidelines for conducting IPA research [29]. IPA focuses on subjective experiences, thus allowing for a detailed exploration of an individual's – and their specific – experiences and perception of these phenomena [32]. Therefore, data was analysed inductively and deductively, allowing it to speak for itself and relate it to social learning theory [8]. We focused on understanding the cognitive processing that takes place to

observe and interpret gendered experiences and form internalisations [35] of gender stereotypes. Using this phenomenological subjective perspective allowed for a case-centred approach that focused on the meaning individuals add to their lived experiences [16], such as how these observations (of gender) experiences may have impacted their life trajectories. This approach is also helpful in adding essential experiences to the general understanding of gender stereotypes in childhood. This method allowed the researchers to understand recurrent themes throughout interviews. The codes we created were then grouped to develop two main themes (relating to the research aims) with subthemes embedded within them. All researchers then agreed on the data structure (Table 2). Data has since been deposited and can be found in the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR).
Through reflexivity, the researchers acknowledge their subject positions in understanding the complex interplay between gender, unpleasant personal memories in school and sports settings, and life trajectories that are, in some way, dictated by our gender identities and expressions. All researchers have strong feelings about gender injustices, as most of us felt discouraged from engaging in masculine/feminine activities that did not align with our assigned gender at birth growing up. We have reflected upon these experiences in our meetings and diaries, and we value these positionalities as ways to (re)frame how gender inequities ought to be challenged for the benefit of future generations.

Findings

Through the analysis of the eight participant interview transcripts, two main themes were created, thus addressing the research aims of this study. Social learning theory [8] was used as a framework for identifying gender learning experiences (observations) that took place during childhood, as well as how learners internalised and made sense of these messages (in the form of gender stereotypes) to (re)produce these behaviours themselves (via internalisations). The first identified theme involved the exposure (direct observation) to hegemonic gender stereotypes from childhood and the various pressures from society that came alongside this for participants. Finally, the second theme addresses pressures and divides in sports – a popular topic of discussion for many participants, showing some of the ways participants internalised – and, importantly, challenged – these messages.

Table 2. Data structure

Theme	Subtheme	Social learning theory
Hegemonic gender stereotypes	Behavioural expectations	Observations and internalisations
	Assumptions about gender expression	Observations and internalisations
	Exposure to ‘others’	**Challenging internalisations**
	Change over time	**Challenging internalisations**
Pressures and divides in sports	Boy encouragement	Observations and internalisations
	Girls discouraged	Observations and internalisations
	Internalising divides	**Challenging internalisations**

Breakdown of themes, subthemes, and social learning theory insights

Hegemonic gender stereotypes

The notion of hegemonic gender stereotypes was regularly discussed by participants throughout their interviews. Participants discussed being aware that these stereotypes were ever-present throughout their lives and that they observed them growing up. Participants discussed observing and internalising how boys and girls were treated differently. From an early age, they became aware that there were different standards and expectations for boys and girls, making them feel unequal. Peaches, for instance, recalled that boys were allowed to misbehave and that this was socially permissible growing up. This unfair treatment was due to the assumption that boys had lower maturity than girls. Peaches explained that she would have gotten in trouble if she had behaved like the boys did:

> *My Mum would always be like, ‘Oh, boys are more immature than girls’. And that used to always really annoy me. Because I used to think, ‘Well, I get in trouble for doing that’ (Peaches, female, she/her, bisexual, 24 years old)*

This type of gender policing is one of the ways hegemonic gender expectations are interpellated in society at the individual level: by ‘educating’ children on gender-appropriate behaviours. This example demonstrates how hegemonic gender stereotypes can be taught explicitly and implicitly, as well as what becomes (un)acceptable behaviour for girls and women, thus solidifying these parameters, as previously suggested by Gieseler [18].
Participants also discussed being keenly aware that their behaviours were often influenced by how they expressed their gender. Amelia, for instance, was often assumed to be a boy because she had alopecia as a child, which meant she always had very short hair. Amelia felt that other children were more aggressive towards her

during this period. She, in turn, would reciprocate this aggression, as she felt the need to fulfil the boy persona that was allocated to her due to her gender expression. Amelia commented:

> *When I was younger [7 years old], I had alopecia, and I lost all my hair [and] people assumed I was a boy because I had short hair. And in that time, I had more physical confrontations come to me, but I felt more aggressive, like I needed to fill the role of what I was given. (Amelia, female, she/her, pansexual, 20 years old)*

As such, perceived gender expression, in Amelia's example, symbolised a type of hegemonic masculinity she was not ready to embrace. However, she had to embrace it as a response to how she was treated due to her expression. The hegemonic gender stereotypes were then replicated in her behaviours, reflecting the stereotype that boys are more aggressive and confrontational. These experiences, relating to Amelia's gender, highlight how engrained the stereotyped behaviours are and how 'accepting' or 'embracing' them might be a self-defence mechanism, allowing for a sense of normalcy within this hegemonic system. This finding supports the notion of internalising acceptably gendered behaviours proposed by Bian, Leslie & Cimpian [5].

Participants' narratives also made it evident that society significantly influenced their relationship with their gender. They acknowledged the impact that wider societies and communities had on their memories of gender in childhood. Many participants discussed specific moments that made them see gender through a different lens. For instance, Luka discussed their memories of being on holiday and seeing their first drag queen show and the intense feelings associated with this experience. This event was one of their first experiences seeing a queer person. This experience allowed Luka to understand that societal standards around binary gender expressions can be disrupted and played with. Luka mentioned:

> *I wanted to stay in the bar and just watch it all night. They were brilliant. I have a really strong memory of just how drawn to that queer person up on stage I was and that sort of ambiguous gender thing. (Luka, dyke, she/they, dyke, 25 years old)*

Luka's emotionally charged experience shows that these societal disruptions were possible, thus challenging the internalisations of gender. This experience allowed Luka to explore their gender identity as non-binary by questioning the binary notion that gender is immutable, stable, and something people should not play with. This childhood experience was fundamental to Luka's identity process, allowing them to see the possibilities of gender outside of societal expectations and obligations. It shows how early internalised messages about gender could be challenged by introducing new forms of gender resocialisation.

Aside from childhood experiences, participants discussed, in their narratives, how exposure to hegemonic gender stereotypes and the societal pressures to conform to unhealthy gendered practices (such as men being in dominant positions and women being submissive) made them keenly aware of their gender particularly when they challenged these stereotypical notions through their gender expression or the gendered context in which they were located. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed that people behaved differently around them because of the hegemonic expectations associated with their perceived gender. For instance, Peter, a receptionist at a GP surgery, was often assumed to be a doctor when answering the phone. This was due to the assumption that women typically hold these administration positions. Peter mentioned:

> *My job involves speaking to a lot of patients […and] when I speak to someone on the phone, I very often get presumed I'm the practice manager, or I'm the Doctor just because I'm male. (Peter, male, he/him, straight, 25 years old)*

Similarly, Peaches, a marketing specialist, experienced this within her workplace. She was presumed to be a receptionist when answering the phone. Peaches commented on this assumption:

> *I had a marketing apprenticeship for an IT company. It was a small business, six men and me. [But] we didn't have a main receptionist, so if the phone rang, any of us picked up. Every time I would answer, someone would assume I was a receptionist, but if the boys answered, they would assume it was an IT support. (Peaches, female, she/her, bisexual, 24 years old)*

Both quotes highlight the expectation that men are expected to be in a superior role to women, an expectation Zimmerman & West [42] explored in their research. These experiences highlight the nature of gendered expectations within the workplace and the broader societal stereotypes associated with specific job roles. Hegemonic gender stereotypes can impact not only a person's relationship with their gender growing up but also their life choices and trajectories. Participants discussed how gender stereotypes – and the expectations surrounding them – changed from childhood to adulthood. For many, this meant they felt less pressured to express their gender in stereotypical ways as they got older – a direct challenge to the internalised messages around gender they received in childhood. Violet described how, during childhood, she was taught that being a girl was lesser than being a boy. For her, this resulted in her disliking being a girl and spending less time with other girls. Violet commented:

> *I also did Brownies, which I hated. Because I was taught that, you know, girls are less than, I just didn't really like girls very much […yet] if I could do it again, I would think, what a treat, must be so much fun! (Violet, cisgender woman, she/her, heterosexual, 30 years old)*

However, during adulthood, Violet expressed markedly different opinions on femininity and enjoyed spending time with other women. Despite her feeling that she is fulfilling feminine stereotypes by enjoying sewing, she did not allow this to impact her choices or her feminine gender expression:

> *I'm very into sewing and crafting. And that is so feminine. I just feel like the biggest stereotype in the world when I'm just sat there with my little floral fabrics, making myself a dress. But I love that. (Violet, cisgender woman, she/her, heterosexual, 30 years old)*

Violet's childhood relationship with gender identity was seen to be heavily influenced by the hegemonic gender stereotypes she observed growing up. In contrast, she now celebrates her femininity and embraces her stereotypically female hobbies instead. This experience highlights not only the enormous impact that learned schemas have on a person's relationship with gender but also how the impact can change over time, contradicting the notion from Bian, Leslie & Cimpian that biases follow people through their lives [5].

Pressures and divides in sports

All participants in this study discussed the experiences of gendered pressures and divides associated with sports, significantly how these pressures impacted their understanding of their gender identities and expressions. Most participants described having strong memories related to sports at school from an early age and how these messages were internalised and challenged later.

Women and participants who described growing up with female experiences – assigned female at birth (AFAB), in particular – discussed being discouraged from engaging in sports, given the pervasive idea that these spots were only for men. They also described how these stereotypes related to sport impacted their gender. Assigned male at birth (AFAB) participants also discussed these stereotypes about sports and how these problematic divides affected them negatively. For instance, Eric discussed being allowed to play "feminine" sports alongside girls until he reached a certain age. From puberty, he was no longer allowed to participate in these sports, as engaging in these pursuits was considered feminine. Instead, he was only allowed to participate in "masculine" sports such as football:

> *When I was in year three, we were allowed to play in the netball team [with the girls]. But then suddenly in year four/five, males were no longer able to be in the team, which was odd. As soon as you got to big boy year 4. You could only play football in the tournaments. (Eric, man, he/him, heterosexual-just, 24 years old)*

This understanding was also reflected among AFAB participants. For instance, Britney discussed wanting to play football with the boys growing up but felt unable to do this as society frowned upon it. Britney discussed:

> *In high school, obviously, all the boys would play football, so probably I wouldn't [play]. Even if I wanted to. And to be honest, I don't think the boys would have even wanted me to play football with them. (Britney, feminine/female, she/her or they/them, bisexual, 23 years old)*

Eric's experience of no longer being allowed to participate in "feminine" sports after puberty mirrors Britney's experience of not being able to play football with the boys. The common denominator is policing around gender in this particular domain. It is clear from both their experiences and perspectives that the gender divide within sport perpetuates the gender binary, as well as the belief that men and women are inherently different – and that their desires to engage in a specific gendered activity ought to align with these hegemonic standards, as shown in previous literature [25].

AFAB participants discussed their experience of fewer sporting opportunities during childhood compared to their fellow male students. Luka discussed their awareness of more sporting opportunities available to boys than girls, including options for tournaments and matches, which is also evident in previous research by Schailee et al. [33]. Girls, on the other hand, were provided 'smaller' versions of sports such as five-a-side football and tag rugby rather than 'full' versions:

> *In year six at my primary school, they introduced girls' football and rugby teams, and it was mega for our school. The teams filled up really fast. But there were catches with it; we only had five-a-side football, and we were only allowed to play tag rugby, but the boys got full rugby. In secondary school, they [the school] organised tournaments and tours for the boys' teams, but that didn't happen for the girls' team. Our year begged for rugby in secondary school [for girls], and eventually, they gave us a couple of weeks of rugby. [as if they were saying] let them feel like they're playing rugby. (Luka, dyke, she/they, dyke, 25 years old)*

Participants discussed how these direct observations of gender inequity in sports impacted their feelings towards (their own) gender, enabling them to challenge some of these notions, albeit unsuccessfully in some cases. Girls (as described by Luka) had to repeatedly ask to participate in 'masculine' sporting opportunities, which was rarely granted, highlighting the gender divisions and inequities in sports, with a clear preference for boys within sports.

Many participants explained how this divide, which started early in life, made them feel in later life. Britney felt that growing up female prevented her from engaging in activities she would have enjoyed, thus offering her

more freedom. As previously mentioned, she wanted to play football but felt pressured to abandon this hobby. Giving this up gave her a great deal of anxiety as the pressure to conform to femininity built up:

> *[Discussing how being raised without a gender may have influenced their experiences] I think it would have been so much easier for me. Rather than constantly thinking, 'Okay, I'm a girl, I should probably get Barbies, rather than playing this 'Hot Wheels toy.' Stuff like that. Because that was always a big thing as I used to play football with my dad all the time. And I was always like, 'I hope no one sees me.' (Britney, feminine/ female, she/her or they/them, bisexual, 23 years old)*

Britney's frustration with these gendered expectations around sports played a role in her wish to live her life outside of the constraints of the gender binary, thus embracing 'they/them' pronouns, for instance. This change in gendered language was seen as a challenge to the internalised messages around gender, enabling Britney to experience a less restrictive form of gender expression and identity for themself.

Participants also discussed these inequities in sports were often reinformed in their own families. For instance, Violet discussed being discouraged from engaging in sports by her parents. Meanwhile, her brother was actively encouraged to do so.

> *I was not encouraged to do any sport whatsoever, but my little brother did sailing. He's a water sports instructor now. (Violet, cisgender woman, she/her, heterosexual, 30 years old)*

These findings show that the gender divide in many areas of life, including sports, can limit an individual's development, denying people the opportunity to reach their full potential. Peaches, for instance, highlighted how dividing children based on gender, in her experience, perpetuates problematic beliefs regarding the gender binary, which can be detrimental to people's development:

> *[Dividing children depending on gender] maybe create some deep-rooted thoughts in people's brains that you are different to men. Because you're not allowed to do things that they're doing. (Peaches, female, she/her, bisexual, 24 years old)*

Many participants agreed that observing these divisions of gender in sports from childhood altered their perception of gender, making them susceptible to embodying, replicating, and perpetuating these stereotypes in their own lives, despite being critical of these unfair – and sometimes harmful – divides, showing the power of gender internalisations. These findings further highlight how divides and differences are enforced and learnt, not innate, as demonstrated by Hyde [19].

Discussion

Through narrative and retrospective accounts of gender socialisation, our findings offer insight into childhood memories related to gender observations, enforcements, internalisations, and subsequent challenges. The findings show the participants' relationship with their gender from childhood and how these experiences shaped their current gender identities, expressions, and life trajectories. We show the various ways gender identity and expression can be influenced by both internal and external sources, including societal pressures – which are learned through direct observations and become internalised [8]. This research also shows the impact of these gendered experiences on the participants' life trajectories and hobbies (mainly sports), showing the limitations created by the gender binary system. Notably, the present findings contribute to the social learning theory concerning gender, as they show how new forms of gender resocialisation can challenge the internalisation of gender. These challenges include promoting gender equity in sports, the possibilities of gender expressions and identities beyond the binary, and the free articulation and expression of these concerns in society. This research demonstrates that the internalisation of gender stereotypes – like gender itself – can be malleable, an insight which may help tackle unnecessary gender divisions in childhood settings. Social learning theory [8] was a valuable framework for exploring how these messages are learned through observations, internalised, and later challenged via gender resocialisation processes. Using social learning theory as a lens, we developed two main themes in the analysis – both extending and supporting previous literature on gender socialisation and gender stereotyping. We will discuss these themes below.

Hegemonic gender stereotypes

The study found that hegemonic gender stereotypes – and their direct observation in childhood – impacted participants' relationship with their gender. Participants felt these stereotypes, which were internalised from childhood, significantly influenced their life trajectories, i.e., their adult life decisions. Consistent with social learning theory [8], participants reported feeling pressured to align themselves with their assigned gender at birth during childhood. As such, participants were constantly exposed to these gender divides and were expected to behave in standardised ways, as dictated by these solid gender schemas and internalisations. For instance, AFAB participants discussed feeling unable to engage in "masculine" behaviours during childhood, including acting out, disrupting, and shouting. They mentioned that there were tighter restrictions and guidelines for girls regarding these actions, whereas boys were allowed to act as they pleased (within the realm of masculinity). These behaviours in boys were seen as usual, perhaps embracing the "boys will be boys" attitude [1]. These behavioural expectations for girls were reported to be enforced by adults and caregivers around them, with

harsher punishments for girls when they engaged in those actions. These unreasonable expectations for gender-stereotyped behaviours were present from childhood and were replicated in everyday life in adulthood, showing how gender roles and expectations became internalised by participants.
These findings suggest that these gender divides can impact life trajectories in that these behaviours and internalisations can be difficult to dismantle. For instance, when employees are assumed to be in a particular role or position due to their gender, i.e., a man is assumed to be working in a superior role or a woman is assumed to be working in an inferior role. These assumptions in the workplace show how gender stereotypes are a daily occurrence which begins from an early age and is learnt through society [8]. These findings also reflect Lindvall-Ostling et al.'s [24] and Mann & Krane's [25] research showing that hegemonic gender stereotypes exist within workplaces and that these assumptions can be triggered by audio alone (speaking on the telephone). As such, these behaviours – and perceived gender differences – are learned and replicated through culture in society; they are not innate to individuals [20]. Furthermore, through broader social influences in adulthood or through self-reflection, many participants were able to challenge these binary notions and break away from these constraints by engaging in liberating and emancipatory gendered behaviours and expressions, thus challenging these internalisations. These challenges did not mean that these participants identified as non-binary or genderqueer; however, in adulthood, they could consciously declassify certain activities or occupations as inherently gendered. As such, childhood experiences and their influence on adulthood about gender were not always stable. Many participants were able to challenge these gender stereotypes in adulthood, either during university or when they moved outside of their childhood contexts. For some participants, however, challenging these notions took longer, as they always remained in the contexts in which they were raised. The gender schemas were rarely challenged in these contexts.

Pressures and divides in sports

All participants discussed the role of sport in their perception – and internalisation – of gender inequities and gender stereotypes, particularly in the context of segregation based on binary genders in childhood. Participants discussed not understanding why their teachers or caregivers divided boys and girls in sporting activities and mentioned that this divide perpetuated the idea of difference. The findings also support Schailee et al.'s research, which highlights how coaches typically encourage and prioritise men within activities relative to women [33]. Many AFAB participants, however, discussed wanting to participate in sports during childhood but feeling discouraged because of their assigned gender. Consequently, many of them did not participate in sporting activities later in life, despite many expressing that they would have liked to. Some of them challenged these messages and internalisations by identifying and expressing their genders in less rigid ways as adults – a process of gender resocialisation that allowed them to distance themselves from the constraints of the gender binary towards gender neutrality.
These divides also appeared to affect individuals outside of sporting experiences. For instance, some participants reported that these experiences made them feel that men and women are inherently different from one another, a message that they internalised and rarely questioned. This internalisation of gender differences also echoes the impact that social learning can have on an individual's view of their gender [8], highlighting how these early childhood experiences can impact cognitions related to gender schemas. These internalisations are outside the children's control and create the illusion of difference [19]. As explained by Zell et al. [41], internalising these illusions of difference can lead to broader internalisations about gender more generally. We argue that by raising awareness about equitable gender learning during childhood, these unnecessary divides can potentially be reduced. This form of gender resocialisation would also help increase access to employment opportunities, access to social activities and spaces such as sports, and other (gendered) behaviours for people of all genders.

Limitations and recommendations

Perhaps due to the participants' age range (20 to 30), the present study did not address career choices directly, as most participants were students at the time of the interviews. Future research should repeat this study in a workplace setting to gain further understanding. Specifically, this research should consider the participants' socio-economic status, ethnicity, and sexuality, as these aspects were beyond the scope of the present study. Future research should also include individuals from a broader education background to ensure more generalisability across population groups, as most of the current study participants achieved similar education levels. Future research could also explore teachers' experiences in both primary and secondary schools to better understand the strategies they employ to tackle gender segregation in the classroom. This line of research could help combat the negative effect these gender divisions can have on people's understandings of their gender identity, expression, and their (gendered) life trajectories.

Conclusion

The present research explored childhood memories and experiences regarding gender. We analysed their potential impacts on gender identity, expression, and life trajectories. All data was analysed using IPA, which allowed the researchers to examine the participants' interpretation of their experiences of gender socialisation and to explore their interpretation of these experiences. Using social learning theory, we developed two key findings: (1) the direct observation of hegemonic gender stereotypes, and (2) how these gender stereotypes and messages became internalised in areas such as sports and how these pressures and divides were challenged in adulthood. These support and extend social learning theory [8] in that participants reported learning about their gender identity and expression from observing others and internalising the societal pressures to conform to gender roles and stereotypes.

Furthermore, the pressures and gender divides in sports appeared to have the most significant knock-on effect on individuals. These inequities in sports were the critical area that participants focused on when asked about their experiences of gender socialisation during childhood – that is, for many of them, gender segregation in sports was the first time they became aware that they were assigned male or female. Participants affirmed that these unnecessary divides perpetuated the idea that men and women are inherently different from each other. Participants experienced a sense of injustice, which they carried with them through adulthood. Nevertheless, these messages were later challenged through processes of resocialisation.

We argue that this research contributes to social learning theory, as it pertains to gender, as it shows how the internalisation of gender can be challenged by new forms of gender resocialisation in adulthood, including the promotion of gender equity in sports, the possibilities of gender expressions and identities beyond the binary, and the free articulation and expression of these concerns in society. These insights add to the existing literature on gender socialisation – amongst cisgender and transgender people [12].

The present research further exemplified how learnt behaviours and pressures relating to gender in childhood can negatively impact the life trajectories of individuals, particularly those who attempted to challenge these rigid forms of gender division from childhood. The present research recommends that these divisions should be addressed within education or recreational settings from early childhood, with an aim of improving opportunity and access to gendered spaces and activities for people of all genders, enabling pupils to express and identify as they feel most comfortable without fear of negative repercussions. We argue that this can help improve people's experiences of gender exploration, equity, and access, enabling greater possibilities and opportunities for people of all genders.

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