Sexualities of trans and non-binary people during transition, a narrative synthesis implementing a post-humanist framework

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Sexualities of trans and non-binary people during transition, a narrative synthesis implementing a post-humanist framework

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexualities are considered a relevant factor to one's wellbeing. However, research has often fragmented sexualities into discrete elements. Additionally, research within trans and non-binary (TNB) populations has historically been pathologizing. This systematic literature review is grounded in relational ontology, which prioritizes the interactions between elements, over the analysis of isolated identities

Aim: The aim of this review is to explore how the sexualities of TNB people change during transition and to understand their experiences of these changes.

Methods: The literature search was conducted using the databases Scopus, Ebsco, CHINAL Plus, Open Dissertations, and Google Scholar, employing search terms related to TNB sexualities and transition experiences. The review synthesized data from qualitative and mixed-methods studies. Despite some studies' methodological limitations, the narrative synthesis provided a comprehensive examination of the subject.

Results: The review found that TNB people's sexualities are fluid and contextually influenced, often undergoing significant changes during transition. These changes are shaped by complex interactions between individual, social, and relational factors.

Discussion: The findings highlight the need for further research using diverse methodologies and inclusive recruitment strategies to deepen the understanding of TNB sexualities. This research has implications for enhancing sexual health practices and policies to be more inclusive and supportive of TNB individuals, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of their sexual well-being.

KEYWORDS

Non-binary; post-humanist; review; sexualities; systematic; trans

Introduction

Sexuality is a multifaceted construct that has been conceptualized in scientific and mainstream culture in a variety of ways, such as behavior, attraction, attitudes, thoughts, fantasies, and identity[1]. Gender is a socially constructed aspect of one's identity, which has a history of being linked with sexuality in research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic (LGBTQIA+) communities (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Pollitt et al., 2021). Within an understanding of gender and sexuality as linked, heteronormativity is often implied based on gender presentation (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016).

Historically, the sexualities of TNB individuals have been pathologized or fetishized (Heyam, 2022; Montoya, 2023; Prunas, 2019). Often, in the first papers dealing with TNB populations (e.g. Blanchard, 1989; Lawrence, 2011; Nieder et al., 2018), matters of sexuality were conflated with gender, assuming that there was *something* (e.g. a traumatic event, a fetish) that caused the individual's diversion from a norm (i.e. being cis and straight) and that being trans also implied an expectation of a nonconforming sexuality. For instance, some researchers believed that trans people eroticize transition, implying that they are aroused by the thought of themself as a man or a woman (Blanchard, 1989; Lawrence, 2011), or

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speculating that femininity and homosexuality are bound together (Bailey, 2003).

Nowadays, despite the increase in research and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ populations (e.g. Hall et al., 2021; Zeeman et al., 2019), there is a popular anti-gender movement with an 'ideology' that considers gender a colonizing indoctrination (Butler, 2025). Within this cultural movement, there is also the belief that trans people (especially trans women and transfeminine individuals) are sexual predators (e.g. Lloyd & Finn, 2017; McLean, 2021) despite them often being victims of fatal partner violence (Peitzmeier et al., 2020). Literature focusing specifically on trans women's sexualities shows how transitioning can be empowering, allow for increased confidence and comfort in exploring one's sexuality, increase sexual pleasure, and shape how they might do sex differently post-transition (Ward & Lucas, 2024). This is another demonstration of how aspects of gender and sexuality are conflated. To elaborate, how non-conformity with heteronormativity on one aspect (e.g. gender, being trans) implies an expected non-conformity in sexuality.

Historical pathologization and public debate on TNB sexualities create a narrative *for* TNB people. It speaks for them. In this cacophony of views and opinions, what is missing is the experience of TNB people themselves. In recent years, there has been, however, an increase in studies asking TNB about their sexualities (e.g. Anzani et al., 2021; Robinson, 2025; Ross et al., 2024; Skrzypczak et al., 2025; Tebbe et al., 2025). Thus, this article attempts in reviewing the literature on TNB sexualities to welcome the voice of TNB people in the social discourse, especially considering the historical pathologization of trans sexualities. It is hoped that insights from this review might help clinicians, researchers and policy makers in having a more nuanced perspective on the matter of gender and sexuality.

Existing reviews

The quantitative literature on TNB sexualities has mostly focused on Gender Affirming Surgery (GAS) (Schardein & Nikolavsky, 2022) or on measuring sexual orientation (Puckett et al., 2021; Reisner et al., 2023). For the former aspect, the questionnaires that are being clinically implemented are not validated for TNB populations (Dearnley, 2005; Horbach et al., 2015; Schardein & Nikolavsky, 2022), and for the latter, the limited existing sexual identity labels for participants to choose from in existing studies (Puckett et al., 2021).

In terms of qualitative literature on the sexualities of TNB people, this has been reviewed by some researchers (Burns et al., 2022; Gunby & Butler, 2023; Mellman, 2017; Pipkin et al., 2023; Thurston & Allan, 2018), with only Thurston and Allan (2018) exploring sexualities alongside transitioning (for trans people only). The reviews suggest that some TNB people experience a relationship between transitioning gender and one's sexuality, whereby transitioning gender may have an impact on how they have sex, use their bodies, and the labels and language they use. Themes from the previous reviews include a process of re-negotiating various norms on multiple levels, for example, individually navigating the development of their own sense of identity, relationally regarding partners and dating, and community in terms of gendered and sexual spaces they are welcome in (Pipkin et al., 2023; Thurston & Allan, 2018). The findings highlight that the impacts of transitioning on sexuality extend beyond the individual and have been integrated into eco-developmental concepts (Lindley et al., 2021) to highlight how various domains influence one another. The literature shows how TNB people may experience additional stressors regarding sexuality such as risks encompassing rejection and loneliness, violence and sexually transmitted infections, and loss of access to certain communities (Pipkin et al., 2023).

Overall, previous reviews in this field have not specifically examined how TNB people experience their sexualities *alongside transition*, specifically considering sexualities more broadly (e.g. including sexual orientation, attraction, behaviors, etc).

This leaves gaps in knowledge for how this dynamic process may occur in light of the range of challenges and/or opportunities for one's sexualities alongside transition. The present review, therefore, aimed to systematically review the qualitative and mixed methods research in order

to answer the following research question: *How do sexualities of trans and non-binary people change during transition, and what is their experience of this change?*

Materials and methods

Relational ontology

This review is carried out using relational ontology (Fox & Alldred, 2022) as it's(?) philosophical framework, which derives from the wider post-humanist movement (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). This philosophical movement is *post*-humanist because, compared to humanist traditions where reality is human-centred, the focus is on the *relations* (Braidotti, 2013) amongst human and more-than-human agents/things/aspects/machines (e.g. technological tools, architectural building, social discourses, bodies).

This worldview is unifying, and nonhierarchical meaning there is no pre-imposed structure or explanation of how society, cultures, or the world functions, or should function (Fox & Alldred, 2022). Therefore, phenomena such as sexuality is understood as the product of a nonhierarchical and ever-changing relationship between human and non-human agents/things/aspects interacting with one another. This is called *assemblage*. In this *relational becoming* (i.e. the rhizomically and unpredictable influences within an assemblage), where any agent has the potential to mutually affect and be affected, assemblages can go through territorialization (i.e. defining, specifying), de-territorializing (i.e. opening up, breaking up with customs), and re-territorializing (i.e. the emergence of a new set of relational specifications). Thus, researching sexualities through this worldview allows a shift from causal entities to the dynamic interplay between elements (e.g. human and more-than-human aspects).

The authors of this review argue that such lenses to observe social life can allow for greater nuance in observing phenomena. This is especially true for TNB lives where often identities and experiences integrate more-than-human aspects (e.g. hormones, prosthetics). Additionally, shifting the focus from the more-than-human aspect to the *relation* between the person and such an element can be de-pathologizing. For example, the interaction between a TNB person and the technological innovations involved in gender or sex-affirming prosthetics (e.g. strap-on, binders) is not merely a matter of individual agency, but a relational event shaped by material forces. Thus, this framework allows readers to appreciate social life as dynamic, relational and always in flux (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Finally, it is also recognized that this tradition has been widely used in literature within TNB populations, which further validates its implementation as a methodology for this review [REF Howitt; MJ; Preciado].

Search strategy

The systematic literature search was conducted using the following databases: Scopus, Ebsco, CHINAL Plus, Open Dissertations, and Google Scholar. The databases selected were agreed based on existing literature on systematic literature reviews (Boland et al., 2023; Bramer et al., 2017). The team agreed to use dissertations as a form of inclusion, given the little published research in this field, and to continue centering TNB people's voices. The search terms used were a combination of 'sexuality', 'transgender', relationship*', 'non-binary', sexual*', 'trans*', 'transitioning', 'transition*', 'sexual desire', 'sexual experience'. See Table 1 for a full description of the search strategy.

Study selection

The inclusion and exclusion criteria are given in Table 2. The total number of articles considered was 5853 after duplicates were removed. The first author screened all the titles and abstracts, with authors AP and LW auditing 10% of these, to ensure consistency in decision-making, and they agreed with the screening decisions. The initial number of papers for the full-text review was 188. The research team reviewed the research question and the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final decision was made based on full-text reviews of the articles by the first author (SV) and in line with suggestions from previous reviews, and existing guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2015; American

Table 1. Overview of search strategy using the SPIDER flowchart.

Spider	Description	Search terms
Sample: Which groups of participants are of interest?	Trans and non-binary people	Transgender OR non-binary OR transgender OR trans*
Phenomenon of Interest: Which behaviors, decisions, experience are being considered?	How do sexualities change during transition, and what is the experience of this change by individuals? Key area: time specifically mentioned OR change over time inferred by what mentioned in the data (e.g. start of hormones, change of name and pronouns) Sexualities are understood as a broad phenomenon, including fantasies, desires, sexual behaviors.	Sexuality OR sexuality OR sex* OR sexual* OR relationship* OR sexual experience AND transition* OR transitioning
Design: Theoretical framework or research method?	Mixed methods data collection and analysis Qualitative data collection and analysis Not included grey literature Including dissertations	mixed method* OR qualitative Longitudinal OR Between groups OR Within group Dissertation
Evaluation: Are there specific outcomes to be considered?	Sexualities (e.g. sexuality, sexual attraction, relationship, and relationship*)	Experience OR sexual experience OR sexual* OR relationship
Research type: Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods?	Mixed methods Qualitative	mixed method* OR qualitative

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
English language	Not in English
Published from 2007	Published previously to 2007
Participants	
• Clearly reported the lived experience of sexualities from the perspective of trans and/or non-binary people	• Papers that did not clearly report the voices/experiences of TNB people
• If participants themselves used the terms trans and/or non-binary	• If data for TNB and cis people were together and not differentiated
• Studies including dyads	• Gender non-conforming people
• Age: 16+	• Only reported partners of trans and/or non-binary people
Study design	
• Mixed methods	• Quantitative
• Qualitative	
Study type/content	
• The study had to specifically mention time or change over time or this could be inferred by reviewers reading what was mentioned in the data (e.g. comment on experience before and when starting GAHT, change of name and pronouns)	• Book chapters
	• Essays/memoirs
	• Reviews
	• Medical papers (i.e. if only sexual satisfaction/sexual function of body parts was measured, and more broadly papers that did not mention/measure the psychosocial component)
• Any study type (e.g. longitudinal, between group comparison)	• Psychological interventions
• Dissertations	

Psychological Association Task Force on Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons, 2021; Coleman et al., 2022). The final number of studies ($n = 31$) complied with the eligibility criteria. Papers not in English were not included because of a lack of resources (i.e. finances for the translation process, and the researchers' lack of proficiency in non-English languages). The participants included were only TNB people (interviewed individually or in dyads). Gender nonconforming (GNC) participants were not included because it might have confounded the study results (e.g. some people identify as a woman, lesbian, and GNC but not trans, and some TNB people would not define themselves as being GNC).

Inclusive use of language that accurately describes one's feelings and identity is considered vital for ethical research and practice by the authors. However, in carrying out this review, less recently published papers were included. Some of these had a different use of language, at times presenting a language that was not considered inclusive, and offensive by the researchers (e.g. FtM, MtF, transexual). Nevertheless, the original terms used in the articles were included in this review for transparency. Only participants aged 16+ were included in this review as puberty is widely considered a key period for identity and sexual formation (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Mixed-method studies were part of this review because they reported participants' experiences of their sexualities. Quantitative data of such studies are weaved throughout the synthesis, and not included in a separate section to provide an overall cohesive narrative. The cutoff year for papers was 2007, because key legal and social aspects for human rights occurred in the early 2000s (e.g. Yogyakarta Principles in 2007), and anti-discrimination law (e.g. UK Gender Recognition Law in 2004). Additionally, 2007 was the same cutoff year used in previous reviews (e.g. Pipkin et al., 2023; Thurston & Allan, 2018). The final review question was: *How do sexualities of trans and non-binary people change during transition, and what is their experience of this change?*

Quality assessment, data extraction

Data extraction was conducted using Covidence (Veritas Health Innovation, 2022). Data synthesis was performed using Narrative Synthesis (Popay et al., 2006). The quality of papers was assessed using Yardley's appraisal tool (Yardley, 2000, 2017), and Vincent (2018) guidance on ethical research for TNB populations. During the extraction and synthesis stages, three team meetings were held: the first, at the time of paper selection to discuss the strategy for data extraction; the second, mid-way, to discuss discrepancies; finally, some members of the research team (i.e. SV, LN, LW, SD and AP) met to discuss the data synthesis of the whole dataset, where the full synthesis was considered and reviewed.

Synthesis method

Narrative Synthesis was selected as a review and synthesis method because it is suitable for studies with high heterogeneity; thus, being apt in integrating studies with different methodologies (Popay et al., 2006). After the full-text screening, the first author and three other authors (AP, LW, SD) summarized key aspects and quotes from the papers (i.e. the number of papers for analysis was equally divided between the three). Only direct quotes from participants of the studies were included. The extraction was inductive. Holding relational ontology as a framework for observation, favored a sensibility to the relation with more-than-human aspects (e.g. noticing the interaction between humans and the context/social group). Finally, the first author reviewed the whole dataset and presented their synthesis (together with the six key aspects offered below) to some of the other authors (e.g. LN, LW, AP, SD). After the group reflected on the findings, in light with previous literature and their own positionalities, the authors finalized the synthesis. The first author led the writing process, with all the coauthors reviewing the final version.

Reflexivity

The authors of this study bring a range of intersecting identities. Collectively, they identify across a range of gender identities (e.g. cisgender, non-binary, trans masculine, genderqueer), and sexual orientations (gay, queer, pansexual, heterosexual). They also embody different socio-cultural (e.g. class), and geographic backgrounds (e.g. Britain, Italy, South Africa). They all identify as White. The respective field of work varies from clinical psychology, academic research, community organizing, and therapeutic practices. They all hold values of gender-affirmative, inclusive, and socially just approaches practices. Nevertheless, the majority trained in European-American framework of education and mental health, which bring its biases in how a phenomenon is observed. Some of the authors hold identities that align with the communities they research. Throughout this project, there has been a focus in celebrating non-normative presentations and expressions of sexuality and gender, whilst welcoming and highlighting more binary expressions, presentations, and identifications of these. Most of the authors also work with GSRD (Gender Sexuality Relationship Diverse) people in nonacademic capacities, and two of them also worked in gender clinics, which shaped how the data was approached and discussed. As they all work or trained within Western institutions (e.g. university, NHS), and are all White, the authors were also mindful of the risks of reproducing Euro-colonial, cisnormative, or medicalised framings. Thus, they have actively worked to mitigate these through self-reflection, feedback on writing, and group discussions.

Results

Study characteristics

Overall, 31 studies were included in the review (see Table 3 for overview). Most studies were qualitative ($n = 29$), and two were mixed-method. Many studies clearly stated an underlying theoretical approach used for the study ($n = 19$). Participants were varied in their ethnicities, gender identities, and sexual orientations (when this was collected). Interestingly, across the studies, in relation to gender identity, a variety of strategies were implemented to collect this demographic, with some studies using multiple choice options,

whilst others used a text entry. Studies were carried out mostly in Western countries, namely 22 in the US, two in the UK, and three in the Netherlands, and one only for the following countries, i.e. Italy, Germany, Canada, and Australia. Participants sample size varied from 8 to 361.

Synthesis of findings

The synthesis was theory-driven, using relational ontology as a philosophical standpoint. Considering the rhizomatic evolution of realities, transness and sexualities are not understood by the authors as a linear process, but rather a creative, unpredictable, always-evolving experience. The themes were developed inductively from the data. The first author (SV) and three other authors (LW, AP, SD) reviewed the whole dataset. After this, the first author reviewed the entire dataset again. Particular emphasis was given to direct quotations from participants. Then, these were grouped into themes. Finally, the first author presented their analysis and consulted with the other authors. The final key themes of the review are:

1. Transition
2. Societal scripts
3. Spaces
4. Communities
5. Relationships
6. Language
7. More-Than-Human Aspects
8. Bodies

The authors identified how some elements/aspects have the potential to territorialize (i.e. limit, constrict, circumscribe), de-territorialize (i.e. open up opportunities, break from previous constraints), and re-territorialize (i.e. forming of new standards, new customs, new use of language) TNB people's experience of their sexualities. More specifically, societal scripts territorialize bodies, gender configurations, and how different gendered bodies are expected to look in a given space. Each space has a *flavor*, or in other words, is territorialized by the machines within an assemblage (e.g. a traditional sports bar in a small town looks different and offers different drinks to a gay bar in a big city). Additionally, more-than-human aspects (e.g. GAHT (Gender Affirming Hormone Treatment), surgeries, prosthetics) during transition (and sometimes in relationship with others) can territorialize (e.g. the conceptualization and labeling of second puberty with the start of GAHT for TNB people), or de/re-territorialize bodies (e.g. experiencing orgasms differently after GAHT, increase in confidence, improvements in wellbeing, increase in arousal). Similarly, Relationships Language (e.g. reclaiming terms to describe body parts), and More-Than-Human Aspects, have also an affective potential.

Transition

Most of the papers spoke about the mutually influencing and unpredictable link between gender and sexualities (e.g. Baker, 2018; Nagoshi et al., 2012; Tree-McGrath et al., 2018). In some studies, participants discussed how transition allowed them to discover other aspects of their sexualities. For example, Cook-Daniels and Munson (2010) highlighted how transitioning shaped participants' sexual arousal, and attraction. One of the participants from their study stated "*transitioning has helped me with the acceptance of my sexuality as well*" (Cook-Daniels & Munson, 2010, p. 160), whilst another noticed a change in their attraction to others "*once I came out as FTM, suddenly I was attracted to everyone*" (Cook-Daniels & Munson, 2010, p. 160). Transitioning was spoken about as a *second puberty* in some papers (Cook-Daniels & Munson, 2010; Doorduin & van Berlo, 2014; Martin & Coolhart, 2022), especially in the context of GAHT. Some participants talked about discovering their sexual selves at a later stage "*in puberty [I avoided] it, discovering only at a relatively late age that I actually have something like sexual organs …*" (Doorduin & van Berlo, 2014, p. 663). relationship mostly remained consistent before and after transition.

Interestingly, for some participants, it was not only their transition, which had an impact on their sexual lives, but their lives (and sexual lives) had an impact on their transition. In Rosenberg et al. (2019) Claire, one of the participants in

their study, linked transitioning and sex work "*most clients like a bit of rogering these days, they want the real thing, so sometimes I'll stop the hormones so I can get an erection*" (Rosenberg et al., 2019, p. 7). This statement possibly reflects the intersection between fetishization of TNB bodies and layers of oppression, which limits the freedom of sex workers. The fetishization of TNB bodies was also mentioned in several papers (e.g. Platt & Bolland, 2017; Rosenberg et al., 2019), either in the context of dating or sex work.

In the papers selected, sexualities were not always intertwined with gender. For instance, in Nagoshi et al. (2012) study almost half of participants rejected a possible link between their gender identity and sexual orientation. Similarly, in Motter and Softas-Nall (2021), which interviewed couples where one partner had undergone transition, transition was often referred to as just another life change.

Societal scripts

The relations of TNB people with other machines (e.g. spaces, people) are sometimes territorialized. In other words, TNB people often experience the effect of prescriptive societal norms. These are dictated by expectations around gender (e.g. Bockting et al., 2009), for instance, what a gendered body is expected to look like (e.g. Rosenberg et al., 2019), how it performs in specific spaces (e.g. Scheim et al., 2019), or when the body is relationships with others (e.g. Engelmann et al., 2022). For instance, Bockting et al. (2009) stated how some of the participants in their study challenged the confines of gender norms. For example, one of their participants stated using their "*visibility as an out FtM to educate people*" and challenged "*the concept of masculinity in dominant culture*" and maintained their "*feminist identity*" and political beliefs, "*that were profoundly influenced by the period in [their] life [they] spent as a dyke*" (p. 694). Another of the participants from Bockting et al. (2009) said that their parents were aware, but did not fully understand or support their child being trans: "*they do not understand why, after starting hormones and doing surgery, I would want to be with men*" and they "*could just hear*" their mother say "*if you were going to be attracted to men, why did you have to put me through all this*" (Bockting et al., 2009, p. 697). Another example comes from Anzani et al. (2021), who argue that sexuality for TNB people is influenced by gender roles and the wider society. Some of their participants talked about trying to have sex in a heteronormative way, one stated: "*I use a strap-on to simulate heterosexual sex*" (Anzani et al., 2021, p. 10).

Spaces

Gender is performed by individuals in a given context (Butler, 2002). Many papers talked about how some spaces were territorialized (e.g. Scheim et al., 2019), whilst others re-territorialized (e.g. Platt & Bolland, 2017; Murchison et al., 2023). Scheim et al. (2019) discussed about cultural norms and expectations within gay male spaces (Scheim et al., 2019). One of the participants in their study stated: "*They're all naked and they're all super comfortable with their bodies. They don't give a fuck. I feel like if I want to settle into masculinity in this way, like I need to be comfortable with what I have going on. There's also not a lot of knowledge about trans men so I also feel I have some sort of role or purpose in educating people with my body*." (Scheim et al., 2019, p. 577).

Online spaces represented new avenues to explore relationships in a safe way, and it was described as easier to set boundaries. For instance, in Murchison and colleagues' paper (2023) one interviewee talked about Facebook as a supportive space where "*you can talk to people who can understand where you're coming from and actually give good advice, or just listen*" (p. 2171). However, other participants found online spaces difficult to navigate, especially dating sites, "*make [the participant] feel bad*" because you see "*the attention cisgender traditionally attractive abled White people get in comparison to me, a transgender fat Deaf*" (p. 2161). Platt and Bolland (2017) talked about the complex issue of disclosing one's trans identity in online spaces. One of the participants spoke specifically about dating apps. Josh, 23, at first thought that "*Nobody's even going to […] want to be with me, because I'm a freak, basically*." Then what "*change[d] [Josh's] mind*" was that "*there's a lot of trans men on OkCupid*" and

Josh started thinking "*Okay, so if all these guys are all on here, then maybe I have a shot*" (Platt & Bolland, 2017, p.171).

Communities

Many TNB people discussed the territorializing or re-territorializing effects of specific communities (and identities). For some participants, transitioning implied losing one's community (e.g. Davidmann, 2014), whilst for others, it facilitated integration (e.g. Mellman, 2017; Pugliese, 2013).

In Davidmann (2014), Lee, one of the participants, talked about this shift from "*before*" transition, where Lee "*was a dyke and enjoyed the friendship, the strength*" and "*the sisterhood in being seen as female*." Whereas later Lee was "*so vocal about being trans*" and did not "*fit into the trans community*" either because Lee did not "*really fit into 'male' and*" not "*into 'female' anymore*" and felt more "*in-between*" (Davidmann, 2014, p.647).

Other studies talked about similar difficulties experienced within some queer communities. For instance, Rowniak and Chesla (2013) highlighted how many of their participants talked about the existing transphobia within lesbian communities. Nonetheless, some of their participants held a compassionate understanding of people with marginalizing views. For instance, Jasper commented "*it's really difficult to understand what it's like to be a lesbian in the 80s and 90s. Which was [Jasper's] experience*" because "*there's so much oppression against women, and so much oppression against lesbians*" and "*you feel like you have to really tighten the boundaries of dyke-hood and you don't want to let your ranks be diminished*" (Rowniak & Chesla, 2013, p.452). Similarly, transphobia was experienced by other trans people within LGBTQIA+ communities. For example, Amy, one participant in Platt and Bolland (2017), tried to date "*a few bisexual men because I figured […] they should feel comfortable no matter what configuration I have. But when I came out to them they said, "Oh, I can't date you, I want to date a real woman*" (Platt & Bolland, 2017, p.169).

Conversely, for other TNB participants transitioning allowed them to feel more integrated in a community. For instance, Mellman (2017) interviewed couples where one of the partners was a transgender man and the other cisgender and found that for some couples, normative scripts facilitated integration. Similarly, Pugliese (2013) interviewed four couples (i.e. each including one transgender man, and one cisgender partner) to understand the impact that transition had on sexuality and the relationship, and their participants reported mixed experiences. For instance, Whitney and Andrew are married and experience "*straight privilege*" because of being legally married and recognized as an "*opposite-gender*" relationship (Pugliese, 2013, p.51). Andrew identified as a lesbian before transitioning and now identifies as queer but reported feeling comfortable in being read as straight in public (Pugliese, 2013). Nevertheless, participants from the study mostly reported experiencing loss (Pugliese, 2013) within the LGBTQIA+ communities. One couple who "*were pretty active in the LGBT community*", commented that they "*appear very straight*" and feel that they "*have to justify [their] presence in any LGBTQ meeting or gathering*", and were feeling "*not quite sure…where [they] fit*" (Pugliese, 2013, p.55).

Relationships

Relationships offered nuanced becoming amongst machines, either in terms of territorialization (e.g. imposing gendered or racial social norms) (e.g. Cook-Daniels & Munson, 2010; Lindley et al., 2021; Murchison et al., 2023; Platt & Bolland, 2017), de-territorialization (e.g. opening up opportunities for a new sense of self for TNB people) (e.g. Bockting et al., 2009; Neubauer et al., 2023), or re-territorialization (e.g. feeling validated in the relationship, which increased TNB people's feelings of belonging to a community) (e.g. Mellman, 2017; Motter & Softas-Nall, 2021; Murchison et al., 2023; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Williams et al., 2013).

Some papers talked about previous experiences playing a role in participants' sexualities (e.g. Auer et al., 2014; Murchison et al., 2023). In Auer and colleagues' study (2014) one of the participants (MtF) said how the shift in "*sexual attraction*" was part of their "*biography*" as they "*had experienced a lot of violence through men*"

(Auer et al., 2014, p.9). The authors commented on how the change in sexual orientation did not appear related to transition, but more because of the individual's personal experience. Another participant (MtF) experienced transmisogyny and mentioned that "*sexual desire decreased [partly] with hormone treatment*" but they also "*turned away from women as sexual partners*" because they "*experienced a lot of reactions that hurt [them]*" (Auer et al., 2014, p.9). Murchison et al. (2023) highlighted that for "*some people dating options was limited by ableism, cissexism, racism, sexism, and/or sizeism*" (Murchison et al.,2023, p. 2161). For instance, one participant stated that previous experiences made them decide to not "*date White people anymore*" (Murchison et al., 2023, p. 2171).

Some relationships (e.g. partnership or sexual) helped TNB people feel validated in their gender (e.g. Anzani et al., 2021; Mellman, 2017; Murchison et al., 2023; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Tree-McGrath et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2013), demonstrating how sexualities (e.g. sexual experiences, sexual partners, relationships) can have an effect on one's experience of the self (re-territorialization). For instance, Cheyenne, a participant from Rowniak and Chesla's study (2013), reported that "*prior to transition*" he identified as a lesbian and "*had planned to continue with women as sex partners*" but then he noticed "*gay men were cruising [him]*" and "*that must mean that I'm passing really well*". Then, "*it kinda shifted*" for him and he "*stopped dating women*" identified "*as a gay man, and just started dating gay men*" *(*Rowniak & Chesla, 2013, p.455). The finding that trans men/trans masculine people reported sex with cisgender gay men as validating was mentioned in other articles (e.g. Mellman, 2017; Williams et al., 2013). Nevertheless, for other people, gay relationships were not so accepting (e.g. Scheim et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2013). For instance, Schilt and Windsor (2014) explored how the sexual practices of trans men changed as their embodied masculinity shifted during transitioning, in a group of 74 trans men. Adam, one of the participants, commented on bottom surgery saying that "*it's not an unattractive idea*" but "*also, you know, I like what I have now. It works.*" However, it is "*a little harder to get dates because it's something to explain […] because I date gay men, so that can be a challenge. But in terms of my own comfort level with my body, I feel pretty good about it.*" (Schilt & Windsor, 2014, p.744).

Neubauer et al. (2023) investigated 12 TNB people's experience of dating and relationships whilst going through social transition. They mentioned that resilience and hope were important aspects for most participants, as well as affirming. Hunter, from their study, said that "*there are people out there that won't accept you*" and "*look at you like you're a disgrace, you're a freak of nature […] but don't let those kinds of people rule your life because…there are people out there who are accepting, who will love you unconditionally, and for who you are. And…to not give up.*" (Neubauer et al., 2023, p. 373).

Language

For some participants, use of language (e.g. for attraction, body parts, within relationships) allowed exploration and new becomings (e.g. Davidmann, 2014; Motter & Softas-Nall, 2021; Pugliese, 2013; Williams et al., 2013), whilst at other times it was limiting, shutting down opportunities (e.g. Davidmann, 2014; Platt & Bolland, 2017; Richards, 2016; Tree-McGrath et al., 2018).

Language can be experienced as limiting by TNB people because of others' restricted understanding of the nuanced relationships between gender and sexualities. Platt and Bolland (2017) discussed that some participants, who had fluid sexual attractions, struggled with the rigidity of labels, as understood by other people. Remy, one of the participants, commented: "*the biggest challenge*" is "*trying to explain it to people, just because I'm not really a binary and straight trans guy.*" People asked Remy "*if you wanted to date boys, why didn't you just stay a girl?*" *and I'm like 'no, that's two completely different things.*'" (Platt & Bolland, 2017, p.170).

Davidmann (2014) commented on how existing terminology fails to represent participants' nuanced gender and sexuality. Elen, one of the participants, who identified as "*in between male and female*" talked about the complexity of sexuality and gender intersection within trans

partners. Commenting on the relationship, Elen said "*trans lesbian works on the basis that we tend to identify largely as female—that's the simple answer*". Then, further expanded:

[…] when you're not fully male and not fully female, sexuality often becomes something quite fluid or hard to pin down. For example, would you say that Jenny-Anne and I are a gay couple? Or a lesbian couple? Or some sort of funny straight couple? How do you define it? It depends on which you take as a base. If you take just our physical bodies you could say we're a gay couple. If you take our personalities and presentations we're a lesbian couple. You could say it's a straight relationship—the male bit of me is attracted to the female bit of Jenny-Anne and visa [sic] versa … When you're trans, what a person is, is far less important than who they are." (Davidmann, 2014, p.643). For some participants in other studies, language was a tool for self-affirmation, allowing TNB people to set boundaries, or foster healthy relationships. For instance, from Pugliese's study (2013), one trans participant commented that before coming out to their (cis) partner they were not feeling "*comfortable being in bed because the terms [their partner] used and the sexual relationship was uncomfortable.*" They further expanded, "*I didn't feel like it was okay to say 'No, that's not okay' to some things because it was just…I didn't want to put myself more out there than I already was*" (Pugliese, 2013, p.63). However, coming out and using new language had benefits for the couple.

Williams et al. (2013) interviewed 25 persons that were assigned female at birth but took a more queer or masculine gender identity. They ask the participants to rate the ways (i.e. tightly, moderately, to loosely coupled) in which their gender identity is linked to their sexualized embodiment. For instance, Richard, one of the participants in their study who identified as "*queer*" and a "*trans guy*" stated "*I knew I wasn't going to be happy in any sort of stereotyped gender, but…I'm much more comfortable with a wider spectrum of masculine things*" (Williams et al., 2013, p.734). Another participant, Patrick, identified as a "*butch lesbian*" before transition, and at first, struggled to define his sexuality, but then, used the label queer. He stated, "*I'm queer because I can't wrap my head around it*". He did not identify as a straight guy because he was still interested in women, but wanted to have sex with men, which highlights that attractions and sexual practices can differ.

Motter and Softas-Nall (2021), commented under one of their themes (i.e. Relationship Changes Connected to Transition) that an important change for people was around language and communication as couples had to be honest, and open because of transition. For instance, this was mentioned by Madelyn who said that transition helped her to be "*really extremely open*" with her partner, Sara. (Motter & Softas-Nall, 2021, p.63). This was observed by the authors in most relationships they interviewed, as well as specifically in the sexual field. Madelyn reported "*for the first time in my life I'm actually comfortable with my role in sex and I'm comfortable with my body*" (Motter & Softas-Nall, 2021, p.63).

Another couple, Conor and Amy, also mentioned that their sexual behaviors did not change with transition but what changed was using different terminology and language to describe body parts or sexual activities. Re-labeling body parts was also mentioned in other studies (e.g. Martin & Coolhart, 2022; Williams et al., 2013). For instance, Williams et al. (2013) found that some of the participants from their study struggled with their genitalia, whilst others used new language for a better embodiment and alignment with their gender. Lathe commented that his vagina was a "*traitor body part*", which betrayed his male identity, whilst Steven, used the term "*front hole*" to label what was their "*vagina*" before transition (Williams et al., 2013, p.729). Together with finding new language, some of their participants, during transition, discovered new ways of engaging with their bodies sexually.

More-than-human aspects

The articles included in this review considered transitioning in a variety of ways, with some including only participants taking GAHT for more than 12 months (e.g. Rosenberg et al., 2019), whilst others just required people to self-identify as trans (e.g. Williams et al., 2016). The sexualities-gender assemblage is composed of a

multiplicity of machines relating to one another, such as people, language, and more-than-human aspects. With more-than-human aspects, the authors refer to the various technologies (i.e. hormones, surgical operation, use of prosthesis) used by TNB people to facilitate a better gender or sexual experience/embodiment.

In most of the articles reviewed, more-than-human machines yielded creative openings (i.e. de- and re-territorialize) to re-discover (or discover anew) participants' relationship with themselves (e.g. Engelmann et al., 2022; Rossman, 2016; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013), with their bodies (e.g. Rosenberg et al., 2019), or in relation to others (e.g. Engelmann et al., 2022; Lindley et al., 2021). At the same time, sometimes societal norms had a superscribing influence on participants (e.g. the assumption that hormones are significantly responsible for one's sexuality) (e.g. Pugliese, 2013; Rosenberg et al., 2019; Rossman, 2016).

Several papers talked about a change in participants' orgasms with taking hormones (e.g. Doorduin & van Berlo, 2014; Rosenberg et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2024; Rossman, 2016; Williams et al., 2016). For instance, Williams et al. (2016) reported how some of the transwomen in their study experienced a change in their orgasms. For instance, Emily said how orgasms felt not explosive, but rather like a "*leaking from her penis*" and this was a "*more internal non-penile orgasm*" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 1673), which involved the whole body and that she perceived as more congruent with her gender. Another participant, Jane, who had undergone GAS, commented on how "*orgasms since surgery […] instead of the male mode, it's like surges. Like waves, going back and forth*" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 1673).

As mentioned, creative becomings were observed in several studies. For instance, Rosenberg et al. (2019) talked about how for some participants, GAHT produced new erogenous zones. For instance, Ella, one of the participants, said "*much more of my body were erogenous zones than there were before*" such as "*in my nipples […] my inner thighs*" which became "*much more sensitive to sexual touch*". She continued saying how overall "*the hormone treatment made […] it spread out, where I feel sexual when I'm touched*" (Rosenberg et al., 2019, p.8). Engelman and colleagues (2022) interviewed 12 TNB participants about specific sexual components (i.e. good sex, sexual pleasure). Finn, one of the study participants, commented: "*before [the mastectomy] I was always like, 'No, please don't, don't look*". They wanted to leave their clothes on and "*leave the light off, and 'no, I don't want to see all that.'*" Then, "*with the surgeries the self-confidence grows as well*" (Engelmann et al., 2022, p. 1693).

On some occasions, more-than-human aspects allowed for new becomings, whilst being re-territorialized by the existing machines within society. For instance, in Rossman (2016) heteronormativity was mentioned by participants, which appeared influenced either by their future choices or their current experiences. For instance, Garrett, a "*24, female-to-male transsexual*" stated "*once I start using testosterone my clitoris will enlarge. So, I'm hoping to sort of be able to use that in a more heteronormative way*" (Rossman, 2016, p.76).

Bodies

Bodies are a relevant aspect of one's transition in relation to sexualities. Some participants in the studies struggled with some of their body parts (e.g. Platt & Bolland, 2017; Richards, 2016; Williams et al., 2013). However, sometimes TNB people engaged in new gender-affirming sexual practices (e.g. Schilt & Windsor, 2014; Williams et al., 2013) or developed a better relationship with their bodies because of GAHT (e.g. Rosenberg et al., 2019). Thus, the body is both re-/territorialized by norms, hormones, and relationships, as well as creatively freed by the same machines.

One of the participants, Mr Fox, in Richards (2016) thesis stated how he "*couldn't have sex with men, or relate sexually to men, when [he] was living as a woman*" as it was "*just not possible to do. [he] did and it was rubbish, and [he] hated it and didn't do it for a long time*" (Richards, 2016, p. 74). However, he reported how being a man made possible for him to engage sexually with other men. In other studies, the body was creatively re-discovered. For instance, Steven, one of the participants from Williams and colleagues'

study (2013) discovered anal sex during transition and this made him feel more like "*a gay man [by] taking it up the butt*" (Williams et al., 2013, p.731). The re-claiming of the anus was also the case for some trans women. In Williams and colleagues' study (2016), participants who did not receive GAS experienced anal sex that was "*seen through the lens of gendered embodiment*". Melanie, one of their participants, said how she liked being anally penetrated as "*it's the closest I can come to being female*". Carla, another participant, commented: [anal sex] "*made me feel more feminine*" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 1672).

Discussion

This research highlighted how TNB sexualities evolved in an unpredictable nonprescriptive way. From the selected dataset, the seven aspects that developed were Societal Scripts, Spaces, Communities, Relationships, Language, More-Than-Human Aspects, and Bodies. For each of these elements, participants from the studies included in this review talked about a myriad of aspects. For instance, for some of them, there was a link between their gender and their sexualities, whilst others perceived transition as just another life event. Interestingly, this is in line with existing research and theories (e.g. Van Anders, 2015), whereby sexuality and gender/sex is conceptualized in a given context (e.g. culture, nationality, religion). Our review allowed us to notice the nuanced aspects the interaction between the aspects above-mentioned.

From the studies, sexualities were also shaped by language use (e.g. Davidmann, 2014; Motter & Softas-Nall, 2021; Pugliese, 2013; Williams et al., 2013), sometimes this was being used in a way that felt gender-affirming, whilst in other instances language was perceived as limiting in expressing aspects of their sexualities. This aspect appears to remain consistent in recent research (Tebbe et al., 2025), as language is reported to be helpful in understanding one's gender and sexuality.

Relationships, both previous and current, also influenced people's sexualities. The relevance of accepting relationships is documented widely both in scientific research (e.g. Robinson, 2025), as well as contemporary culture (e.g. Faye, 2025; Martin, 2021). People gather in specific spaces within a social environment (e.g. gay, lesbian). Some TNB people talked about experiencing loss, with losing a sense of belonging to a community (e.g. lesbian community when transitioning), whilst others mentioned feeling accepted.

Transitioning often involves re-negotiating or dealing with one's body within a gendering Western societal context. Some TNB people used various strategies (e.g. language, change of sexual acts) to navigate this, whilst other times, they used more-than-human (e.g. GAHT, GAS) elements for a better alignment with one's gender. For example, in some cases, GAHT allowed for a change in orgasm (e.g. Doorduin & van Berlo, 2014; Rosenberg et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2024; Rossman, 2016; Williams et al., 2016) and a better embodiment of one gender. Overall, it appears from other literature too that medical transitioning offers a change in sexual arousal, desire, and practices, as well as reframing aspects of one's identity (e.g. Riggs et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2024). However, this change is not to be understood in a binary way, as TNB might have a different embodiment of their sexualities and gender.

Strengths and limitations

This review had several strengths. Firstly, most of the contributing authors were involved in all stages of the review, through regular meetings. This added expertise and opportunities for reflection (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Secondly, this review was presented in the context of a clearly stated theoretical background (Fox & Alldred, 2022), which allowed for a greater sensitivity to the interaction between human and more-than-human aspects (e.g. GAHT, online spaces). Thirdly, compared to previous reviews (Pipkin et al., 2023; Thurston & Allan, 2018), including studies with non-binary people possibly allowed different narratives about people's experiences in this field. Finally, including dissertations was both a strength and a limitation. The advantage was to include relevant data, and favor inclusivity. However, the disadvantage of this was a possible lack of a formal peer-review process as universities across the globe do not have a shared consensus for evaluating quality.

This review comes, nonetheless, with some clear limitations, some of which are due to the time constraints, and others to the nature of the studies. Time constraints meant that grey literature (e.g. Reddit, YouTube) was not included. Including these would have added relevant insights to the existing knowledge, especially considering that research in TNB sexualities is a relatively new area (Ross et al., 2024), whilst organizers, writers, and individuals have always been writing and living their trans sexual lives. As the activist and writer of the notorious zine "Fucking Trans Women" stated: trans people are "*sex mad scientists*" (Bellwether, 2013, p.6).

Most studies were from Western countries and included predominantly white participants. Therefore, possibly overshadowing the wider experiences of the TNB population worldwide. Finally, not including GNC individuals might have excluded studies with TNB people that identify as GNC. Nevertheless, GNC might include other queer identities (e.g. cis lesbian, cis gay men) who do not necessarily undergo transition or do not identify as trans. Whether to include GNC individuals or not in studies is an ongoing topic of debate, especially as language is constantly evolving (APA; 2015).

Research implications

Considering that most of the studies involved Western, White, well-educated participants, alternative recruitment, and study design are required. Future research should include a more geographically varied, and ethnically diverse population. This might imply doing research in clinical psychology differently. For instance, especially for recruitment, one option could be implementing indigenous field worker sampling (IFS), whereby investigators are selected from the local community and are trained in relevant research aspects (e.g. research aim, interview process) (Power, 2013). This approach might allow prospective participants to feel more comfortable in disclosing their experiences to their peers (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021) compared to researchers they meet for the first time. Additionally, it is evident that not many studies above mentioned asexuality. Hence, a further exploration of this aspect is required.

Most of the papers used either Grounded Theory or Thematic Analysis as a data analysis strategy, and only Davidmann (2014), and Richards (2016) integrated non-verbal aspects in their studies, with the former implementing photographs and the latter LEGO. This territorializes how sexualities for TNB people are being studied. Thus, adding more-than-human aspects at data collection (e.g. creative methodologies, walking tours) or other research stages could provide richer insights, and perhaps show various flows within the machines of the sexualities-gender assemblage.

Furthermore, considering the relevant aspect of space that was mentioned in the literature, future research should consider both rural and urban settings to understand TNB people's experiences in different geographic spaces, as it was also recommended in other research (Bockting et al., 2009; Gunby & Butler, 2023; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013). This would help to show the nuances of different flows within various relational machines, and possibly expand our knowledge and understanding of this aspect for TNB people.

Finally, considering that one's relationships might influence their gender or sexualities (e.g. Pugliese, 2013; Robinson, 2025; Tebbe et al., 2025; Twist, 2017), future research might consider investigating this aspect. More specifically, research on TNB people's experience of relationships and how these shaped their sexualities and/or gender could offer further insights on the dynamic aspect of these elements.

Clinical implications

Data from this review showed that sexualities *might* change alongside one's transition (e.g. Cook-Daniels & Munson, 2010; Doorduin & van Berlo, 2014) and/or one's transition *might be* shaped by their relationships and sexualities (Rosenberg et al., 2019). In clinical settings, it is reported that clients may not voluntarily disclose about their sexualities but having therapists asking such questions can allow people to accurately describe aspects of their sexualities (e.g. Cahill et al., 2014; Maragh-Bass et al., 2017). Therefore, clinicians working with TNB individuals might consider openly asking about their sexualities,

especially as sexualities *can* be an avenue for further affirmation of one's gender (Ross et al., 2024). Moreover, educational curricula should ideally include training in therapeutic competencies related to discussing sexualities (e.g. Mollen & Abbott, 2022; Tebbe et al., 2025).

Several participants in the studies talked about how expected gender roles and heteronormativity influenced their relationships and sexualities (e.g. Anzani et al., 2021; Bockting et al., 2009). Additionally, LGBTQIA+ spaces were also reported as normative for some participants (e.g. Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Scheim et al., 2019). Thus, if clinically helpful, therapists could take into account helping TNB clients working on their internalized normative assumptions (and possible double stigma), as well as helping them consider how to navigate social dynamics in social and online spaces. More specifically, this can be carried out by implementing trans affirmative adaptations/interventions (e.g. Austin et al., 2017; Budge et al., 2021; Chang & Singh, 2016), and/or by helping clients navigating social dynamics, expectations and norms. For instance, Edwards et al. (2019) present a framework and a clear example in how therapists could bear in mind the sociocultural identities their clients hold and their relationships, and help their clients fostering connection with their community, as well as act as offering advocacy when needed.

Relationships were reported by participants to be either validating (e.g. Auer et al., 2014; e.g. Anzani et al., 2021; Mellman, 2017; Murchison et al., 2023; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Tree-McGrath et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2013) or challenging (e.g. Auer et al., 2014; Murchison et al., 2023), with this being the case especially in the context of intersecting identities (e.g. ability, ethnicity). Hence, clinicians may wish to address the topic of relationships with their TNB clients. If clinically relevant (and the client considers this helpful), clinicians could offer a few sessions with the client's partner(s) to discuss aspects such as use of language, boundaries setting, and communication. Furthermore, at the policy-level, gender services may consider offering couples therapy and/or psychosexual therapy as options for TNB people.

Across the studies included, language was reported as either limiting (e.g. Platt & Bolland, 2017 Davidmann, 2014) or helpful, especially when interacting with their partners (e.g. Pugliese, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Furthermore, for TNB people the use of language might change over time (e.g. Zimman, 2017; Zottola, 2018). Therefore, it is suggested that clinicians, as well as policymakers, consider the evolving nature of inclusive nature (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Conclusions

The present review synthetized data from existing qualitative and mixed methods studies exploring how the sexualities of TNB people changed during transition, and their experience of this change. Narrative synthesis allowed for a step-by-step, yet flexible, procedure for the synthesis. Sexualities of TNB people appeared to be influenced by a number of factors and these might produce unpredictable outcomes and changes, both for the individual and their sense of self, and for the individual's feelings regarding other people and genders. Further research could implement varied methodologies and recruitment processes to facilitate an expansion of our knowledge on this topic. Clinicians are invited to consider the influence of heteronormativity as well as normativity existing in LGBTQIA+ spaces. Clinicians are also encouraged to consider the relevance of relationships for their clients' gender identity and their sexualities.

Note

1. *Sexualities*, as conceptualized here, comprehends various aspects, such as sexual attraction, sexual orientation, sexual behaviours, desire, and relationships. *Transition* in this article refers to any non-hierarchical (i.e., not based on pre-determined steps) process that a trans or non-binary person goes through to embody a feeling of congruence across the multiple aspects of their gender that are relevant to them as a person. The authors consider sex as neutral, and not sex positive. This is to challenge sex-normativity, with an attempt to de-pathologize asexual experiences and identities.

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