

# Understanding more about how young people make sense of their siblings changing gender identity: How this might affect their relationships with their gender-diverse siblings and their experiences

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## Abstract

The gender roles and identity of siblings have been found to be an important factor in the nature and quality of sibling relationships. With an increasing number of young people identifying as gender-diverse or transgender, this research aimed to develop a greater understanding of how young people make sense of their siblings' gender diversity. Semi-structured interviews explored the experiences of eight sibling participants (aged 11–25 years) who have a sibling identifying as gender-diverse. Five overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis of their transcribed interviews. These themes encapsulated commonalities and nuances within the sibling participants' experiences and revealed a process of adjustment. Developing an increased understanding of transgender issues appeared to enable young people to embrace supportive roles, and as a consequence, they reported that their relationships with their gender-diverse siblings were enhanced. However, the sibling participants' increased understanding of transgender issues also generated significant fears and concerns about their siblings' well-being and their sibling relationships. From understanding more about these eight young people's experiences, suggestions are given for how specialist services might best support siblings of gender-diverse young people along their processes of adjustment.

## Keywords

Transgender, gender dysphoria, young people, adolescents, siblings, narratives, sibling relationships, support needs, gender diversity

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## Introduction

Bank and Kahn's (1982) ground-breaking book 'The Sibling Bond' examined the sibling attachment relationship and suggested that this may be the most enduring relationship a person has during their lifetime. They wrote 'siblings are not minor actors on the stage of human development', but rather play a complex role (Bank & Kahn, 1997, p. XV). Bank and Kahn (1982) defined the sibling relationship as an integration of two people's identities and personalities during childhood and into adulthood. This integration is achieved through interaction, interplay, and careful negotiation and adaptation of factors including personalities, likes and dislikes, interests and power dynamics in response to situations. Consequently, sibling relationships are a 'distinctive, emotional, passionate, painful and solacing power that shapes who we are and who we become . . . (as) a sibling can be one's worst enemy or sweetest companion' (Bank & Kahn, 1997, p. XV).

Researchers, like Dunn (1992), have also investigated how this relationship is impacted when siblings experience a significant change in identity as a result of disability, a physical illness or mental health issues. Dunn (1992) found siblings can become 'supporters and helpful influences' (p. 12) in the context of sibling illness, while McHale and Gamble (1989) suggest that siblings of disabled young people can develop difficult feelings towards their siblings due to perceived differential treatment and attention. Lamb (2014) suggests that sibling relationships may be similarly impacted by other changes in a child's identity, however, as yet changes to gender identity have not been explored.

The umbrella term 'transgender', more commonly referred to as 'trans', can describe any person who challenges societal binary gender norms of male and female (Gendered Intelligence, 2012). Gender-diverse young people in the United Kingdom are identified using a wide range of terminology to describe their identities including 'trans female and trans male', 'non binary', 'gender fluid', 'gender queer', 'pangender' and 'agender' (Gendered Intelligence, 2012). While some transgender people may fulfil the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) criteria for a diagnosis of 'gender dysphoria', meaning they experience intense distress with their biological bodies (often triggered by pubertal bodily changes), others experience less distress with their bodies (Di Ceglie, 1998). With increasing numbers of young people seeking support from gender identity services in the United Kingdom (Carmichael, 2016), understanding the possible impact of a change of gender identity on the sibling relationship seems important. Most research into families in this field has focused on the father–mother–child triad rather than the wider family (Gregor, Davidson, & Hingley-Jones, 2016), so there is currently limited research incorporating siblings' perspectives. Ehrensaft (2011) notes siblings are often forgotten by professionals, whose focus can be on the gender-diverse child and their parents.

Some assertions have been made about potential negative consequences of having a gender-diverse sibling. Israel (2004) warned that complicated feelings and negativity about a child's gender diversity can be experienced by the whole family. Norwood (2013) discussed siblings possibly experiencing a degree of grief or loss in relation to their sibling making a change to their gender identity. Gregor et al. (2016) suggested siblings may be bullied by association with their gender-diverse sibling, while Ehrensaft (2011) added they may feel responsible for causing their siblings to be bullied, either because of their own negative behaviour towards them, or through 'outing' their siblings as gender-diverse. However, none of these assertions have been substantiated by research. From their clinical experience, Edwards-Leeper and Spack (2012) proposed 'siblings are the most supportive members in the family of the gender dysphoric child, often coming to accept the social transition quickly and becoming a primary ally' at times of bullying (p. 331). Conversely, Pazos (2000) found family tensions may make it difficult for siblings of gender-diverse young people to know whose perspective to prioritise and support. Therefore, Gregor, Davidson and

Hingley-Jones (2015) suggested parents need time to explore their feelings, and this may also apply to siblings.

Gender-diverse children and young people challenge social norms which can evoke a range of perspectives and emotions from members of the family and the wider social domains that children and their siblings inhabit. Currently, there has been no specific research investigating how young people make sense of their siblings' gender diversity, and if this has an impact on their sibling relationships. In addition, in the authors' experiences of working with gender-diverse young people and their families, they have found little guidance about siblings' support needs. Orford (2008) states that

people's functioning, including their health, can only be understood by appreciating the social contexts in which they are placed . . . (thus) causation is seen as operating through the interaction of many factors on a variety of levels from the micro-level to the macro-level . . . the notion of 'cause' is itself seen as problematic. People are not merely seen as being at the mercy of constraining social forces, but rather as active social agents who are trying to make real . . . choices, to bear responsibilities, to make sense of what is going on, to formulate and carry out plans in line with past experiences, present values, and expectations and hopes for the future. (p.xii)

Challenging and overcoming power and inequality, and respecting diversity, are central principles of Orford's (2008) community psychology perspective, and this research study embraced these principles to enable siblings of gender-diverse young people to share their experiences and perspectives of having a gender-diverse sibling. Through empowering young people to share their experiences of having gender-diverse sibling, this research aimed to

1. Develop a greater understanding of how young people make sense of, and experience, their siblings changing gender identity;
2. Employ this greater understanding to identify any potential support needs siblings may have and suggest how these might be addressed.

### **Research consultation**

Consultation and supervision were provided by Intercom Trust, an LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) charity based in South West England. In particular, Intercom advised on terminology to ensure it reflected the preferences of gender-diverse young people, as well as those preferences of the siblings participating in this research, both as consultees and participants.

The research design was developed with staff consultees from Intercom and the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) – the United Kingdom's only National Health Service (NHS) gender identity service for children and adolescents, and with young people aged 12+ who attended GIDS' siblings' groups at their 2014 family days. In accordance with a participatory research methodology, consultees, that is, siblings of gender-diverse young people known to GIDS or Intercom Trust, recommended one-to-one interviews rather than focus groups. They believed interviews would more sensitively enable siblings to share their personal experiences, as the interviewer could offer individualised support (if required) to ensure their well-being.

## **Method**

### **Design**

Using topics suggested by sibling consultees (see Figure 1), in-depth, open-ended interviews explored the experiences of siblings of gender-diverse young people. While the authors appreciate

- Participants awareness of gender diversity
- How participants found out about their sibling's gender diversity
- Any awareness of signs that their sibling was uncomfortable with their assigned gender identity at birth
- Questions participants had on finding out about their sibling's gender diversity and information and support accessed
- Participants' initial reactions, concerns and fears
- How their family and others have reacted to their sibling's gender diversity, and any consequences of these reactions (e.g. moved house, bullying, changed schools, lost friendships)
- Any positive and negative experiences, and reactions, they have experienced in relation to their sibling's gender diversity
- Participants' thoughts for the future – for their sibling, themselves and their family
- Any feelings around loss of roles and identity issues
- Participants' informational and support needs, and how they think these might be met by services and transgender organisations/charities

**Figure 1.** Topics suggested by sibling consultees at GIDS' 2014 family days (held in Exeter and London).

siblings have multiple identities and broader lives, this research focused solely on participants' common identity as siblings of gender-diverse young people. Thematic analysis enabled identification of common and nuanced experiences within the sibling participants' narratives. The siblings' experiences were then used to suggest how support available to siblings of gender-diverse young people might address their potential needs.

Ethical approval was granted by the National Research Ethics Service (NRES), GIDS' research and development service, and the University of Plymouth's ethics committee.

### *Recruitment*

Inclusion criteria were that families had to

- Have at least two children – one accessing a gender support service and a sibling aged over 11 years;
- Be English speaking as no translation funds were available.

As this is an initial study exploring young people's experiences of having a gender-diverse sibling, this research chose to focus on recruiting adolescent participants. However, following recruitment difficulties and younger children expressing an interest in participation at GIDS' family days, an amendment was approved by NHS ethics to lower the age range to 11 and increase the age to post 18.

GIDS' clinicians distributed information sheets to families on their caseloads who met the inclusion criteria, and to interested families at GIDS' family days and clinics during summer 2015. As only a few families opted in, a second recruitment approach was established through Intercom Trust. Intercom publicised the research on their website and distributed information sheets to families on their advocacy workers' caseloads who met the recruitment criteria.

Families opting in contacted their GIDS' clinician or Intercom worker who ensured they understood the research's purpose and participatory requirements. Where families were still interested, consent was sought to forward their details to the lead author.

Clinical judgement was used to screen out families that might experience undue distress through participation.

### ***Participants***

Ten families opted in, but three did not meet the research criteria as the sibling participants were aged under 11. The final sample comprised seven families – five recruited through GIDS and two via Intercom Trust. Eight siblings participated, with Rosie and Sam (siblings from the same family) requesting a joint interview. The recruitment criteria did not rule out half or step-siblings participating, and one participant, Zoe, is a half-sibling.

All siblings participating in this research (and their parent(s) in the case of those aged under 16 years) met with the lead author prior to the research interview to gain informed consent. This meeting included in-depth discussion of the research's purpose, participatory requirements, confidentiality, right to withdraw and clarified that the care of their gender-diverse sibling at GIDS or Intercom Trust would be unaffected by participation or withdrawal. While all siblings were found to be Gillick competent (Care Quality Commission, 2015), parental permission was obtained for those under the age of 16.

Demographic information shared by these eight sibling participants about themselves and their gender-diverse siblings is documented in Figure 2.

### ***Data collection***

Interviews commenced with an open invitation to the sibling participants to share information about themselves and their gender-diverse siblings to put them at ease and initiate the sharing of narratives (Riessman, 2008). Interview topics (developed through the consultation process) included exploration of how the young people became aware of their siblings' gender diversity and their responses to this; positive and negative experiences they encountered as a consequence, and their fears and concerns for their siblings' futures. Interviews lasted for 65–135 minutes (average was 90 minutes). No sibling participant chose to have a family member or friend present during their interview, other than Sam and Rosie who requested a joint interview. They were also given the choice of being interviewed in their own homes (four siblings) or at a GIDS or Intercom Trust base (four siblings).

Post-interview debriefing was conducted to support the siblings' well-being. Contact details of a GIDS' clinician and/or trans-advocate were given should they wish to seek support. A subsequent email or telephone follow-up a few days later ascertained if there was any further information the sibling participants wished to share, or see if any concerns had arisen. Opportunities were offered of a second interview if the sibling participants wished to share further information and chance to comment on their transcripts; no-one took up these opportunities.

### ***Method of analysis***

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An abductive approach to thematic analysis (i.e. deciding the most likely inference from the observations to develop possible explanations for initial exploration) was adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) and involved the following:

<b>Participant's demographics</b>	<b>Gender-diverse sibling's demographics</b>	<b>Additional information shared by the participant about their sibling and family</b>
<p>Autumn Female Age 14 White British</p> <p>One sibling - Sebastian</p>	<p>Sebastian (Sally) Assigned female at birth, identifies as trans male Age 16.</p> <p>Two years since his transition.</p>	<p>Autumn reported Sebastian has experienced long-standing mental health difficulties including anxiety, and has recently received a diagnosis of autism.</p>
<p>Sam (Samantha) Assigned female at birth, but recently has begun to question her own gender identity Age 13 White British Second eldest of 4 children</p>	<p>James (Kate) Assigned female at birth, identifies as trans male Age 16.</p> <p>About 18 months since James transitioned.</p>	<p>Sam and Rosie reported having a close sibling relationship, so requested a joint interview. Their younger brother was too young to participate.</p> <p>Their parents are separated. The siblings live mainly with their father.</p> <p>James regularly attends a LGBT+ support group.</p>
<p>Rosie Female Age 11 White British Third eldest of 4 children</p>		
<p>Kelly Female Age 20 White British One sibling - Charlie</p>	<p>Charlie (Natalie) Assigned female at birth, identifies as trans male Age 18.</p> <p>About 3-4 years since his transition, but recently started attending an adult gender clinic. He is about to commence cross-sex hormone treatment.</p>	<p>Charlie first came out to his close school-friends, who chose his new name.</p> <p>Their parents were divorcing at the time of Charlie's transition, so Kelly reported taking an active role in Charlie's care.</p>
<p>Zoe Female Age 25 White British Eldest sister of half-sibling Anna (same mother)</p>	<p>Anna (Andrew) Assigned male at birth, identifies as trans female Age 12.</p> <p>About 18 months since her transition.</p>	<p>As their mother is a single parent, Zoe reported adopting the role of a second parent to Anna (and her other younger siblings). Zoe's other siblings (1 brother and 1 sister) declined to participate in this research.</p> <p>Having lived away from the family home for several years, Zoe recently moved back home following the break up her engagement. Zoe advised her fiancé was not supportive of Anna's gender diversity.</p> <p>Zoe attends GIDS' appointments to support Anna and their mother, and her mother and Anna also have support from a LGBT+ charity.</p>

Figure 2. (Continued)

<p>Cerys Female Age 11 White British One sibling - Gemma</p>	<p>Gemma (Richard) Assigned male at birth, identifies as trans female Age 8. Gemma is on GIDS' waiting list. She has been out as trans at home for about 6 months.</p>	<p>As Gemma is not out publicly as gender diverse, Cerys refers to Gemma by a female name and pronouns only at home.  The family is accessing specialist support from a LGBT+ charity.</p>
<p>Phil  Male About to turn 16 White British One sibling - Nick</p>	<p>Nick (No change of name as already had a 'gender-fluid' name) Assigned male at birth, and identified as gender-fluid from age 2, but in the last 18 months has identified as a trans-female Age 14. Nick has been known to GIDS for about 4 years.</p>	<p>The family attend monthly clinic appointments, and family days, at GIDS. Nick also regularly attends a group for gender diverse young people.</p>
<p>Matt Male About to turn 12 Other ethnicity One sibling - Vicky</p>	<p>Vicky (Victor) Assigned male at birth, identifies as trans female Age 16 Vicky came out as trans to her family about 2 years ago and has been known to GIDS since then. She is only known by her female name and pronouns by family.</p>	<p>Matt attends the same all boys' school as Vicky, so he refers to her by her assigned at birth male name and pronoun at school, but uses her female identity at home.  Their parents are divorced. Matt and Vicky live mainly with their mother.  Vicky has a diagnosis of autism and Matt reported she has experienced depression since his early childhood. Vicky attends local LGBT+ support groups.</p>

**Figure 2.** Information shared by the eight sibling participants about themselves, their gender-diverse siblings and their families.

Identifying information has been excluded, and pseudonyms substituted for all names, including chosen names and assigned names at birth (in brackets) for participants' siblings. Citing both names has become necessary as participants made reference to both names in their interviews.

- Transcripts being read multiple times and noting initial areas of interest;
- Initial codes were developed deductively from the interview topics (i.e. making inferences that if propositions A and B are true, then C is likely to also be true), for example, clustering codes related to how the sibling participants learned of their siblings' gender diversity;
- A second set of codes was developed inductively by clustering features grounded in the transcripts' content (i.e. using the observations to make the inference, so from what you have observed making generalisable inferences about the same occurrence happening more widely in the area/population being studied), for example, how these sibling participants managed their siblings' two identities between their coming out and their social transition;
- Initial coding ceased once saturation was reached, so no new codes emerged;
- Grouping of these initial codes enabled development of potential overarching themes;

- Further exploration and refinement of these potential themes produced the final overarching themes. Five themes were identified.

### *Validity enhancement procedures*

Reflexivity was applied using ‘bracketing’ (Tufford & Newman, 2010) to highlight awareness of how the authors’ experiences and preconceptions might influence the research process. As all authors have experience of working with gender-diverse young people and their families, they engaged in ‘bracketing interviews’ to allow them space to reflect on their position(s) and how these might influence the research, as well as increase their awareness of how their perceptions might colour their interpretations, and open up their ability to consider the sibling participants’ narratives from different perspectives.

Reflection and reflexivity was further enhanced through supervisory discussions which aimed to increase ‘the acuity of the research and facilitate more profound and multifaceted analysis and results’ (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81).

The sibling participants in this research study used different terminologies to describe their siblings’ gender diversity. This included ‘transgender’, ‘trans’, ‘trans female’ and ‘trans male’ and ‘non binary’. Participants also used the term ‘*coming out*’ to describe the process of their sibling first telling others about their gender diversity and the subsequent social change of identity, which the participants referred to as ‘*transition*’. They also felt that pseudonyms for chosen names and names assigned at birth should be used in their narratives, and to identify individual quotations in the write-up, as this is consistent with qualitative research methods. We acknowledge that there is much debate about terminology and language in this field, but as this is a qualitative research study, we have used the participants’ own wording to be authentic to their experiences and accounts.

### **Findings**

Although the interviews commenced by asking all eight sibling participants to share some background information about themselves and their gender-diverse siblings, they all took a chronological approach to sharing their narratives. The five overarching themes reflect key stages in what seemed to be a process of adjustment for these sibling participants. Theme 1 reflects the impact of learning of their siblings’ gender diversity and some of the emotions this seemed to evoke. Themes 2, 3 and 4 discuss adjustments and adaptations these sibling participants reported making in response to the shifting situations they encountered along their siblings’ journeys, including adapting to new names and pronouns, manage their siblings’ two identities (which appears a consequence if they are not out fully as trans in all social contexts) and the deepening empathy and supportive role these sibling participants adopted in response to their siblings coming out as gender-diverse in all contexts. The final theme presents the sibling participants’ reflections on their experiences, and how these have affected their understanding and outlook, while also outlining their ongoing concerns for their siblings’ futures. While the five themes encapsulated commonalities in these eight sibling participants’ experiences, they also captured unique nuances. Quotations from the sibling participants’ narratives are used (pseudonyms as given in Figure 2 are used to identify individual participants’ quotations as requested by participants) to ‘describe the data in (rich) detail’ ensuring their voices and perspectives are accurately presented (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), while interpretations aid in furthering understanding regarding how these sibling participants make sense of, and experience, their relationships with their gender-diverse siblings.

### *Theme 1: confusion following finding out about, or being told of, their siblings' gender diversity*

All eight sibling participants described a sense of confusion when they first learned of their siblings' gender diversity. Autumn, Rosie, Matt, Cerys and Phil (the younger siblings) were all told by their parents and stated they were 'quite confused' and found it 'really hard to make sense' of what they were told, as the discloser(s) 'didn't really know how to explain it' (Rosie). Zoe, Sam and Kelly found out about their siblings' gender diversity in other ways. Zoe's line manager (the special needs co-ordinator at Anna's school) informed her, Sam found out from following James on social media, and Kelly's sibling, Charlie, texted her to say he wanted 'to be a boy'.

Autumn, Cerys and Zoe stated their confusion was coupled with feelings of 'upset': 'I was completely in shock . . . my brain turned to mush . . . I just cried for ages' (Cerys). These feelings of 'upset' perhaps suggest feelings of loss akin to grief. Indeed, Autumn poignantly tried to explain her confusion in the following way: 'It was just somebody you have been with for the whole of your life is not that person . . . it's like a lie . . . all the memories you have aren't right'. Autumn, Cerys and Zoe shared complicated feelings that a gender change may have had implications for the very foundation of their sibling relationships, and the personality of their siblings. Conversely, when Kelly's family doctor assumed she was mourning the loss of her sister, Kelly refuted this strongly saying, 'What! He's still here!'. She qualified her response saying 'I think I always had a brother'. However, Zoe remembered wondering if it was permissible to grieve the loss of her brother when she was actually gaining a sister.

Unlike Kelly who had a gender-diverse friend, the other seven sibling participants reported not knowing what the term 'transgender' meant, which added to their sense of confusion. Zoe said her 'knowledge and experience of transgender was nothing'. The news was described as being 'weird' (Autumn and Rosie), and 'strange' (Cerys), so generated further questions for Phil and Cerys. Phil (at age 4/5) questioned, "'Am I going to have to do the same? Change into a girl?'" and that was a bit scary', and Cerys' (aged 10 at the time) 'big worry' was that Gemma would become 'a girlie girl' and they would no longer have shared interests. Zoe (the eldest participant) had previously concluded that Anna's wearing of 'nail-varnish, make-up and occasionally a dress' meant she had a gay brother. Her 'strong feminist beliefs' about 'inequalities between the sexes' in British society led her to assume that Anna would now have more limited life chances as a 'trans female' than as a gay man. Conversely, the news for Autumn, Rosie, Sam and Kelly (whose siblings 'came out' as trans in early adolescence) seemed to lead them to reflect on their childhoods, as they sought memories that confirmed, or made sense of, their siblings' gender diversity, such as their siblings always having been seen as 'tomboys'.

The six female sibling participants reported seeking further information to help reduce their initial confusion about the meaning of being gender-diverse or transgender. However, their accessing the Internet seems to have added to their confusion, as it provided them with an abundance of information. As Matt and Phil said they did not seek additional information, they appear to have not felt the same need as the female sibling participants, but this may also be a reflection of their young ages at the time of their siblings coming out.

### *Theme 2: achieving some clarity through beginning a social transition*

The sibling participants' confusion about their sibling's gender diversity and its implications left them feeling uncertain about the way forward. Zoe, Cerys and Autumn (the three siblings 'upset' on learning of their siblings' gender diversity) stated they welcomed being involved in the selection

of their siblings' new names. For them, new names perhaps afforded new identities and a foundation on which to re-build their relationship with their gender-diverse siblings. Cerys helped Gemma search for names on the Internet, Autumn selected from Sebastian's short-list and Zoe ensured Anna did not propose 'whacky' names. The other four sibling participants reported their siblings' new names were selected in other ways. Rosie and Sam stated James chose his own name, Kelly said Charlie's friends chose his, while Matt's sibling feminised her birth name.

Five of the sibling participants felt their adjustment to new names and pronouns took approximately 3 months, with Autumn, Zoe and Matt believing their adjustment was made easier by their siblings choosing new names beginning with the same initial as, or sounding similar to, their assigned names at birth. However, as Rosie said James trialled several names before deciding on the one that 'suited him best', this may explain why she and Sam felt their adjustment took 6 months. All the female sibling participants reported adjusting to new pronouns was more challenging than name changes, but Phil and Matt said they had 'no problem' adjusting to feminine pronouns. As Phil experienced no name change and Matt's adjustment was perhaps easier as 'Victor' became 'Vicky', this may have meant they could concentrate on using the correct pronouns.

Despite the gender-diverse sibling participants referring to name and pronoun adjustments as being challenging, they were all keen to show their support for their siblings by making deliberate efforts to use their new names and pronouns, and by correcting other people's errors. However, tensions in their sibling relationships appeared to arise when the sibling participants felt their gender-diverse siblings did not appreciate how challenging or difficult it was for them to adjust to these changes: 'because I've been calling him "Kate" and "she" all my life . . . when you get mad, you don't think, so . . . it came out automatically, like "Dad tell her . . ." . . . James thought I was purposely saying he was born a girl and using it against him' (Rosie). The sibling participants did admit that seeing their siblings with changed appearances (hairstyles and clothing) required much getting used to. However, they were prepared to support in making other visible changes, such as removing photographs from view (Autumn and Kelly) and editing details and photographs on social media accounts, so their siblings' assigned at birth gender identities were hidden to reduce distress (Autumn, Kelly and Sam), despite this creating a dilemma for participants as such photographs documented their childhoods and precious memories also.

### *Theme 3: managing their gender-diverse siblings' two identities*

Making such practical changes appears to have helped the sibling participants overcome some of their initial confusion, but this was short-lived as in the majority of cases (exceptions being Kelly, Phil and Zoe) these changes were confined to the home environment.

The five youngest sibling participants, along with Kelly (who was 16 at the time), reported there was much time spent discussing when their siblings would come out publicly. While waiting for an opportune time, such as end of school year or change of educational establishment, these five sibling participants said their parents told them to keep their siblings' gender-diverse identities within the family and continue to use their birth identity (name and associated pronoun assigned at birth) in public. This emphasis on keeping their siblings' gender-diversity solely within the family heightened these sibling participants' worries, as they felt it put them under immense pressure to not make any mistakes which could result in their 'outing' their sibling as gender-diverse in public, and this possibly causing hurt and upset for the whole family. These sibling participants reported this interim period lasted between 6 months (Sam and Rosie) and up to 12–18 months (Autumn and Kelly), but is ongoing for Matt and Cerys whose siblings are not yet out as gender-diverse publicly. Phil and Zoe stated they did not have to manage two identities, as Phil's sibling, Nick, had identified as gender-fluid since age 2, and Zoe said she and her mother had 'progressed quickly' with Anna's transition.

During this interim period, Sam, Rosie, Autumn and Cerys reported being fearful that their 'slip-ups' might accidentally reveal their siblings' gender diversity to others. Being anxious that their slip-ups might make their siblings targets for bullying, and them by association, these participants reported having to be quick-witted to cover up any mistakes. Cerys said she created the cover story that 'Gemma' was the 'nickname' her family used because 'if Richard had been born a girl, he would have been called Gemma'. Conversely, Kelly said she naturally fell in with the names and pronouns being used around her. These four sibling also reported their gender-diverse siblings began experimenting with their new identities, like going out in different clothing reflective of their gender diversity. Although initially this happened in places where their sibling were less likely to be recognised and then moving closer to home, these sibling participants expressed extreme anxieties about the potential negative consequences of them, or their siblings, being recognised and questioned by others. Autumn and Zoe shared the belief that trans females' (male-to-female transitions) masculine characteristics render them more vulnerable to bullying, so Zoe was more concerned about Anna's safety, while Autumn expressed relief that Sebastian was a trans male.

Managing their siblings' two identities appeared challenging for all the school-aged sibling participants, but particularly for the females who appeared to need to emotionally process the impact of their siblings changing gender identity. While siblings Sam and Rosie had each other to talk to, Cerys and Autumn had no other siblings to share their feelings. They found it 'really annoying that I couldn't talk to anyone . . . or tell my friends' (Autumn) and reported their preoccupation with their emotions (especially their anxieties about what was going to happen to their siblings) affected their friendships and studies. Autumn reflected, 'I wasn't the most liked person that year . . . and my friends couldn't understand why I was so upset'. They said they wrote diaries (Autumn), and blogs and stories (Cerys) to help manage their emotions and were guarded about what information they shared with others about their siblings. In such circumstances where sibling participants were unable to share their feelings, they appear to have sought information (especially other siblings' stories) on the Internet to help them make sense of their feelings and know that these were not unique to them.

Having been party to a conversation where negative perspectives about gender diversity were shared, Zoe found herself in a similar position of being unable to share her emotions with her fiancé and friends. She, likewise, wrote stories where the characters voiced her emotions. Autumn, Cerys and Zoe stated their emotions became too intense for them to contain, so they made the decision to confide in a close friend despite fearing negative repercussions from family and friends. While Autumn acknowledged, 'Friends can't really do anything . . . but it's really nice having people there for you', she, Cerys and Zoe found their confidants 'really supportive'.

#### *Theme 4: the sibling participants' deepening empathy with their gender-diverse siblings*

To accept their siblings' gender diversity, it appears these sibling participants had to

draw a line, so you're not bathing in self pity . . . that you are going through this because of someone else . . . You've just got to snap out of that, as this is somebody's life, . . . and accept them how they are, and help and support them in every way possible. (Autumn)

Their narratives suggest that for some participants acceptance was a gradual process (Kelly, Sam and Rosie), while for others it was triggered by a specific event, like when Phil was watching 'a tv documentary about people wanting to be transgender' during a school lesson, and for Autumn it was only after 'having a meeting with somebody specifically for transgenderism'. This acceptance of their siblings' gender diversity appeared to mark a significant turning point for these sibling

participants, enabling them to develop a deeper empathy with how their siblings were thinking and feeling, and shifting their focus from the impact on themselves to their becoming increasingly supportive of their siblings and their gender diversity. Zoe and Cerys (two of the siblings who were most upset by their siblings' gender diversity) cited examples of how they demonstrated their increased empathy and acceptance. Cerys recalled being delighted when 'one of the first things we got her as a girl' was the 'pink tutu' Gemma had been craving. Zoe discussed how she managed her feelings of guilt stemming from being unsupportive of Anna's wish to be gender-diverse, by painting Anna's bedroom in her favourite colour, pink. While objects (such as new passports and the tutu), and the sibling participants' editing their social media accounts, are poignant markers for young people of others' recognising their changed gender identities, some of the sibling participants voiced resentment about the financial and time implications of supporting their siblings' gender transitions. While Kelly said,

The money thing really annoyed me like . . . £80 for a new passport, because . . . he wanted to change the name . . . and yeah, ok . . . it's going to make him happier, but money doesn't grow on trees

Autumn reported taking on extra chores, and Kelly stated her family were unable to go on holiday as attendance at Charlie's clinic appointments used all her parents' annual leave. Although wishing to be supportive of their siblings, Kelly and Autumn's resentful undercurrents may reflect their perceptions that their siblings' were unappreciative of the sacrifices they were making.

Acknowledging it was their siblings' 'decision' to be gender-diverse and was significant to their well-being, the six sibling participants (whose siblings are now out publicly in their changed gender identity) reported some 'relief' when they learnt their siblings were preparing to come out as gender-diverse publicly, as this saw an end to their having to manage their siblings' two identities (i.e. their identity assigned at birth and their changed gender identity). However, their increasing awareness of negativity and phobia towards gender-diverse or transgender people in British society appeared frightening for the sibling participants, as they all reported embracing a supportive and protective role towards their siblings: 'I didn't want her (Nick) to be shamed for it . . . if she feels really passionate about it then she shouldn't be made to think it's not normal, or that she can't do it' (Phil), but only Phil and Zoe reported actual incidents of bullying.

In helping their siblings prepare for potential negative responses from others, all sibling participants reported taking on supportive roles including providing a listening ear, increasing their siblings' self-confidence, offering to engage in distractive activities and providing coping strategies. Through embracing these supportive roles, all the sibling participants became increasingly aware of the fears and concerns their siblings were experiencing:

I think it's really unfair on him to be called a girl . . . he's had 6 hours of being called a girl at school, and he just wants to come home and be called 'James' and the right gender. (Rosie)

This in turn enhanced these sibling participants' understanding, and they felt this strengthened their relationships with their gender-diverse siblings.

The sibling participants' supportive roles appeared to extend to their being sensitive to their siblings' needs and moods, so they offered opportunities to talk, encouraged them to be persistent when they encountered difficulties and engaged them in a shared activity by way of distraction or to lift their siblings' moods. Zoe, Kelly and Phil's concern for their siblings' well-being extended to their accompanying their siblings to gender identity service appointments, and Zoe and Kelly actively encouraged their siblings to share their feelings and concerns with staff/clinicians. Initially, Autumn and Matt attended gender identity service appointments, but 'I felt it was just not a place

that I needed to be' (Autumn), perhaps because these sibling participants felt such appointments centred around the needs and wishes of their gender-diverse siblings rather than appreciating that they might also have needs. All eight sibling participants, however, wished to be kept updated regarding their siblings' care post appointments, but such updates often evoked new fears and concerns for them which they stated they felt unable to discuss with family or clinicians.

The six sibling participants' narratives (excluding Matt and Cerys) suggest that they became more relaxed once their siblings' gender diversity was recognised publicly. Consequently, it then felt 'really, really, really weird' (Rosie) when someone referred to their siblings' identities assigned at birth 'because that's just not right' (Autumn).

### *Theme 5: these sibling participants' reflections on their experiences*

Although each of the sibling participants related their unique experiences, it appears they have all shared a similar journey in supporting their gender-diverse siblings. Regardless of where their siblings are on their journeys, it appears that all the sibling participants have increased their knowledge of transgender and gender diversity through accessing information. While Phil felt having a gender-diverse sibling 'makes you more accepting in general', the sibling participants reported their Internet searches and use of social media have enabled them to better understand transgender and wider LGBT+ issues. This learning resulted in these sibling participants having 'broadened horizons' (Autumn). For the sibling participants whose siblings are further along their journeys (Phil, Kelly and Autumn), it appears that their learning and their personal experiences have shaped their thinking and their broader acceptance of diversity within British society. Indeed, Autumn reflected, 'I don't know what sort of person I would have become, if this hadn't happened'.

When they reflected on their experiences, all the sibling participants reported that they felt their relationships with their gender-diverse siblings were now enhanced: 'If something major happens like this, then it helps you get closer to the other person' (Cerys). They all attributed this to their siblings being 'happier' (Rosie, Sam, Phil and Cerys), 'comfortable' (Autumn) and 'more confident' (Zoe, Matt and Kelly) in their changed gender identities because 'I think James knows who he is now' (Rosie). However, Autumn added, 'We just kind of understand each other more. He's more fun to be around'. Her comment perhaps suggests that the sibling participants' increased learning and empathy with their gender-diverse siblings might also have contributed to their siblings' well-being and their enhanced sibling relationships. Kelly, for example, said she 'now perceive(s) gender as more of a mental thing than a physical thing' and Sam has learnt about gender being a 'whole spectrum' of different identities.

Despite their ongoing learning about gender variance and transgender, the sibling participants all reported having two significant fears for their siblings' well-being and futures. First, they remain fearful for their siblings' safety in British society as they recognise there are people who are less accepting or transphobic. Second, knowing their siblings might wish to access medical interventions to physically transition (including hormone treatment and surgery), the sibling participants are fearful about potential complications or side effects. However, the sibling participants' age and the stage of their siblings' journeys appeared to impact their other fears and concerns. Cerys and Matt (both under 12 and whose siblings are not out publicly) said their focus is on short-term, practical worries around the use of toilets, changing rooms and sports lessons. Kelly and Zoe (both in their 20s, so at a different life stage to the other participants), and Autumn and Phil (whose siblings are further along their journeys) reported having a long-term focus. They reported fearing that their siblings might have more limited life experiences including being unable to travel to countries where gender-diversity is culturally unacceptable (Autumn), being unable to find a partner (Autumn, Zoe and Kelly), or being unable to be parents (Kelly) or biological parents (Zoe).

While these sibling participants appeared to have ongoing fears and concerns for their siblings' well-being, and have unanswered questions including how their siblings know they are gender-diverse, they all agreed, 'if it is something she wants, then she should go for it . . . (because) on the inside, if she is a girl, then that's who she really should be' (Phil).

## Discussion

This research aimed to develop a greater understanding of how young people make sense of, and experience, their siblings changing gender identity. Eight young people (two from the same family) were empowered to share their experiences through in-depth, open-ended interviews. Thematic analysis of the sibling participants' interview narratives revealed five overarching themes, which suggested these sibling participants experienced a process of adjustment. This process appeared to be gradual as they learnt more about what their siblings' gender diversity meant, and the impact of this on them and their families. Key points and experiences were highlighted by the sibling participants such as their learning of their siblings' gender diversity and their confused responses; their adjustment to name and pronoun changes which afforded some clarity about the way forward; managing a period when their siblings had different public and private gender identities; increasing their support and empathy by understanding more about their siblings' challenges; and finally how their learning and personal experiences have broadened their outlooks and ultimately appear to have enhanced their relationships with their gender-diverse siblings.

Each key experience appeared to unsettle the sibling participants and created fears and concerns. To enable them to adjust and move on, these siblings participants had to identify ways of coping. Having learned of their siblings' gender diversity, the sibling participants' lack of prior awareness of what this meant perhaps generated fears of the unknown. Use of the Internet may have furthered the female sibling participants' confusion and uncertainty. Autumn, Cerys and Zoe's 'upset' at the perceived loss of their sibling seems to confirm Lamb's (2014) conclusion that gender is a major factor in the development of sibling relationships, and that when gender identity changes this can have an impact on their subsequent relationship. This finding perhaps suggests why some siblings might experience the feelings of loss and grief reported by Norwood (2013). The way forward for Autumn, Cerys and Zoe appeared to be recognising that their loss was for a part of their siblings' identity, as opposed to losing their siblings altogether. Rethinking the relationship and shifting ideas about the importance of gender identity helped them to re-establish and re-balance this sense of loss.

When their siblings adopted new names and pronouns, these sibling participants appeared to find solace in certainty and having a way forward, but it also seems to have generated new fears and concerns. For a time, gender-diverse young people may seek an opportunity to try out a different gender identity at home before making any formal steps in other contexts. For the sibling participants, this seems to have generated anxiety and a burdensome feeling about not accidentally sharing this changed gender identity with others. Like Ehrensaft (2011) reported, the sibling participants worried about accidentally outing their siblings to others through their slip-ups and causing negative responses from others as a result, or upsetting their siblings through their inadvertently using the incorrect identity in a specific context. This finding may possibly explain Israel's (2004) conclusion that all family members experience complex feelings and negativity when their family member comes out as gender-diverse, and how the family tensions reported by Pazos (2000) arise. The sibling participants appeared to have difficulty containing their emotions and maintaining their siblings' confidentiality, with Cerys, Autumn and Zoe confiding in a close friend. The need to share their feelings suggests that some siblings of gender-diverse young people, like Gregor et al. (2015) recommended for parents, need a space to discuss their feelings and experiences, perhaps with a

trans-specialist who may be best placed to answer any specific questions that arise, or in a support group for siblings of gender-diverse young people. It is also recognised that different family members may hold different perspectives, or understanding, of gender diversity and face different challenges, so opportunities to talk together as a family may be supportive for all family members, including siblings, especially as this research has recognised that the opinions of other family members, especially parents, may impact or influence the attitudes and perspectives of siblings. Such shared family spaces may be particularly helpful for siblings in Kelly's position where there were conflicting perspectives which she had to manage, as this enabled her to agree a shared understanding of the way forward which was supportive of Charlie.

The siblings' narratives suggested that ultimately sharing their siblings' journeys enhanced their relationships with their siblings. Their deepening empathy with their siblings' thoughts and feelings, coupled with their knowledge of negativity and transphobia within UK society from watching television and searching on the Internet, appeared to make the sibling participants fearful about their siblings being bullied, so they embraced more supportive and protective roles. This may provide context to explain how siblings of gender-diverse young people become the 'primary ally' that Edwards-Leeper and Spack (2012) found in their clinical work. It is recognised that the UK media reporting regarding transgender and gender diversity remains sensationalist and biased, often with a focus on reporting of violence towards trans people and transphobia. Consequently, exposure to this has created significant fears for the sibling participants in this study; hence, they identified a need to hear alternative dialogues regarding trans people who are living well, regardless of their gender diversity. As the siblings in this research became supporters of their gender-diverse siblings, while also experiencing tensions in their sibling relationships especially the resentful undercurrents created by their siblings not appreciating the sacrifices they were making to be supportive, these findings are similar to those reported by Dunn (1992) and McHale and Gamble (1989) with siblings who experienced identity change in their sibling relationships resulting from disability or through physical or mental illness. Therefore, these findings might be generalisable to any sibling population who experience a major identity change in their sibling relationships.

### *Implications for families and professionals working with gender-diverse young people*

This research aimed to employ this greater understanding from these eight sibling participants' experiences to identify any potential support needs siblings of gender-diverse young people may have and suggest how these might be addressed by healthcare services, or third sector LGBT+ organisations. It seems that the ways in which young people first come to learn about their siblings' gender diversity can generate confusion and difficult feelings. As the sibling participants' narratives show this is most likely to be in the context of a family conversation or a discussion with a parent, it seems that access to accurate, age-appropriate information, which is sensitive to not raising anxieties, would be most helpful for both parents and young people at this point to help siblings understand about gender identity and diversity. Having access to environments that normalise gender diversity in young people, for example, GIDS' family days and LGBT+ support groups, and being able to meet other families experiencing a similar journey, seems an important part of recognising young people and siblings are not alone in their experiences and that others share their complex feelings. Unfortunately, at present, such support groups and networks are limited, so families are required to travel significant distances to access such provision.

The sibling participants seemed to benefit from developing strategies for adjusting to name and pronoun changes, but they also highlighted a need for their gender-diverse siblings to have some patience with them and their mistakes during this period of adjustment. Recognising that it took about

3–6 months for the participants in this research to adjust, it seems that professionals advising that it may take such a time period for adjustment would help reduce the pressure siblings experience to get names and pronouns correct, and help gender-diverse young people recognise that they cannot expect an immediate adjustment and mistakes may occur. Also, there may be a period of siblings having to manage their siblings' two identities (assigned gender identity at birth in public and their changed gender identity within family contexts), as their siblings work out how they want to live in the world. Managing these two identities, and keeping their siblings' gender diversity solely within the immediate family, seemed to generate anxiety for the eight sibling participants in this research. The siblings' narratives suggested they would have welcomed the opportunity to engage in family conversations to discuss their concerns and perspectives, so they can understand how they are going to move along their siblings' journeys as a family. This may explain why some of these siblings have attended gender identity service appointments, but professionals may encourage periodic sessions involving the whole family to discuss such issues. An initial session with siblings might focus on exploring their understanding of gender identity and diversity and its role in the development of their sibling relationships, but then helping them to re-think their relationships and shifting ideas about the importance of gender to help them re-establish and re-balance any sense of loss and anxiety they may be experiencing. It is important that environments are provided, and facilitated, to enable all family members to share their feelings together, and encourage all family members to be part of decision-making and planning (e.g. around time scales and what is happening when), as this might ease some of the tensions the siblings participants in this research experienced.

Owing to the lack of information the sibling participants in this research were given about gender diversity, they all turned to the Internet for information, but they were aware that what they were accessing might be misleading, and it may also have been overwhelming given their age, or the stage their siblings were at along their journeys. The provision of staged information might then prevent the creation of some fears and concerns for siblings. For younger siblings, and those at the start of their processes of adjustment, who may be anxious about practical issues, such support might address queries such as use of toilets and changing rooms by gender-diverse people, and provide strategies to manage negative responses such as bullying. For older siblings, or those whose siblings are further along on their journeys, informational needs might include medical interventions for transitioning, and provide access to biographies of gender-diverse people, or opportunities to meet them in person, to learn about their life experiences. The need to stage such information necessitates continuing to regularly involve siblings of gender-diverse young people as their siblings progress along their journeys.

The authors' proposal for meeting the needs of siblings of gender-diverse young people arose from the commonalities occurring within the sibling participants' narratives. However, within each theme some siblings reported nuances, so the authors recognise that this proposed support might not meet the needs of all siblings of gender-diverse young people. Some flexibility may be needed within this support provision to meet the needs of individual siblings. It is recognised that all the siblings in this research were supportive of their siblings' gender diversity, however, this may not be the case for all siblings, therefore, support needs may vary in this context.

It is also acknowledged that to support gender-diverse young people and their families more broadly, professionals and organisations have a role and responsibility in terms of raising awareness of gender diversity to hopefully reduce exclusion and discrimination within society.

## **Limitations of this study**

This research has a number of limitations, with several arising from recruitment challenges which affected the participant sample. The short time-frame over which to conduct the research

limited the recruitment period to 4 months. Siblings of gender-diverse young people are a hard-to-access population, so recruitment had to be supported by GIDS and Intercom Trust. This meant the sample solely comprised siblings of families who were actively seeking support from these organisations, or siblings who knew of Intercom Trust, as Intercom advertised the research study on its website. This is likely to have biased the results owing to it being a self-selecting sample from within a particular clinical group. It could be argued that families attending support services are likely to be more supportive of gender diversity than perhaps other families who are not engaged. However, staff in both services report that they work with families who hold a range of beliefs and feelings, and that families who have more negative or conflicted feelings also access their services. Families and siblings having to opt in to enable participation meant the sample was not homogeneous. The authors prioritised sample size, so there was much diversity in the sample's demographics (see Figure 2). The sample was biased to female siblings (six females), with a very slight bias towards participants having gender-diverse siblings who identified as female, and there was a wide age range from 11 to 25 years. This large age range afforded perspective across the adolescent developmental life stage and highlighted different needs at different ages or life stages. Older participants seemed more able to express complex feelings and relational issues, and reflected on the process of a journey that may have occurred alongside their own development. However, these recruitment challenges, and the subsequent sample biases, mean it is not possible to generalise the findings of this small study. More research is needed to address the biases and limitations of this research such as learning more about the experiences of male siblings; siblings under the age of 11 who were not included in this research sample; siblings from step-families and those of siblings from families who hold more negative or conflicted perceptions of gender diversity, but it is acknowledged that these families may be hard to access.

The authors note that one of their questions may have constrained and biased the sibling participants' responses. The question asked was about sibling participants' fears or concerns for their gender-diverse siblings' futures. This was a negatively loaded question, and the authors failed to also ask about positives that the participants might foresee. On reflection, the authors acknowledge that sibling participants may also have some excitement about aspects of their gender-diverse siblings' futures which may be better/easier/more comfortable, but this biased question was not recognised at the time of developing the interview schedule with the consultees.

Owing to the authors all having experience of working with gender-diverse young people and their families, they had a desire to find out how siblings of gender-diverse young people might best be supported. This created a clinical stance in this research, which may be perceived as pathologising, but the authors believe this was necessary to try to be helpful to siblings and identify their potential support needs. Therefore, this research is limited by it solely focusing on the impact of a young person changing their gender identity to identify as gender-diverse on their sibling relationship, and investigating how this is perceived by their sibling(s). Consequently, the other positive aspects of the lives of siblings of gender-diverse young people are not explored such as aspects of their own personhood. It was not the aim of this research to assume that having a gender-diverse sibling is necessary dominant in the siblings' lives, but the authors' assumption that this aspect of their lives might better be supported.

Although consultees felt siblings might become distressed in their interviews, the authors did not find this. This suggests focus groups might be a useful next step for learning more about siblings' experiences as through their exploration together, siblings may be mutually supportive of one another. Nonetheless, the authors believe this research has achieved its aims of beginning to learn more about young peoples' experiences of having a gender-diverse sibling and how these experiences have impacted their sibling relationships. From this increased understanding, the

authors have been able to suggest areas where siblings of gender-diverse young people may require support and how this may be addressed.

## Conclusion

This study has been the first research undertaken with siblings. It aimed to develop a greater understanding of how young people make sense of, and experience, their siblings changing gender identity, and employ this greater understanding to identify any potential support needs siblings may have and suggest how these might be addressed. Despite recruitment challenges and the significant diversity amongst the participant sample, this has been an initial exploratory study which has shown the supportive role siblings take on following learning of their siblings' gender-diverse/trans identities. This supportive role appears to stem from the sibling participants developing a greater understanding of gender diversity and increased awareness of the negative and phobic attitudes evident within UK society. However, learning of their siblings' gender diversity led sibling participants to seek more information. This study has highlighted siblings' need for information which is staged to address their questions, and the concerns/fears that arose for them as their gender-diverse siblings moved along their journeys. It also recognised sibling participants' desire to have access to environments which normalise gender diversity and provide support to help them challenge negative attitudes and transphobia within society.

The authors appreciate that the findings from this study are not generalisable owing to the small participant numbers and the significant sample diversity, but areas for further exploration have been identified, especially exploring the perspectives and experiences of families who are less/not supportive of their gender-diverse family member.

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