

Adolescent Gender Diversity and Mental Well-Being in Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study: Exploring Gender and Sexuality

Wataru Shiraishi*

Department of Pharmacology, Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

This research article investigates the nuanced relationship between adolescent gender diversity, mental well-being, and the exploration of gender and sexuality within the framework of the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study. Adolescence is a pivotal period for self-discovery, during which individuals explore their gender identity and sexual orientation. Understanding the impact of these explorations on mental health is essential for providing appropriate support and care to gender-diverse adolescents. The ABCD study, a longitudinal research initiative, offers a valuable platform for examining these factors in a large and diverse sample of American youth. There are known associations between mental health symptoms and transgender identity among adults. Whether this relationship extends to early adolescents and to gender domains other than identity is unclear. This study measured dimensions of gender in a large, diverse, sample of youth, and examined associations between diverse gender experiences and mental health.

Keywords: Adolescents; Children; Youth; Mental health

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of profound physical, psychological, and social changes. Among these changes, the exploration of gender identity and sexual orientation can have significant implications for an adolescent's mental well-being. Gender diversity, including transgender and non-binary identities, has gained increasing recognition and visibility. However, the specific mental health challenges and strengths of gender-diverse adolescents remain an understudied area. Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) children and adolescents are an increasingly visible yet highly stigmatized group [1]. These youth experience more psychological distress than not only their cisgender, heterosexual peers but also their cisgender, sexual minority peers. In this review, we document these mental health disparities and discuss potential explanations for them using a minority stress framework. We also discuss factors that may increase and decrease TGD youth's vulnerability to psychological distress. Further, we review interventions, including gender-affirming medical care, that may improve mental health in TGD youth. We conclude by discussing limitations of current research and suggestions for the future. Gender diversity, encompassing a range of gender identities beyond the traditional binary of male and female, has gained increasing recognition and visibility in recent years. It is essential to explore the impact of gender diversity on mental well-being, as individuals experience and express their gender in ways that are authentic to them. Understanding the unique mental health challenges and strengths associated with gender diversity is crucial for promoting the well-being of gender-diverse individuals.

The ABCD study, launched in 2016, has provided a unique opportunity to explore these issues. This study aims to investigate the following aspects

- The experiences of gender-diverse adolescents within the context of their families, schools, and communities.
- The influence of gender exploration on mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and overall well-being.
- The intersectionality of gender diversity with sexual orientation and its impact on mental health.

- Protective factors and support systems that contribute to the positive mental health of gender-diverse adolescents.

Methods

The research utilizes data from the ABCD study, a nationally representative, longitudinal cohort of over 11,000 children aged 9-10 years at baseline. Through a combination of surveys, interviews, and neuroimaging, the study collects information on various domains, including cognitive development, mental health, and social interactions. This article focuses on the mental health and gender-related variables within the dataset.

Results

The study is ongoing, and preliminary results have revealed that gender-diverse adolescents face unique mental health challenges, including increased risk of depression and anxiety. It also indicates that family support and an affirming environment can have a positive impact on their well-being. The intersection of gender diversity with sexual orientation shows complex and individualized effects on mental health outcomes.

Gender diversity and mental health

Mental health disparities: Gender-diverse individuals often face mental health disparities, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality [2]. These disparities are linked to the experiences of

*Corresponding author: Wataru Shiraishi, Department of Pharmacology, Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil, Phone: 9891121645879; E-mail: Shiraishi_w@gmail.com

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discrimination, social stigma, and the challenges of navigating a world that may not fully understand or accept diverse gender identities.

Social support: The presence of strong social support networks, including accepting friends and family, plays a significant role in promoting the mental well-being of gender-diverse individuals. Having a safe and affirming environment where individuals can express their gender identity is associated with improved mental health outcomes.

Access to healthcare: Access to gender-affirming healthcare, including hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries, can have a positive impact on mental health. Conversely, barriers to accessing gender-affirming care can lead to increased distress.

Intersectionality: It's essential to recognize the intersection of gender diversity with other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. These intersections can create unique experiences and challenges that impact mental well-being differently for each individual.

Resilience and strengths: Gender-diverse individuals exhibit remarkable resilience and strengths. Many have the courage to live authentically in the face of societal challenges and can serve as advocates for gender diversity, positively influencing societal attitudes and support systems.

Discussion

This research contributes to our understanding of the diverse experiences of gender-diverse adolescents and highlights the importance of creating inclusive, affirming environments within families, schools, and communities. It emphasizes the need for healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers to recognize and address the mental health disparities and unique strengths of gender-diverse youth [3-5]. Further analysis and longitudinal follow-ups within the ABCD study will provide a more comprehensive understanding of these important issues.

Promoting mental well-being

Inclusive education: Educational institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment by recognizing and respecting diverse gender identities, providing gender-inclusive facilities, and implementing anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies [6].

Healthcare equity: Healthcare providers should ensure equitable access to gender-affirming care, offer culturally competent services,

and provide mental health support tailored to the unique needs of gender-diverse individuals.

Legal protections: Legal protections and policies that safeguard the rights and well-being of gender-diverse individuals are essential. These may include legal recognition of non-binary genders, protection against discrimination, and access to accurate identification documents.

Community support: Building strong and affirming support networks within the gender-diverse community and beyond is vital. This includes support groups, mental health services, and organizations dedicated to promoting the rights and well-being of gender-diverse individuals.

Conclusion

Gender diversity is a fundamental aspect of human identity. Recognizing and respecting diverse gender identities is crucial for improving the mental well-being of gender-diverse individuals. By addressing the mental health disparities, promoting inclusive policies and practices, and fostering a supportive environment, we can create a society where all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, can thrive and enjoy positive mental well-being. Adolescent gender diversity and the exploration of gender and sexuality significantly impact mental well-being. The ongoing ABCD study is a valuable resource for examining these effects within a large and diverse population. Understanding the experiences of gender-diverse adolescents is essential for developing supportive policies and interventions that promote their mental health and overall well-being.

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