Learning Who We Can Be: A Social-Cognitive Account of Trans and Nonbinary Gender Trajectories

Carson Cooper

Department of Psychology, Carleton University

Ivan Coyote's autobiographical writing shows how gendered recognition and misrecognition shape a child's sense of self. In one scene, a stranger praises them as "a good boy" for helping their mother, and Coyote recalls:

"A tourist man wearing tourist shorts and a tourist shirt was on his way in to the Super Valu, and he stopped to let us exit past him. 'You're a good boy, son, to help your mama like that,' he drawled at me.

My chest puffed up like a little rooster and I stood taller, like I thought maybe a soldier would, or a doorman, someone with a uniform and a purpose. Nodded quick, without smiling.

My mom sighed and squinted into the sun in his direction. 'She's not my son, she is my daughter,' she told him, without any edge in her voice, just the facts" (Coyote, 2016, pp. 13–16).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is a useful starting point for understanding gender identity development because it emphasizes that people learn who they can be by observing others, anticipating consequences, and regulating their behaviour in social contexts (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). In its classic formulation, SCT explains gender development through reciprocal determinism: personal factors, gender linked behaviour, and the surrounding environment continually shape one another. Children observe gendered models, experience reinforcement and punishment, and internalize standards that guide future choices (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

At the same time, SCT as articulated by Bussey and Bandura (1999) is architecturally binary: it presumes two relatively stable gender categories, "male" and "female," and treats "same gender models," "gender identity," and "gender constancy" as processes that culminate in becoming masculine men or feminine women. This framework describes how transgender (trans) and nonbinary (NB) children learn about gendered conduct but struggles to accommodate

identities that do not resolve into those endpoints. Trans and NB experiences show that gender development can involve resisting, revising, or moving between categories rather than occupying predefined roles. Coyote's autobiographical writing illustrates this, showing a child who grows up with only "boys" and "girls" yet feels misrecognized and must assemble a livable gender from limited models (Coyote, 2016). Placing SCT in dialogue with such narratives suggests its mechanisms can be extended to better capture trans and NB trajectories if binary assumptions are loosened and affective experiences and counter spaces are foregrounded (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Within SCT, personal factors, behaviour, and environment continuously interact. Children's interpretations of gender norms shape what they do; their actions elicit reactions that confirm or challenge which behaviours are intelligible and rewarding. In highly structured contexts, rigid gender role prescriptions limit personal influence, whereas in more egalitarian settings children have greater scope to negotiate expectations (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gendered knowledge is gained through observational learning and reinforcement. Children attend to models marked as "for boys" and "for girls," abstract rules about how "most boys" and "most girls" behave, and experience sanctions that reward conformity and punish atypical behaviour. Over time these patterns are internalized as standards for "proper" gender conduct. Because these standards are anchored in a culturally dominant binary, SCT conceptualizes development as learning to occupy one of two normative categories linked to assigned sex (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Within this framework, trans identity development unfolds through the same social cognitive mechanisms, in conditions where only two gender categories are socially recognized and legitimated. Ordinary SCT processes therefore operate on a constrained set of options, and

part of the developmental work of trans people involves expanding, resisting, or reconfiguring those options in identity and practice (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). In most cis normative settings, networks of families, peers, institutions, and media overwhelmingly model gender as a binary linkage between sex assigned at birth and "appropriate" masculine or feminine roles, so early observational learning provides trans children with few explicit models of people like themselves. For a child whose internal sense does not fit their assigned category, the "similar model" may be another gender or gender nonconforming person, even when adults label that modelling as inappropriate. Trans youth may also rely on symbolic models such as fictional characters or online communities for guidance about how to dress, move, speak, and name themselves. Findings from a large study of socially transitioned transgender children indicate that early sex assignment and family socialization do not necessarily determine later gender identity or expression, and that these children tend to identify strongly with their lived gender and display gender-typed interests and behaviours consistent with that identity rather than with their assigned sex at birth (Gülgöz et al., 2019).

For trans children, early tries to express their experienced gender through clothing, play, or mannerisms are often punished, while performances aligned with assigned sex are rewarded, even when those feel inauthentic. Through direct and vicarious experience, they gain outcome expectations: expressing their felt gender brings social costs, while suppressing it brings conditional approval. Many therefore develop patterns of conformity or "camouflaging," adjusting behaviour to minimize punishment in hostile environments (Bandura, 1986). They may come to judge themselves harshly for gender nonconforming desires because those desires violate internalized standards of "appropriate" masculinity or femininity, as social sanctions become self sanctions. This conflict can persist even after encountering more affirming contexts,

because personal standards often lag external norms. Bussey and Bandura (1999) argue that gender development involves a shift from external to self regulation; for trans people, this shift can become transformative when new standards are built around authenticity rather than binary conformity. Gülgöz et al. (2019) showed that, consistent with SCT's focus on self-socialization, trans and cis children display alignment between their gender identity and their choices of toys, clothes, and peers.

Bandura's work on self efficacy highlights that people act on what they believe they can successfully do in each sociostructural context. A trans adolescent may privately recognize their gender but feel low efficacy for coming out or accessing care if they anticipate rejection or institutional barriers. Conversely, experiences of mastery, vicarious success, and supportive feedback can raise perceived efficacy for gender affirming action. In restrictive contexts with rigid norms, personal agency has less room to operate; in more egalitarian or trans affirming environments, the same mechanisms can support identity exploration and transition related decisions, with self sanctions aligned to standards like "living truthfully" rather than "staying within my assigned category" (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

SCT offers a powerful account of how gendered conduct is learned but, in Bussey and Bandura's formulation, leaves little space for trans, NB, and gender fluid trajectories. "Male" and "female" are treated as the primary units of analysis, and core constructs presuppose two exclusive categories tied to assigned sex. Even when they emphasize diversity within each group and critique essentialist biological theories, development still ends with "masculine men" and "feminine women," making experiences beyond these positions difficult to articulate except as deviation or resistance (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Their analysis also says little about sustained gender dysphoria or euphoria, which are central to many trans and NB experiences. They discuss

fear, anxiety, and pride as consequences of sanctions but not the distress when a person's internal sense of gender is misrecognized, or the positive affect accompanying gender affirming embodiment and recognition. The affective side of their model is thus skewed toward compliance with external standards and underdeveloped as a lens on the emotional costs of enforced conformity (Bandura, 1986).

Bussey and Bandura acknowledge "sociostructural constraints and opportunities" but their examples of hostile environments focus on inequities between "men" and "women," rather than stigma and violence directed at gender nonconforming and trans people. Hostile school, family, and media environments are treated as negotiable constraints, whereas in many trans youths' lives these function as existential threats that reshape what actions are thinkable or survivable. The theory's emphasis on gradual internalization risks naturalizing conditions in which binary conforming options are the only viable ones, rather than showing how such contexts restrict identity possibilities (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Empirical findings from Gülgöz et al 4 found that a 10-year-old trans girl raised for many years as a boy, a trans girl raised for fewer years as a boy, and a same-age cis girl did not differ significantly in gender identification or preferences, suggesting that neither birth-assigned sex nor early sex-specific socialization necessarily determine later gender identity or expression (Gülgöz et al., 2019, p. 24483).

Although modelling is central to SCT, their account is organized around "boys" and "girls" groups and media that reproduce traditional stereotypes. They give little attention to what happens when children rely on rare or distant models such as trans elders, online communities, or culturally specific gender diverse traditions to construct viable identities. Intersectional differences in race, class, culture, and disability are acknowledged but not integrated into their

analysis of which models are visible or safe to emulate. Coyote's narrative makes these gaps visible by showing how a child navigates gender with almost no local models and must instead piece together a livable identity from partial, sometimes conflicting examples (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Coyote, 2016). Recent cohort work warns that checklist items like "behaves like the opposite sex" or "wishes to be the opposite sex" mostly reflect broad gender nonconformity and are poor predictors of later identity, so they should not be used to infer sexual orientation or gender diversity (Marino et al., 2023, pp. 1182–1183).

Extending SCT to trans and NB trajectories does not require abandoning its core mechanisms but does require loosening the assumption of only two stable gender categories. Rather than treating "boy" and "girl" as the sole labels, a revised SCT would allow multiple self categories; NB, genderqueer, or culturally specific third genders, and analyze how children and adolescents learn to sort themselves into or between them through the same observational and self regulatory processes Bussey and Bandura describe. Modelling and self labelling are therefore not constrained to a binary choice; youth can draw on more complex repertoires of gender concepts when constructing identities (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Research on early-transitioning trans children indicates that once youth live according to a gender different from the one assumed at birth, their gender development no longer reflects early sex assignment or sex-specific socialization but instead follows their self-identified gender (Gülgöz et al., 2019, p. 24483).

Such an extension foregrounds the importance of trans and NB role models and counter spaces as distinct learning environments. If mainstream families, schools, and media primarily model binary roles, then community centres, online forums, and trans authored narratives function as alternative sites where different gender rules are displayed, rehearsed, and

normalized. Coyote's account of growing up without local language or live models for their experience, yet eventually finding stories and communities that fit, exemplifies how symbolic models and counter spaces can supply the scripts and efficacy information that binary environments withhold. In SCT terms, these counter spaces diversify the pool of models, shift outcome expectancies, and support new standards for living well in one's gender (Coyote, 2016). A trans inclusive SCT would also treat gender dysphoria and euphoria as central self regulatory signals rather than peripheral affective states. For trans and NB people, chronic dysphoria often signals misalignment between external roles and internal gender standards, while euphoria in affirming moments marks successful alignment. In hostile environments these signals may be overridden by fear and stigma, but as individuals encounter affirming models and contexts, they guide the revision of personal standards and the exercise of agency under constraint. As Coyote's narrative illustrates, the pain of misrecognition and the joy of being seen on one's own terms function as feedback that gradually reorganizes which models are followed and which futures can be imagined (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Coyote, 2016).

SCT offers a compelling but incomplete lens for understanding gender identity development, including trans and NB trajectories. Its emphasis on reciprocal determinism, observational learning, reinforcement, and self regulation clarifies how children come to understand what counts as "masculine" or "feminine" behaviour and how they learn to anticipate the social consequences of conforming or deviating from these norms (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Trans and NB youth work with the same mechanisms as cisgender peers but under binary constraints that limit recognized options and affirming models. By situating SCT in conversation with trans and NB experiences, the theory can be extended by recognizing multiple gender categories, foregrounding counter spaces and role models, and treating dysphoria and

euphoria as central self regulatory signals. Narratives like Coyote's, together with longitudinal and cohort studies of gender diverse youth, show SCT's mechanisms at work under conditions the original theory barely anticipates and reveals how trans and NB people rework available models, standards, and futures.

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