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**“MY NAME IS MY IDENTITY”: UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF
GENDER IDENTITY TO IMPROVE MEASUREMENT**

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis
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Abstract

Existing measures of gender identity have some inconsistencies that lead to researchers missing out on the comprehensive image of an individual's gender. The purpose of the present study was to assess how individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth conceptualize their gender identity. To understand which aspects are important to an individual's gender identity, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four undergraduate students who identified as non-cisgender (e.g., transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, etc.). Results of the qualitative analysis identified two themes within conceptualizations of gender identity: (1) *personal* and (2) *social*. The importance of these two domains as well as the alignment between them is abundantly apparent in the participants' responses and should be the focus of future measures of gender identity.

Key Words: LGBTQ, gender identity, measurement, psychology.

“My name is my identity”: Understanding Conceptualizations of Gender Identity to Improve
Measurement

Gender is a prominent characteristic of human existence, and “there appears to be no other dichotomy in human experience with as many entities assimilated to it as the distinction between male and female” (Bem, 1981, p.354). Given that the concept of gender is deeply ingrained in society, researchers often test for gender differences in their hypotheses. However, most tests of gender differences are restricted to binary definitions of gender (i.e., comparisons of those who identify as male to those who identify as female) that are often ascribed to biology, but significant gender differences can also be attributed to social and cultural explanations. While gender is often conceptualized as a key factor explaining outcomes in research, it is seldomly systematically measured with adequate construct validity (i.e., adequately measuring what is intending to be measured). This is due to the lack of measurements that stem from a common, clear operationalization of gender identity. Problems with current measures of gender identity are more pronounced when considering specific populations such as individuals whose gender identity differs from cisgender (e.g., transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, etc.). For these individuals, gender is an extremely salient aspect of their personhood and relates to the ways in which that person may experience stress from living with a marginalized identity. Accurately understanding the distinctive way in which non-cisgender folks construct their identities is the first step needed in exploring the ties between those gender identities and other constructs and phenomena.

Research pertaining to measuring gender identity has primarily been centered on the experiences of LGBTQA+ individuals and has originated a limited number of ways to measure gender identity. One of these methods developed by the Gender Identity in U.S. Surveillance

(GenIUSS) group uses a label-focused approach in which participants are asked two questions. The first question pertains to the individual's assigned sex at birth (e.g., "What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?") with response options of "male" and "female" and the second question asks about current gender identity with the options of "male", "female", "transgender", and "do not identify as female, male, or transgender" (GenIUSS Group, 2014). Using questions such as these provide information solely about the gender labels that an individual may use while neglecting the depth of comprehension possible.

Other more comprehensive views of gender identity and the multitude of aspects that comprise that identity have been presented. The Gender Unicorn conceptualizes each of the unique aspects of gender as having a scale of feminine/female, masculine/male, and other/other genders for an individual to describe their gender identity, gender expression/presentation, sexual attraction, and romantic attraction (Pan & Moore, 2014). Other measures such as the Gender Identity/Gender Dysphoria Questionnaire for Adolescents and Adults (GID YQ-AA; Deogracias et al., 2007) largely capture the degree of discomfort one experiences with self in relation to one's gender identity. A frequency scale from *always* to *never* is used to rate questionnaire items (e.g., "In the past 12 months, have you felt satisfied being a woman?", "In the past 12 months, have you felt more like a man than a woman?"). However, this measure only has a "female" version and a "male" version that focus on the experiences of transgender individuals existing on the binary who were assigned female at birth and identify as male or who were assigned male at birth and now identify as female. The GID YQ-AA does not allow for identities and experiences that fall outside or between the binary conceptualization of gender creating a vacuum within transgender/gender diverse measurement.

A more recent measure, called the Transgender Congruence Scale (TCS), attempts to quantify “the degree to which transgender people feel congruence between their external presentation and internal self” (Kozee et al., 2012). The TCS solely focuses its measure on the physical presentation of an individual’s gender identity (e.g., “My physical appearance adequately expresses my gender identity”) and has a few items targeted at how others perceive the individual (e.g., “I am generally comfortable with how others perceive my gender identity when they look at me”). This measure does not account for aspects of gender that exist beyond the physical presentation of self (i.e., behaviors, emotions). Although valuable contributions to the literature, the aforementioned measures do not provide an all-encompassing view of gender, mainly due to their focus on a few individual aspects of gender identity.

The proposed study would provide a valuable base upon which to build a novel and comprehensive measure of gender identity (e.g., how an individual defines their identity label, physical expression, emotional expression, and other salient aspects). Individuals who do not identify as cisgender have theoretically gone through a process of examining the ways in which their gender is represented and perceived which makes this population an ideal starting point to understand gender before creating a measure that would be generalizable to the rest of the population. Therefore, the primary aim of the present study is to understand how individuals who do not identify as cisgender (identifying with the identity assigned at birth) conceive the most salient aspects of their gender to use in the initial development of a measure that more accurately captures gender as a dimensional construct. The first research question is: How well do the elements of gender identity identified in the literature accurately describe the entirety of an individual’s self-concept of gender? The second research question is: What features do

individuals consider to be related to their self-concept of gender that are not identified in the literature?

Method

Procedure and Participants

I collected in-depth qualitative interview data from four undergraduate students at a large midwestern university. Flyers containing information about eligibility requirements and study procedures were posted in buildings across campus. A digital version of the flyer was sent through specific listservs (e.g., LGBTQA+ Resource Center listserv, Women's Center Listserv) and on-campus LGBTQA+ organizations' social media pages. Students were invited to contact me if interested in participating. Additionally, I approached key student figures within the local LGBTQA+ community to inquire if they would like to participate. Students who displayed interest in participating were screened for the eligibility criteria. Inclusion criteria were that the student: a) be 19 years or older, b) be registered as a student at the university, c) have a gender identity other than cisgender (different from the gender assigned at birth). The IRB has approved all study procedures.

Recruitment efforts led to five interested participants, four of whom met eligibility criteria (one student did not respond to the screening questions). The four participants who met the eligibility criteria gave verbal consent before completing an online demographics questionnaire and partaking in a semi-structured interview about their gender identity. The interview consisted of a series of questions regarding the participant's gender identity and which aspects of gender are most salient to the construction of their identity (see Appendix for the list of interview questions).

Of the four participants, half (50%, $n = 2$) were genderqueer/gender non-conforming, one (25%) identified as genderqueer/gender non-conforming and non-binary, and one (25%) identified as a transwoman. The sexual identities of the participants were as follows: gay or lesbian (50%, $n = 2$), pansexual (25%, $n = 1$), and queer (25%, $n = 1$). For the race/ethnicity of the participants, two (50%) were white/Caucasian, one (25%) was Native American, and one (25%) was multiracial.

Qualitative Analysis Approach

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The audio file of the first interview was accidentally deleted from the recording device before it could be uploaded to a password protected folder and, as a result, was not transcribed (however, comprehensive field notes were taken during the interview, which were used in the analysis). Audio recordings of the other three interviews were transcribed. These qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I read through the interview transcripts and field notes to determine initial codes, which were discrete pieces of information that continually appeared within the interviews. I analyzed how the codes related to one another to establish overarching themes that captured the participants' conceptualization of their gender identity. I identified two overarching themes, which are discussed in detail below. I also include example quotes from the participants' responses to help illustrate these themes (note that some quotes were edited for clarity, e.g., removing "like" and "um").

Results

My analysis of participants' open-ended responses revealed two overarching themes (1) *personal* and (2) *social*. In these themes, participants explained important aspects of their gender identity that held personal significance (*personal*) and were experienced through their

interactions with others (*social*). Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below and brief summaries are included in Table 1.

Personal

Each participant described making choices that have personal significance for the conception and representation of their gender identity, which operated in isolation of their interactions with others. First, participants described deliberate choices they made to define their gender and its meaning. For example, one participant's gender identity was connected to choosing their name: "*My identity is my name*" (ID 003). Another participant described the behaviors that allowed them to authentically experience their gender, such as, "*I mainly dress however I want to dress and that, to me, is in line with my gender*" (ID 002). Participants who endorsed these views expressed how they are able to define aspects of themselves outside of the current limitations of words like masculine and feminine. The ability of these participants to define the meaning of their gender apart from others' definitions is significant because it allows the individual to have a more complex identity that maps onto the authentic experiences of that person's gender.

In addition, when describing the personal significance and experience of their gender identity, participants expressed sentiments of fluidity that centered on their behaviors not being consistently masculine and/or feminine. For example, one participant described balancing feminine and masculine elements simultaneously: "*I guess I'd probably present a little more masculine, but I like to counteract that by painting my nails or doing other things like that*" (ID 004). Another student described distinctive times in which their physical appearance leans towards feminine or masculine: "*When I'm dressing more casually, it's more femme athletic. And when I'm dressing more professionally, it's a little bit more masculine*" (ID 003). Fluidity

allows the individual to express themselves in ways that feel natural regardless of whether the outside world would perceive those expressions as stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine. For some participants, this fluidity may also spill into the *social* by signaling to others key elements of the individual's gender identity which is discussed further below. Overall, these participants pointed to the characteristic of gender identity that is centered around personal desires and choices. In order to determine how someone constructs their gender identity within their own psyche, one cannot give that individual a predefined set of criteria that will measure which group they belong to because each person views their identity through a personally-defined lens that differs from others who may share the same label or pronouns.

Social

Participants also understood and constructed their gender identity with the intention to present themselves in a specific way to the people whom they interact with. For some, features of their gender were specifically enacted to make others more comfortable. One participant discussed choosing an identity label based on how others would react instead of their personal comfort saying: *"I think genderqueer is probably my favorite, but I don't use it as much just because I don't know how other people feel about that or if they know what that means"* (ID 003). Additionally, some participants' identity labels were intricately connected to their ability to explain their gender to others. For example, one participant stated: *"Nonbinary just seems to fit me the best because it's not so specific. I personally use it because I can't explain my gender to people in clear cut lines"* (ID 002). Within this theme, participants indicated that pieces of their gender identity and expression are influenced by considerations of other people besides themselves. These pieces are influenced by attempts to ensure other people are accepting or understanding of who the individual is in terms of their gender.

Participants used behaviors, in addition to identity labels, to communicate their gender identity to others. One of the participants (ID 001) explained their transition from male to female clothing and accessories as a behavior that was performed in order to make others feel more comfortable using the correct pronouns for this individual (i.e., she/her/hers). Additionally, one participant described choosing specific hairstyles and clothing options, expressing that “*I guess that makes me think that other people perceive me as more genderqueer*” (ID 003). This participant also described how the expression of their gender allowed them to initiate a conversation about the complexities of their gender beyond a label or first glance: “*I think it’s more about me wanting them to ask questions*” (ID 003). For these individuals, the ability to initiate conversations about the participant’s gender is an integral process in guaranteeing that others do not draw conclusions or make assumptions about the person based on limited knowledge of that person’s gender presentations. When others were operating with limited fragments of information, the participants stressed that the ways in which that limited information does a disservice to the complexities of their identity. The *social* theme captures the ways in which participants display their gender to outside observers, which is similar to current

Table 1. Themes, definitions, and example excerpts

| Theme | Definition | Example excerpts |
|--------------|--|--|
| Personal | Aspects of gender that are performative for self without regard to interactions with others (i.e., defining their internal gender identity) | “My identity is my name” “When I’m dressing more casually, it’s more femme athletic. And when I’m dressing more professionally, it’s a little bit more masculine” |
| Social | Aspects of gender that are performative for society (i.e., presenting their gender to elicit specific reactions/assumptions or communicating the <i>personal</i> to the outside world) | “I guess that makes me think that other people perceive me as more genderqueer” “I think it’s more about me wanting them to ask questions” |

understandings and measures of gender but moves beyond this by connecting the outward displays with the *personal* expressions of gender identity.

Discussion

Current measures of gender identity typically focus on one or two facets of an individual's gender identity (e.g., label, physical presentation, dysphoria). The present study examined aspects of gender identity that may be missed when using the current measures of gender identity. Analyses of the responses revealed two predominant themes: (1) *personal* and (2) *social*. These themes are distinct but have noteworthy connections between them that present a novel picture of gender identity which must be considered in future development of gender identity measures if research is to accurately capture gender identity in a meaningful way.

The ways in which participants discussed the *personal* theme revolved around how they internally defined their gender and enacted that gender for themselves. Apparent in their definitions was a disconnect from mainstream ideas about having a consistent presentation or expression of your gender (masculine or feminine) throughout the multiple elements of your gender. Current measures purport the idea of having a consistently masculine or feminine identity across aspects by having separate versions for males and females (e.g., GID YQ-AA; Deogracias et al., 2007) and by scoring items based on how consistently individuals answered *always boys, usually boys, etc.* to questions of who they played with or who their best friend was as a child (Zucker et al., 2006). Among my participants, a more endorsed view of gender identity was one that was fluid and outside the traditional definitions of masculine and feminine. Further, whatever behaviors or presentations that an individual expresses are inherently representative of that person's gender by virtue of the individual holding that gender identity and being the one performing those actions. When an individual is defining their gender, and what that specifically

means to them internally, they also discussed having to find way to communicate that identity to others due to the role that gender plays in everyday society. This is where the *social* theme came into prominence—participants clarified how this internal sense of self also interacted with the outside world. Participants showed that behaviors or presentations were sometimes expressed in order to communicate some message about their gender to others and to elicit opportunities to explain their internal sense of gender beyond what a person may be able to glean from surface-level expressions.

Participants also illustrated the way in which they understood their gender was in terms of the intersection of these two themes. There were discussions of the euphoria and comfort that was felt by participants when the ways in which they enacted their gender in the *personal* aligned with the performance of their gender in the *social*. In addition, participants discussed the impact of the misalignment of these two spheres, also known as dysphoria. Throughout the interviews, participants placed an emphasis on defining their gender identity through the ability to bring both the *personal* and the *social* together by understanding the complex nature of who they were internally and displaying their identity for others.

Working from the views that the participants in this study presented, I contend that future measures of gender identity that aim to be comprehensive and inclusive should focus on the *personal*, the *social*, and the degree to which they are uniquely experienced and/or aligned. In doing this, researchers need to remain vigilant in creating measures with items that are flexibly able to map onto participants' presentations of gender without defining specific behaviors or aspects as feminine or masculine. This flexibility will allow researchers to gather in-depth information surrounding the complexities of real-life constructions of gender identity. Measuring the *personal* is important in understanding the individual's cognitions about the self while

measuring the *social* is important in understanding how that individual consciously edits or selects behaviors that will be shown to the outside world. Additionally, there is a need to assess the level that an individual is experiencing their *personal* gender identity presentations lining up with the *social* gender presentations within their life. Understanding the interplay between these two realms may give researchers a richer idea of the implications that gender has in people's lives and allow researchers to make more informed connections between gender and other constructs such as mental wellbeing. For those who have a gender identity that is not cisgender, this more complex understanding of gender is crucial when attempting to understand the psychological impacts of the stress that comes from having a marginalized identity (Meyer, 2003; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). There are also benefits from understanding the multifaceted nature of gender for individuals who are cisgender but may have androgynous presentations or behaviors as psychological androgyny has been linked to better overall mental health (Lefkowitz & Zeldow, 2006). Having knowledge about how gender identity relates to mental health processes for individuals starts by having a clear way to conceptualize and measure gender identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of the research that must be noted is the small sample size. A sample of four participants limits the breadth and depth of conclusions that can be drawn about how the human population understands and performs their gender identity. The present study had three individuals who identified with nonbinary identities and one who identified as a transwoman; thus, future research would benefit from including individuals with a wider range of gender identities and other identities that would allow greater generalizability with regard to other demographic variables (e.g., age, race, geographic location). Research with a more diverse

sample could demonstrate whether or not the present findings are consistent across variations in gender identity or whether the themes presented in this study occur for a smaller subgroup of the LGBTQA+ community. Nonetheless, the present study provides a beneficial genesis point for future research to expand upon by developing a more inclusive measure of the complexities of gender that can validated with a more generalizable sample.

Overall, the results of the current study suggest that further research is needed to develop a measure that encompasses the many domains of gender identity, uses non-gender specific language, and captures the importance and (in)congruence of *personal* and *social* aspects of gender identity.

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Appendix

1. Please tell us what pseudonym you would like us to use
2. First, I want to ask you to generally describe your personal gender identity, so how you think about your gender and/or how you would explain your identity?
3. Next, I would like to discuss your feelings and thoughts about the language surrounding your gender identity.
 - a. What is the specific label, if any, that you use for your gender identity?
If the student uses a label:
 - i. What does that label mean to you and how well do you think it fits your gender identity?
 - ii. How important to your gender identity is that label? / How much does that label contribute to your gender identity?If the student does not use a label:
 - iii. How important to your gender identity are labels? / How much do labels contribute to your gender identity?
 - b. What pronouns, if any, do you use?
If the student uses pronouns:
 - i. How well do you think those pronouns fit your gender identity?
 - ii. How important to your gender identity are those pronouns? / How much do these pronouns contribute to your gender identity?If the student does not use pronouns:
 - iii. How important to your gender identity are pronouns? / How much do pronouns contribute to your gender identity?
 - c. How important to your gender identity is your name? / How much does your name contribute to your gender identity?
 - d. Is there anything else relating to the language surrounding your gender identity that we didn't cover?
4. Another area that I would like to discuss is how you present or express yourself to the world physically, emotionally, and behaviorally.
 - a. Let's go ahead and start with how you physically present or express yourself.
 - i. Can you describe how you physically present or express yourself to the world that conveys your gender identity (e.g., through clothing, hairstyles, accessories, etc.)?
 - ii. How do you feel your physical presentation or expression fits within each of the categories of masculine, feminine, another gender, or lacking gender?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity is the way you physically present or express yourself? / How much does your physical presentation or expression contribute to your gender identity?
 - b. Now moving onto how you emotionally present or express yourself.

- i. Can you describe how you emotionally present or express yourself to the world that conveys your gender identity (e.g., different emotions, how open/friendly you are, how vulnerable you are with emotions, etc.)?
 - ii. How do you feel your emotional presentation or expression fits within each of the categories of masculine, feminine, another gender, or lacking gender?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity is the way you emotionally present or express yourself? / How much does your emotional presentation or expression contribute to your gender identity?
 - c. Next, I want to discuss how you behaviorally present or express yourself.
 - i. Can you describe how you behaviorally present or express yourself to the world that conveys your gender identity (e.g., actions, activities you engage in, how you treat others, etc.)?
 - ii. How do you feel your behavioral presentation or expression fits within each of the categories of masculine, feminine, another gender, or lacking gender?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity is the way you behaviorally present or express yourself? / How much does your behavioral presentation or expression contribute to your gender identity?
 - d. Is there anything else relating to how you present or express you gender identity to the world that we didn't cover?
5. Moving on from your presentation or expression to the world, I am curious about how your attraction or lack of attraction to others interacts with your gender.
 - a. Let's go ahead and start with your sexual attraction.
 - i. Can you discuss your sexual attraction or lack of attraction?
 - ii. Do you feel as if your sexual attraction or lack of has ever changed due to your gender identity?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity is your sexual attraction or lack thereof? / How much does your sexual attraction or lack thereof contribute to your gender identity?
 - iv. Is there anything else relating to how your sexual attraction or lack thereof relates to your gender identity that we didn't cover?
 - b. Now moving onto your romantic attraction.
 - i. Can you discuss your romantic attraction or lack of attraction?
 - ii. Do you feel as if your romantic attraction or lack of has ever changed due to your gender identity?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity is your romantic attraction or lack thereof? / How much does your romantic attraction or lack thereof contribute to your gender identity?
 - iv. Is there anything else relating to how your romantic attraction or lack thereof relates to your gender identity that we didn't cover?
 - c. Next I want to discuss your emotional attraction.

- i. Can you discuss your emotional attraction or lack of attraction?
 - ii. Do you feel as if your emotional attraction or lack of has ever changed due to your gender identity?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity is your emotional attraction or lack thereof? / How much does your emotional attraction or lack thereof contribute to your gender identity?
 - iv. Is there anything else relating to how your emotional attraction or lack thereof relates to your gender identity that we didn't cover?
 - d. Is there anything else relating to attractions that we didn't cover?
6. The next topic that I would like you to discuss is regarding stereotypes that you have either heard or believe exist about your gender identity?
 - a. Let's first cover stereotypes about your gender identity.
 - i. Can you describe any stereotypes that you may have heard or that you believe exist about your gender identity?
 - ii. To what extent do you feel as if your gender identity matches onto these stereotypes?
 - iii. How important to your gender identity are these stereotypes and the extent that you match the stereotypes? / How much does matching up with or differing from these stereotypes contribute to your gender identity?
 - b. Next, let's dive into traditionally masculine gender stereotypes.
 - i. To what extent do you feel as if your gender identity matches onto these stereotypes?
 - ii. How important to your gender identity are these stereotypes and the extent that you match the stereotypes? / How much does matching up with or differing from these stereotypes contribute to your gender identity?
 - c. Lastly, let's talk about traditionally feminine gender stereotypes.
 - i. To what extent do you feel as if your gender identity matches onto these stereotypes?
 - ii. How important to your gender identity are these stereotypes and the extent that you match the stereotypes? / How much does matching up with or differing from these stereotypes contribute to your gender identity?
 - d. Is there anything else relating to how gendered stereotypes relate to your gender identity that we didn't cover?
7. One last question for you. Is there any topic that we did not cover that you think is important to the makeup of your gender identity?