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# Toward a New Theory of Gender Transcendence: Insights from a Qualitative Study of Gendered Self-Concept and Self-Expression in a Sample of Individuals Assigned Female at Birth

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Sex and gender are two concepts that are often conflated in popular culture. However, those who experience dissonance between their assigned sex and gender identity intimately understand the difference between sex, a biologically-based distinction, and gender, a confluence of social and behavioral factors that contribute to understanding who one is as well as how one is seen by others. The gendered self-understanding and self-expression of 170 North Americans who self-identified as gender nonconforming and who were assigned female at birth were explored using a transpersonal lens and thematic analysis. Data suggested a range and variety of gendered self-concepts that aligned across two broad themes: *binary* (female/woman; male/man) and *non-binary* (gender nonbinary; trans masculine) gender core identities. Themes of gendered self-concept, expression in behavior, dress style and appearance, and surgical body modification are discussed. These data support the application of transpersonal theory to transgender identity development, and they underscore the need for more research to test the validity of a new theoretical model of gender transcendence discussed herein.

**Keywords:** *transgender, gender nonbinary, identity, self-concept, transpersonal*

According to Szasz (1973), “People often say that this person or that person has not yet found himself. But the self is not something that one finds. It is something that one creates” (p. 49). The transgender experience requires that one knows his or her inner sense of self over, and sometimes in opposition to, one’s anatomical or physiological reflection in the mirror as well as one’s reflection from society at large. An assignment of sex, as male or female, is usually performed at birth by genital observation rather than brain typing, gonadal, chromosomal, or hormonal testing, which would provide a more nuanced picture of one’s sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). However, gender is about more than anatomical sex. Fausto-Sterling (2012) compared gender identity to a jazz improvisation performance:

[It results from] a continuous interaction between the nervous system, the rest of the body and the environment. If gender identity were the performance piece, it would succeed or fail based on the contributions of all the instruments in the band, how they integrate into a coherent system and how the couplings ebb and flow during the time course of the performance. (p. 405)

Extending this metaphor, to know one’s gender may require an ability to listen closely to the complex music or messages generated from within and over the cacophony of expectations and “shoulds” from society at large.

## **Gender Identity Models to Date**

Among those for whom sex and gender are in alignment (that is, cisgender), sex is often

conflated with gender. Indeed, Bem's (1981) gender schema theory proposed that the "phenomenon of sex typing derives, in part, from gender-based schematic processing, from a generalized readiness to process information on the basis of the sex-linked associations that constitute the gender schema" (p. 355). Here, using a social-cognitive framework, Bem argued that the developing child learns to associate particular gendered behaviors, attributes, and self-concepts with persons of a given sex. That is, newborns assigned male at birth learn that they are expected to identify as boys and to ultimately take on societal gendered roles traditionally assumed by men. Similarly, newborns assigned female at birth are expected to identify as girls and to take on societal gendered roles traditionally assumed by women. In contrast, those with transgender lived experiences have gendered understandings of themselves that are different from the sexes they were assigned at birth (Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011).

For decades, scholars have attempted to classify transgender self-concepts and to summarize the developmental experiences of individuals with transgender and transsexual lived experiences (Devor, 2004; Gagné, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Mason-Schrock, 1996). However, much of the research summarizes the lived experiences of either clinical samples (Zucker, 2005; Zucker & Bradley, 1995) or of persons assigned male at birth (Girchick, 2008; Wren, 2002). Limited research has focused on trans or gender nonconforming self-concepts among non-clinical samples of persons assigned female at birth. In addition, transpersonal psychology has not yet been applied as a framework for understanding the self-concept or developmental trajectories of people with transgender or gender nonbinary lived experiences. Therefore, in an effort to broaden the scope of our understanding of transgender and gender nonbinary identities, I explored the use of a transpersonal framework toward the development of a new model of gender transcendence. Unlike previous models that limited applications to specific identity types (e.g., lesbian, gay, transsexual), or to developmental trajectories that follow stages towards an endpoint of identity achievement and pride (Cass, 1984; D'Augelli, 1994; Devor, 2004), the gender transcendence model privileges

the varied and unique ways that people come to understand themselves as gendered beings. The gender transcendence model also leaves open all possible developmental pathways in the journey towards authenticity. It is my hope that this model offers a new and useful paradigm from which we may effectively shift our understanding of gender, and its development away from the increasingly antiquated binary framework, to one that allows for more nuanced (and individualized) identity development trajectories.

### **A Transpersonal Approach to (Trans) Gender Identities**

The inner experience of a sex-gender discord may instigate an identity exploration process away from that which was assigned by others (at birth and/or from societal expectations) and towards the development of a gendered self-concept that is informed by a complex and nuanced inner knowing. To date, transpersonal psychology has not yet examined a transgender lived experience, and yet transpersonal psychology is potentially one of the most thorough and inclusive sciences of human *being* with which one can examine the experience of people whose behaviors and presentation are considered nonconforming with their assigned sex.

Transpersonal psychology has been described in various ways, and those within the field continue to generate unique ideas to define and understand how people come to know themselves as more than the body, the emotions, or the mind (Caplan, Hartelius, & Rardin, 2003; Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007; Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). More recent transpersonal investigations are also interested in demonstrating an integration of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual nature of the whole person, but with additional attention to intrapersonal experiences and one's experience of inner wisdom, coming from a more private, inner sense of self via participation with various aspects of one's life (Ferrer, 2011; Hunt, 2016). Knowing one's gender may require keen listening to and interaction with the music of inner experience; however, being able to speak about a gendered self is constrained by the limits of language.

Identity labels provide a challenge for some gender nonbinary individuals, as labels are limited by language that is shaped by cultural concepts and social norms. While one may have an internal sense of gendered self, identity is publicized through labels that often correspond with appearance, enactment/behavior, and adherence to social expectations. In a poignant example of personal (private), in contrast to social (public), experience of one's gendered self and self-expression, Bergman (2006) describes *Butch* as,

This crazy identity that requires an hour, two charts, and a graph to explain, is the commodity I use to make my living . . . This is all very well and good during my workday, when solicitous professors ask politely by which pronoun I might like to be introduced and/or addressed, and students take notes on what I say and do and talk about it in class the next day, but that accounts for a very small percentage of my public life. The rest of the time, at the supermarket and the airport, on the street and anywhere else I go, I am not in control of my identity. I am being identified by others and living with the results. (p. 20)

Bergman compared the daily experience of presenting a public self to doing what they “need to do” to be seen in a certain way:

This is what I do when I am invested in having my gender read a certain way. I plan, I prepare, I smear myself in chocolate frosting, stick a sign that says, “chocolate frosted,” and do what I need to do. (p. 21)

For Bergman, the self-concept as *Butch* is a noun—an identity that is tough, rugged, moody, and rude, but for whom it also represents being a gentleman who opens doors for the feminine girlfriend, picks up the dinner check, and holds the umbrella for her when rain is pouring. *Butch* is also an adjective and a verb depending on how a person uses it; it can mean different things at different times. *Butch* can refer to a style of dress and appearance (adjective), or to the way one relates with others sexually. Complex and

seemingly incoherent, yet clear to those who use this self-concept, *Butch* is just one example of the challenges inherent in constraining the self with any one or more identity terms. Similarly, there exists an empirical challenge in defining and explaining the gendered self-concepts of those whose genders do not neatly fit within the discrete boxes of *man* or *woman*. In describing this challenge as a paradox, Behar (1990) wrote:

On the one hand, there is the desire and temptation to leave the account wholly in the native voice, in imitation of the literary autobiography that it is not; on the other hand, there is the anthropological imperative to place the account in a theoretical/cultural context, to provide some sort of background, analysis, commentary, or interpretation, so as to mediate between the reality of a life lived and inscribed elsewhere but wedged between book covers and read here. (p. 224)

What is also evident is the role of gender as a central component to one's self-concept. Gender is a central and organizing construct in most cultures (Sell, 2001). Traditional social roles are often designated by gender, and in many societies, power structures are also organized by gender. Nevertheless, how do people understand themselves when their ideas and constructs of gender differ from cultural norms and expectations? In what ways do people transcend beyond the gendered binary of man and woman that organizes most of North American society? How do people unearth gender from within fixed binary categories to embody a more authentic and nuanced self-concept? The purpose of this paper is to explore current narratives about gender identities and expressions among a sample of self-identified gender nonconforming people who were assigned female at birth. Using a transpersonal lens, the goal is to unearth themes of gendered self-concept and self-expression as they differ from cultural norms and expectations. Taken collectively, the data presented here may provide a foundation for a new model of understanding gender that is more expansive than what is accounted for in a binary structure of man or woman.

## Method

This mixed-method study investigated the range and variety of gender identities and self-expressions beyond those constricted by the gender binary as “man” and “woman” in a sample of self-identified gender nonconforming persons assigned female sex at birth. The research questions for this study were as follows: 1) What are the gender identities of gender nonconforming persons who were assigned female sex at birth? 2) How do these individuals express their unique gender identities through behavior and outward appearance? 3) What medical or other actions, if any, were taken to transcend beyond the sex-binary of male and female to stand more authentically in one’s current gender identification?

A transpersonal lens is used to highlight themes of *being* (identification within a gender identity group), *becoming* (how gender is expressed to others, integrating both past gender role, which may have been constrained by social expectations and current gender self-concept), and *transcendence* beyond the body with a female birth sex assignment.

### Participants

Inclusion criteria consisted of being at least 18 years of age, receiving a female birth-sex assignment, and seeing one’s self as gender nonconforming in any way. The mean age of the sample was 28.7 years (SD=9.53, range: 18–56 years). A majority of the sample was White (86%), and the median current annual income was \$20,000 or less (56%). Most participants reported having at least a college degree (69%), and an additional 25% reported having a graduate or professional degree. A majority reported being currently employed at the time of study participation (86%).

Participants were asked, “What gender identities would you select to describe yourself?” Participants were given a list of 30 gender terms that frequently appeared in the literature (e.g., butch, dyke, gender-blender, gender queer, transgender, transsexual; Hill, 1999), and they were allowed to check as many terms that they felt applied to them. Participants were also provided with “prefer no label” and “something else (please specify)” options whereby they could provide their own identity

term if they chose. Participants selected a total of  $N=727$  terms from the given list (see Table 1), which amounts to approximately four terms voluntarily selected per participant. For the sample as a whole, the identity terms selected most often were *gender queer* (or *queer*) ( $n=150$ , 88%), followed by *female-to-male* or *FTM* ( $n=88$ , 52%), *male* ( $n=73$ , 43%), and *transsexual* ( $n=55$ , 32%).

Participants were also asked whether they had had or planned to have any medical body modifications and, if so, what kinds of procedures (e.g., top surgery, bottom surgery, hormones only) they had or planned to have. Just over half of the respondents ( $n=89$ , 52%) reported being in varying stages of an active

Gender-Typed Terms	n	%
<i>Female Identity Terms</i>		
Female	28	16%
Dyke	23	14%
Fem	11	6%
Butch	19	11%
<i>Gender Nonbinary Terms</i>		
Gender Queer (Queer)	150	88%
Boi	33	19%
Gender Fuck	30	18%
Androgynist	23	14%
Gender Bender	21	12%
I Prefer No Label	19	11%
Sex Radical	10	6%
Chameleon	6	4%
Hermaphrodite and/or Intersex	6	4%
<i>Trans Masculine Terms</i>		
Tranny Boy	49	29%
Transgender	41	24%
Cross Dresser, Drag, Impersonator and/or Transvestite	28	16%
<i>Male Identity Terms</i>		
Female-to-Male (FTM)	88	52%
Male	73	43%
Transsexual	55	32%
Fem Male, Sissy Male	15	9%
<b>Total Selections</b>	<b>727</b>	

**Table 1.** Gender identity terms selected from the multiple-choice list sorted by term gender type



medical transition (e.g., taking cross-sex hormones, had masculinizing chest surgery, etc.) to affirm their identity as male or as men. An additional 15% ( $n = 26$ ) reported actively considering whether some form of medical gender affirmation was the right next step for them. About one-third of the respondents ( $n = 55$ , 32%) reported that they were not actively considering any sort of medical intervention to affirm their gender identities.

### **Online Recruitment**

The Internet is a useful tool for collecting data from sexual and gender minority samples (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009) and generally underrepresented individuals (Mustanski, 2001). Moreover, research in the past decade has used online study designs as the primary means to recruit and assess the experiences of minority participants (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011). Participants were primarily recruited online through e-mail announcements that were sent to listservs that targeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities (e.g., Yahoo Groups, LGBTQ community e-lists), through public program online mailing lists with permission from the programs' directors (e.g., LGBTQ Community Centers in the United States), and through professional membership listservs where readers had connections to other transgender and gender nonconforming community members (e.g., WPATH, APA Division 44). The recruitment e-mail also asked recipients to forward the announcement to additional online LGBTQ communities.

The recruitment e-mail included a link to the website where the survey was posted for online participation. The survey was hosted using Qualtrics survey software. The first page of the survey website presented the online consent form, which included a description of the study, the participation procedures, a statement that the survey was anonymous, and that it needed to be completed in one sitting. After reading the consent form, if interested in participating in the study, the respondents were asked to click "Continue" at the bottom of the page. For online participants, clicking "Continue" was considered consent to participate.

### **Survey Tool**

The survey was conducted only in English and distributed in both online and paper versions

that were identical in content. Business reply mail envelopes were included with the paper copies for anonymous return to the researcher. Sampling venues for distribution of the paper survey included community centers specializing in transgender communities; LGBTQ student centers and groups in North America (e.g., LGBT centers in New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, Miami, Atlanta, and North Carolina, among others); national conferences and professional meetings (e.g., American Psychological Association, Gender Odyssey, Philadelphia Trans Health Conference); public events and community gatherings, such as local LGBT Pride Festivals; and the researcher's personal contact networks. The paper recruitment flyers listed the survey hyperlink on removable paper tabs that directed participants to a website portal to complete the online version of the survey.

The study was approved by the Cornell University Institutional Review Board. Respondents were not compensated for their participation. Given these methods of recruitment, it was not possible to determine an accurate response rate because it is unknown how many individuals saw the survey online and chose not to participate, or who received a paper copy but elected to participate online instead. However, over 300 paper surveys were distributed, and only ten were returned by mail, yielding a hard copy response rate of less than 3%. Questions of external validity are addressed in the Discussion.

In total, 299 surveys were completed; of these, 289 were online and 10 were paper surveys returned by business reply mail; 95 respondents were excluded from this analysis due to a male birth-sex assignment; 19 were excluded for being under 18 years of age, and 15 were excluded due to insufficient data for narrative analysis. Thus, the final sample consisted of 170 respondents.

The survey included demographic questions, and both free-response and multiple-choice questions about gender identity and gender expression. The open-ended questions allowed participants an unrestricted amount of space for the narrative responses. The current study focused its qualitative analyses on participant responses to the following five free-response questions:

In your own words, how would you describe yourself in terms of your gender identity?

How do you express your gender identity in your daily behavior?

How do you express your gender identity in your dress style and appearance?

How do you express your gender identity in your personality characteristics?

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed the six-step thematic content analysis method as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, participant online responses to the open-ended questions were downloaded into an Excel file and checked for text that may have been dropped during the download procedure. Any missing text was transcribed from the online survey database into the Excel file by the author. Hard copy responses were also typed into the Excel file. At this step, the author became familiar with the narrative texts, and generated an initial list of potential themes. Second, the author read through the qualitative data to assign initial codes and began organizing the coded data into meaningful groups. At this stage, if a coded string of data fit into more than one group, it was grouped in both groups where appropriate. Third, codes were organized into larger themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed for content that was similar within theme (internal homogeneity) and for differences between themes (external heterogeneity) (Patton, 1990). Fifth, the resulting themes were given names and defining criteria were established (Table 2). Sixth, two research associates using a coding rubric that was generated using steps 1 through 5 above independently coded a random selection of participants from the dataset. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and reconciled as a group.

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts and proportions. Demographic data were examined for any group differences, using either chi-square for cross-tabulated categorical data, or analysis of variance (ANOVA) for examining between group mean differences. Weighted chi-square tests of independence were conducted to test for between group differences in selection patterns of the multiple-choice gender

identity terms. The quantitative data analyses are summarized below after the presentation of the qualitative analysis.

### Results

This study presents a qualitative analysis of the range and variety of gendered self-concepts that exist among a sample of self-selecting gender nonconforming persons assigned female at birth.

#### Qualitative Results

Respondents' qualitative responses for describing gender identity formed two broad themes: *binary* and *nonbinary* gender core identities. Binary gender core identity groups included a cisgendered female/woman group and a transsexed male/man group. The nonbinary gendered self-concepts included a gender fluid/nonbinary group and a trans masculine group. In cases where pronouns were shared with the investigator, they are used where appropriate; in instances where no pronoun was specified, or in instances where the participant indicated they prefer no pronoun, the general pronoun "they" is used in this text.

Themes of gender expression for both behavior and dress style and appearance were most homogeneous within each gender identity group. While there were some overlaps in expressions of self-described gender nonconformity in behaviors and dress style and appearance, there were also key defining characteristics that separated each gender identity group. For example, while a number of female/woman group respondents reported "tomboyish" behavior or masculine-spectrum dress style, they neither expressed explicitly "male-like" gender identification nor ascribed to embodied masculinity. Although the use of the word "boyish" here may reflect a non-conforming gendered presentation of self-concept, this group predominantly maintained cisgender self-concepts; that is, a current gendered self-concept that was consistent with their birth sex assignments as female.

The following section goes into greater detail about both within- and between-group patterns for the four gender identity groups that emerged from the qualitative data beginning with the binary gender identity groups. Although there were 170 participants included in this analysis,

		Gender Identity Groups			
		<i>Female/Woman</i>	<i>Gender Nonbinary</i>	<i>Trans Masculine</i>	<i>Male/Man</i>
<b>Domains</b>	<i>Gender Identity</i>	female, woman, girl	nonbinary (e.g., androgynous)	masculine, "trans-" variations	male, man, trans man
	<i>Gender Presentation</i>	feminine or tomboyish	alternating between masculine and feminine or androgynous	trending masculine	masculine
	<i>Gender Behaviors</i>	tomboyish	alternating or androgynous	trending masculine	male typed
	<i>Transitional Status</i>	non-op  non-op = no hormones or surgery	non-op	active consideration	active transition

**Table 2.** *Thematic summary of the domain criteria across the four qualitatively derived gender groups*

participant identification numbers were maintained from among the original 299 respondents.

**Gender identity.** Gender identity descriptions thematically clustered into two broad themes: binary and nonbinary gender identities. Respondents who held more binary oriented identities clustered into two groups: male/man and female/woman. Those who described more nonbinary or gender expansive identities also clustered into two groups: gender nonbinary and trans masculine.

**Female/woman group.** In their qualitative narratives, most respondents in this group described themselves using one-word descriptors such as “female,” “woman,” or “girl.” For example, Participant #18 wrote, “I firmly identify as female, and as a woman, however, I do not identify with conventional ‘femininity.’”

Many other respondents commented that despite maintaining a gender identity that was in alignment with the sex they were assigned at birth, they neither ascribed to conventional displays of femininity, nor did they limit their expressions to only the feminine. As Participant #22 wrote:

I am a girl, although not a girly-girl. I'm actually a tomboy at heart, which basically means I like being a girl, I identify as a girl, but I like doing boy-like things (such as playing sports, roughhousing, etc.), and always have.

Here, this respondent defined for the investigator what it means to her to be a tomboy (at heart), while maintaining a gender identity as a girl.

Similarly, Participant #39 described the nuance of maintaining a cisgender identity as a woman, while also describing herself as someone who explores a range of gendered expression in her personality. She wrote, “I'm a woman who likes to explore both the male and feminine side of my personality. I am mostly a tomboy though.”

Some of the participants whose gender identities aligned with their sex assigned at birth explained that depending on the social group with which they were associating, they would use other identity terms such as tomboy, boi, dyke, baby dyke, butch, or queer to describe their gendered self-concept. For example, Participant #66 described herself as female and then as a girl, calling herself “queer”, but as she explored her identity further, she expressed not wanting to be limited in identity self-concept by others:

I identify as female but not as particularly feminine. I used to rebel against femininity, but I don't so much now—I even wear pink on occasion. I think I've become secure enough in my queerness to not have to reject everything girly, if that makes sense. I feel comfortable in both male and female spaces. So when asked, I



say I think of myself as a girl . . . but I don't really think of myself as a gender at all. Just me. I call myself queer, I don't really like labels much—I'll step in and out of categories to see what they're like, but I don't want to define myself by them.

What is poignant in this participant's narrative is how she initially rejected "everything girly," but now felt "secure enough in [her] queerness" to feel "comfortable in both male and female spaces" to just be herself.

**Male/man group.** Most respondents in this group (76%) described themselves in their qualitative responses using terms such as, "male," "man," "boy," or "guy." For example, in a typical type of response to the open-ended question of gender identity, Participant #27 wrote: "I identify as male and have always felt so." Several respondents emphasized having an identity within the gender binary as male or as boy from as early as they can remember, despite being assigned female at birth. As Participant #53 explained, "my gender is male. Thinking back to my childhood I cannot remember ever feeling like a girl, I've always felt like a boy." Participant #160 described being a "male trapped in a female body."

Other participants in this group discussed how their gender identities as boys and men extended beyond social constructions or expressions of gender; their embodiment of gender was more about a core aspect of themselves internally. For example, Participant #15 shared,

I feel that we have chosen the most obvious variable (genital appearance) to distinguish between the sexes, but it is not the most accurate. I feel that I am (and always have been) male, just a male of the XX variety (rather than XY).

Similarly, Participant #185 wrote that he was "male, raised female due to my sexual organs, but now I'm living full time as male." And Participant #290 shared, "I am a man through and through. The only thing that says I'm not is my man boobs and lack of penis."

Taken together, these narratives highlight the nexus of how gender and sex become conflated in our discourse on gender identity, both by cisgender and transgender individuals. Indeed, when asked

to describe one's gender identity, how do people explain to others that their self-concepts extend beyond language, social group organization, or something as fundamental as biology?

Participant #238 highlighted one of the distinguishing features between the male/man group and the trans masculine group, when he wrote, "I do not identify as transexual or any variation of that, just male." Here, as noted above, this person shared that while his identity is not congruent with sex assigned at birth, he does not maintain the trans lived history as part of his current gendered identity; rather, he is "just male."

However, about one-third of the participants who were sorted into the male/man group reported in their gender identity qualitative responses multiple variations of a *trans-* compound word with either *-man*, *-male*, *-boy*, or *-guy*, such as transmale, transman, trannyboy (or transboy), or transguy. About one-quarter also used terms or phrases such as female-to-male transexual or FTM. However, among those sorted into the male/man group, respondents discussed the semantic equivalence of these trans masculine identifications with either male-sexed identity or gender identities as men *without* the trans qualifier. For instance, Participant #148 described his gendered self-concept as, "FTM spectrum male aka transman aka trans male aka male/man."

Participant #24 explained that the context of the conversation and to whom he is speaking matters as far as disclosure of his history as a transman:

[It] depends on who I'm talking to. To people I don't know, well, I'm just a man. To people I'm closer to, I'm either FTM or transman if we need to talk about it. Mostly we don't talk about it. I'm just a man.

A few described their lived experience as if having a "birth defect" or medical "anomaly." Participant #113 wrote, "I would describe myself as a boy with a really bad birth defect. I use the word boy as opposed to man, because, to me, I will not be a man until I go through T (Testosterone) puberty." Similarly, Participant #145 shared, "I was born into a female body. However, I am a male in all other ways and am actively taking steps to correct this anomaly. I describe myself as a man."

**Gender nonbinary group.** Narratives varied widely among those sorted into the gender nonbinary group, but there was consistency among participant narratives in their identification as “unique,” “other,” or “androgynous” genders. Gendered self-concepts were described as either equal proportions of man and woman at once (e.g., androgynous), or as one that alternated equally between a typical man and a typical woman. For example, Participant #292 wrote that they identified “Somewhere in-between. I don't feel specifically more like one gender. I feel like I am a mixture of the two genders, neither of which I think really relates completely with my body image.” And Participant #52 wrote that their identity was “fluid”. I'm definitely queer and find myself going through different phases in my gender identity. Sometimes I feel very male, sometimes I just want to be in a drag, sometimes I feel like a tomboy and sometimes I feel like a girl—not a girly girl, but female. So—if I had to give it one term, genderqueer.”

Among these participants, most (54%) used the term *genderqueer* (or *gender queer* as two separate words) in their qualitative responses to describe their gender identity in their own words. Just under half (42%) reported *androgynous*, *neutral*, or *fluid*. Several participants defined what these terms meant to them. For example, Participant #154 described their gender identity as:

Androgyne and genderqueer. Neither of the terms “man” nor “woman” has much appeal for me. I don't so much feel like a mixture of both, as neither. Perhaps other-gendered.

Some participants reflected on how difficult it was to explain their gender identity when there was no existing language that fit best. For example, Participant #229 explained:

I can't truthfully say I identify as a “man” or a “woman”. At the same time, I've been unable or unwilling to find a new label for my identity. I feel like to assign myself a nice palatable gender term is more for other people's benefits than my own. At the same time, I totally understand other people's need or pleasure in calling themselves something.

Participant #273 wrote:

I don't generally describe it. I live as female, but don't identify as such. I'm masculine, don't plan to transition, but if there were a way to magically have a male body I would. I don't have a specific term that I feel captures what I am.

**Transmasculine group.** Similar to the respondents sorted as gender nonbinary, most (73%) trans masculine respondents reported self-described gender identities in their qualitative responses that included terms like *fluid* or *neutral*. However, unlike the gender nonbinary respondents, trans masculine respondents reported rejecting their female birth sex assignment in favor of more masculine or male-spectrum self-concepts and associated more with identities such as *FTM* (54%) or used key phrases including “basically male,” “mostly male,” or variations on *transmale* (31%). For example, Participant #271 shared, “I identify as *trans*, I suppose. There are days when I feel like a boy or like a guy, but there are days when I just don't know what I am, although I'm sure that I'm NOT a girl.”

Participant #50 highlighted that despite a fluid and fluctuating gender self-concept, there were currently changing aspects of their body to appear more masculine and become physically more male presenting:

I have trouble identifying as any specific gender, so I usually use genderqueer. FTM is also a term I use in some contexts as well as transgender. My gender falls somewhere between man and woman but is also fluid and fluctuates. I am currently changing aspects of my body so that I appear more masculine. I anticipate becoming physically mostly male.

As with the respondents in the gender nonbinary group, some trans masculine respondents reported feeling limited by the English language when trying to describe a gendered self-concept. For instance, Participant #214 said, “FTM is the best fit out of all well-known terms. But given that most of my involuntary behavior (especially reactions to situations and thought processes) has always resembled the ‘typical male,’ ‘FTM’ might not be entirely accurate.”

As described by this participant above, the sorting of participants into a gender identity group was not limited to just self-described gender identity, but a composite profile across three additional domains, including gendered behavior, dress style and appearance, and transitional status, which was defined as the hormonal or surgical body modifications planned or made, including the sub-domains *pre-op* (pre-operation), *noho* (no hormones), *top-surgery*, *bottom surgery*, and *post-op* (Devor, 2004). Thus, the gendered behavior patterns and dress style and appearance patterns that emerged in the qualitative narratives from participants are described below, organized by the four gender identity thematic groupings from above, and presented in the same order of binary identity groups first and nonbinary identity groups second.

**Gendered behavior.** This section summarizes exemplar gendered behaviors that were more commonly reported by the respondents who clustered into each of the four gender identity groups.

**Female/woman group.** In response to the open question, “In your own words, how do you express your gender in your daily behavior?” thematic analysis demonstrated that the respondents in the female/woman group did not care much for conformity, and often displayed no distinctly gendered daily behaviors. Some women described a heightened consciousness of stereotypic feminine versus masculine traits, and reported often actively blurring stereotypic gendered boundaries, while still maintaining a female or woman self-concept. For example, many women reported acting “like a girl” in certain spaces, but more masculine in others. For example, as Participant #49 wrote:

I used to behave in stereotypically feminine ways—but now that I have had my consciousness-raised, meaning I have studied gender, sexuality, feminism, I consciously try to adopt more “masculine” characteristics WHEN I AM IN CERTAIN PLACES—like a lesbian bar, trying to pick up a woman. I don't want anyone thinking I am straight just b/c I look so feminine. How am I supposed to get a date? So, I typically dress “girly” and in day-to-day interactions I usually act the part, but I stand a little butchier,

smile at women at gay bars, etc. Things I don't do in “the real world”. Oh—but I hate chivalry, so I usually refuse to let men open doors for me, etc. and whenever the opportunity presents itself I ask men not to do things like that for me.

Participant #66 reported not thinking about her gendered behavior as feminine or masculine, but generally somewhere in between:

Hm . . . I don't think of myself as acting particularly fem. or masc. in general. Somewhere in between. I do delight in volunteering for things considered guys' work, but I'll sew and cook as well. I've always been a tomboy; now I'm also a gamer geek, which tends to be a male-dominated group. I don't care much for conformity, in gender or anything else, and I think that's visible to others.

Some women reported expressing their genders in female-typical general mannerisms. For example, Participant #74 wrote that she expresses her gender with, “The way I cross my legs, the way I speak, the way I use the toilet.” One woman (#26) reported expressing her gendered self in her behavior by doing “typically feminine things,” such as talking out problems, or acting a bit more “touchy-feely” than male counterparts.

**Male/man group.** Thematic analysis of gendered behavior among the male/man grouped respondents revealed behaviors that are thought of as those typically associated with men. However, respondents reported doing nothing remarkable to express their gender as men; many respondents reported not thinking much about their gendered daily behavior, and just described that they acted like themselves, as men. For example, Participant #15 explained, “I don't think about how I express my gender identity anymore. I just go about my business like anyone else. I guess my daily behavior expresses my gender identity, but not any differently than that of an XY male might.” Similarly, Participant #17 wrote, “I live full-time as a man. Most of my behaviors, while not overt or stereotypical are pretty man like.” And Participant #34 shared, “I just act like a man. I don't know how to qualify this other than that I do what feels natural to me as a man.”

Some respondents were more specific about particular actions that were associated with men. For example, Participant #97 wrote, "I walk like a guy, I drive like a guy, I don't know, I just am, I act, and am a guy." Participant #131 expresses his gender with a specific dress style, restroom choice, and by his pronoun preference; for example, "I wear men's clothes. I use men's washrooms. I expect people to refer to me as he. I usually react displeased if someone refers to me as she."

Participant #236 was upset by the question, noting that he had agonized for years over how to "prove" he was a man. He replied,

What the hell? I don't "express my gender identity" any more. I just live. I don't even think about it now. Hearing this question gives me the impression that you're asking me how I "prove" myself and my identity. I agonized over how to do that for years until I was comfortable enough to just relax and be myself.

**Gender nonbinary group.** Gender nonbinary grouped respondents primarily reported behaving in genderless or gender-blended ways, not particularly restricted by gender norms. Many also reported that daily behavior took place on a day-to-day basis and that all things from clothes to pronouns to what bathroom was used varied depending on the day. For example, Participant #162 replied, "I express it by flip-flopping my butch and femme, masculine and feminine traits." Similarly, Participant #174 wrote, "I wake up and get dressed (in whatever I feel like on that particular morning) then go to school. Chat and research information online. I usually don't go by my birth name, instead a name which I see fits my personality and both of my genders."

Like some of the respondents in the male/man group, some of those who thematically grouped into the gender nonbinary group commented that it was difficult to describe what about their behavior was particularly gendered. For example, Participant #94 replied, "Daily behavior . . . that's hard. I switch pronouns depending on whom I'm with, I use different bathrooms depending." Participant #154 wrote, "I don't really express my gender identity through my behavior or personality, I just express myself."

Some respondents in this group described feeling free to perform gendered behavior in ways that met how they were received in public spaces. As Participant #107 explained:

I'm called "sir" almost daily because my head is shaved, and I don't ever correct people because I enjoy that. If I'm called "sir," I find myself lowering my voice a bit so people don't try to correct themselves and change their pronouns of me.

However, other respondents felt "constrained" by their work environments and reported behaving in more sex-typical ways at work, but more androgynous at home or with friends. For example, Participant #101 shared:

Basically, while I feel like I have to present as fairly conventionally female at work, I try not to limit my behaviors too much in spite of this. It's difficult because I feel constrained by my clothing and the standards of "proper" behavior, so I can't always move the way I normally do or speak as I normally would. Outside of work I'm much more androgynous and I feel that my body language is more "boyish."

**Trans masculine group.** Most (65%) of the respondents in the trans masculine group reported masculine-typed mannerisms or behaviors, including walking style, speech patterns, sitting or standing "like a man," high level of physical activity and appetite, socializing habits, choice of bathroom, and use of male pronouns. Some respondents (19%) reported not really thinking much about gender roles, and that they try to act like themselves. For example, Participant #122 wrote, "I do what I want. I don't worry about what is 'normal.' I don't act a certain way based on how people see me." Participant #214 similarly replied, "I'm just myself, and do not try to be anything or anyone else. But I frequently (almost every day) get comments from others [like], 'hum, usually guys do/say that'. 'You're such a guy!' I guess, by just being me, I behave like a typical guy."

Participant #271, who rejected their female birth sex assignment, summarized how hard it is to explain how gender is expressed through behavior:



This isn't really something I've ever thought of. I'm generally not one to buy into gender roles and I don't give too much thought to what actions and sorts of behavior are considered to be masculine or feminine. I identify strongly as a feminist, and there was a certain amount of guilt I had to deal with when I began to accept myself as trans. I feel like I could push gender norms as far as necessary to be comfortable as a woman, and I would, but it's more my body that I'm not comfortable with than anything else. I don't think I could ever be a woman without feeling like a fake. With that said, I think a lot of my daily behavior is fairly gender neutral. Some things I do every or most days: practice piano, spend time online, shower, shave, read, listen to music.

**Dress style and appearance.** This section summarizes the exemplar dress styles and appearances that were more commonly reported by respondents who clustered into each of the four gender identity groups.

**Female/woman group.** These participants primarily expressed a desire to feel comfortable in whatever they chose to wear. For example, Participant #33 shared that she dresses “comfortable on the weekend (more or less sporty). Business and business casual during the week. Not masculine, but not super feminine either”. However, what was considered “comfortable” varied across participants. For instance, Participant #2 was most comfortable in women’s clothing that made her feel sexy. She wrote, “I am comfortable dressing in women's clothing, I like pretty clothing, I like feeling sexy, but mostly I dress for comfort in female clothing.” Similarly, Participant #60 liked attire that is traditionally feminine or associated with women; she wrote, “I wear clothing purchased at women's clothing stores and wear decorative jewelry like detailed earrings and necklaces. I wear my hair from chin to shoulder length, in a woman's style and hair color. I usually carry a purse and occasionally wear make-up.”

Others in this group were comfortable in feminine clothing, but without the make-up and frills. For example, Participant #77 replied, “I do not wear make-up or wear ultra-feminine clothes. I do own skirts and a couple of dresses, but I prefer low-rise

stretch jeans and fitted pants. I do have a passion for girly shoes, like high sandals.” The comment from Participant #18 highlights what many of the women in this group reported—that while they also feel comfortable in men’s clothing, shopping for and wearing men’s clothing did not supplant their gendered self-concepts as women:

I tend not to wear clothes that were created for or sold to women—I usually shop in the men's section. For me this does not change my gender identity; this simply means that I like the patterns and styles that are more common in the men's section. I would suggest that by virtue of my wearing them, I make them women's clothing—the straight world of course, disagrees and is alarmed by this. Also—and in many ways, the more compelling reason—I prefer some men's items of clothing is that they are more practical. I do sometime shop in the women's section because of fit, but I am frustrated by things like the lack of pockets, or pockets that are so shallow that everything falls out of them. I find that clothing created for women is minimally functional. I have very short hair which non-queer people see as gender deviant.

Many of the respondents in this group reflected on sorting their dress style by context, such as having one style at work, another when socializing, and another when simply lounging in weekend attire. For example, Participant #75 wrote:

I dress conventionally at work—long hair pulled back, often long skirts. Never anything revealing, because I don't feel comfortable with that. Outside of work I enjoy wearing whatever I like and is comfortable—and I'm "lucky" because my gender and sex are both female, so people don't notice me much. It seems like I don't like to draw attention to myself and am a private person. But I do love to knit my own socks and make my own underwear out of old t-shirts. That way I can express myself and feel like I'm flamboyantly wearing what I love but not feel publicly uncomfortable.

Participant #49 expressed preference for feminine clothing, but also noted that she has recently tried



masculinizing her wardrobe out of frustration with feeling like she had to fit in with a judgmental queer community:

Very feminine—make up, blow dry my hair, straight iron, curl the ends under, fem. clothes. Although recently I have started wearing a little bit more masculine clothes—only slightly—like "boy shorts" bought in the women's department and stopped wearing dresses largely—again, I want the fit in w/ the gay community and accepted as "legit"—which is b.s. if you ask me, b/c why can't I look any way I want and still be queer???? People think you are a phony if you look too girly. ARGH!!

**Male/man group.** Respondents in this group primarily reported a masculine or male-typical dress style. Respondents also noted feeling much more comfortable expressing a "queer" side to their personality, whether socially or sexually, now that they presented and passed as male. For instance, Participant #213 noted, "Now that I feel more comfortable in my body (been on testosterone for 15 months) I'm wearing tighter clothes and pants, going for a queerer look. But I like looking butch, with a tank top or boots, and a general low maintenance style. I'm a small-framed guy with short hair. I like working out and having muscles."

Occasionally, participants reported dressing in a more "androgynous," "metrosexual," or "eurogay" style to express a more "femmy" side to their personality, but noted that this did not reflect any ambivalence about maintaining a male gendered self-concept. For example, Participant #251 wrote:

I dress as a man full-time. I try to blend in with other men with my male wardrobe. Sometimes when I go out I will dress as a more "femmy man", but I usually go out in a shirt and tie and dress pants. To break form, I might go out in a shirt and tie and pleather pants, to play up my femme side. On a daily basis, when not going out, I dress sort of as a skater boy/metrosexual man, some combination, lots of designer labels and nice men's fashion mixed with thrift store chic and skater boy—getting to my Seattle roots.

Most often, participants in this group commented that they wore what they liked, that it was typically

masculine-typed, but that they didn't preoccupy themselves with the gender of clothing. As an example, Participant #156 shared, "I dress in what I like. I guess you would say it's always 'masculine apparel' but I'm not hung up on the 'gender' of clothes. I wear clothes, that doesn't define who I am."

**Gender nonbinary group.** Nearly half of the participants sorted into this group reported their dress style was primarily, but not exclusively, masculine. About one-quarter reported that their dress style and appearance changed daily, alternating masculine and feminine presentations; another quarter held strict and consistent androgynous presentations, and fewer reported a dress style that, while androgynous in taste, included more gradations of feminine presentations. In one example of how dress style and appearance changed daily, Participant #52 replied:

My dress changes daily. Some days, I wear a tight shirt and girlie jeans—other days, I'm all about a cowboy shirt, big pants and a massive buckle. More of my clothes are "male" than "female" but the "male" clothes are very metrosexual. My hair is currently mid length but that varies throughout the year. I don't wear any make-up.

Respondents in this group also reported feeling constrained by gender norms in the workplace. Participant #101 reported that despite being in the mood to wear a skirt on occasion, to do so would feel like "giving in" to what was "expected" of cisgender women. A more comfortable solution for this person was to dress and appear androgynous and "not [draw] too much attention" to one's self:

At work, I try to straddle the line between not totally giving in and not drawing too much attention to myself. I keep my hair as short as I feel I can get away with, and I tend to favor more androgynous clothes (slacks and button-down shirts). The mood does sometimes strike me to wear a skirt, but I try not to wear skirts just because I'm expected too, because it feels like giving in. Outside work I'm mostly a jeans and t-shirt kind of person. I also like to play with what I think of as nerdy boy fashion—I wear a lot of sweater vests and such. I'm a drag king,

too, which gives me some outlet when I'm feeling really constrained.

Some respondents reported wishing away their breasts or a desire to flatten their chests with sports bras, but they also did not report any intentions or desires to pursue hormonal or surgical body modifications, such as chest masculinization. As Participant #203 put it:

I look what is described as "masculine", meaning I wear clothes that have been gender coded as menswear. The only "female" items I own are several sports bras to flatten my ta-ta's when I feel like it and when the ta-ta's are sore. I have short hair, many tattoos, and do not shave my legs or underarms. I think some people read me as butch lesbian. I am 5'6", ~130#. A fairly slender build, which I think factors into my overall body satisfaction. I have been told that I look intimidating, though this is not a conscious facade.

Similarly, Participant #154 wrote:

I like to wear certain articles of boy's and men's clothing, but I also like certain articles of girl's/women's clothing. I like to look boyish. I also like to mix men's & women's clothing together sometimes, such as wearing a skirt over pants, or a men's shirt with women's jeans and colorful socks. I feel this expresses my androgyne identity. I like having short hair as it gives me a more androgynous appearance, as well as being cooler in the summer and easier to care for. I've never worn, nor desired to wear, panty-hose or high heels. I very rarely choose to wear dresses or skirts. I don't wear make-up, except very occasionally, nail polish. I'd prefer not to have breasts and am glad that mine are at least rather small. I'd prefer to have a more muscular body.

**Trans masculine group.** Similar to the male-spectrum respondents, trans masculine respondents reported either exclusively masculine or masculine-trending attire. A number of respondents reported changing dress style from women or androgynous presentations to present as more convincingly "male". For instance, Participant #125 described their dress style as:

Usually jeans and a t-shirt. I do own one long, jean skirt and that's kinda fun when it's hot out. Few of my clothes are "girly" but the majority are women's clothes. I'm buying more and more men's clothes. I don't bind every day, primarily because it's sweaty, especially at work (although I have bound at work). Occasionally, I use eye shadow to make a beard shadow and emphasize masculine aspects of my face. I still haven't been "sir'ed" yet, although when I'm dressed as a boy I have never gotten "ma'am" either.

Participant #228 described how different dress styles were appropriate in different environments, particularly at work. They described wearing primarily masculine clothing when they had a choice; yet, "for teaching, I still wear women's clothes, as I study and teach at a Catholic university, but they're androgynous women's clothes like suits". Participant #278 wrote about how it was still important to present and be recognized as "male", even though this did not adequately express the "gender queer" part of their identity:

I exclusively wear men's clothing, all day, every day, from head to toe. My hair is a short, trendy men's cut, and I do not remove any of my body hair. While this does not adequately express the genderqueer part of my identity, it allows people to read me as male, which is important to me.

**Transitional status.** This section, summarizes whether respondents reported any desire or intention to pursue hormonal and/or surgical body modification to change their gendered appearance.

**Female/woman group.** Respondents sorted into this group did not report any desire or intention to pursue hormonal and/or surgical body modification to change gender appearance.

**Gender nonbinary group.** Respondents sorted into this group did not report any desire or intention to pursue hormonal and/or surgical body modification to change gender appearance. However, as previously summarized, respondents did report using sports bras or other compression shirts for a flatter appearing chest.

**Trans masculine group.** Half of the respondents sorted into this group provided

information regarding transitional status ( $n=14$ , 54%). From among them, 43% reported chest binding or surgical chest reconstruction to actively be witnessed by others as “male” or more “male-like;” 28% reported testosterone use or an active intention to pursue physical transition (pre-op status); two reported having completed a physical transition to their liking, and one reported no interest in hormonal or surgical body modification, but preferred to actively pass as masculine or male via dress style.

**Male/man group.** Approximately one-fifth of respondents (18%) sorted into this group reported completing physical and hormonal transition to live full-time as male; 28% reported daily chest binding or surgical chest reconstruction; 26% expressed being “pre-op” and in an active process to pursue body modification surgery to live full time as men; 28% did not currently have access to any surgery options, but were either taking hormones (9%), or indicated that they were currently living socially as male (19%).

A tabular summary of how the various gender identity groups sorted across the four gender expression criteria are presented in Table 2.

### Quantitative Results

Chi-square analyses were run on the crosstabulations of gender identity group and various demographic factors, including ethnicity, employment status, income, and education. No significant differences were found. Descriptively, the female/woman group was slightly older (mean age =  $31.1 \pm 10$  years) than the other groups (gender nonbinary =  $27.4 \pm 8$ ; trans masculine =  $27.4 \pm 7$ ; male/man =  $28.7 \pm 10$ ). However, a one-way ANOVA of gender identity group on participant age also did not reveal any mean group differences. Thus, demographic factors were not included in the subsequent quantitative group comparisons.

Figure 1 presents a bar chart of the proportion of respondents within each qualitatively themed gender identity group who selected various gender-typed terms from the multiple-choice list.

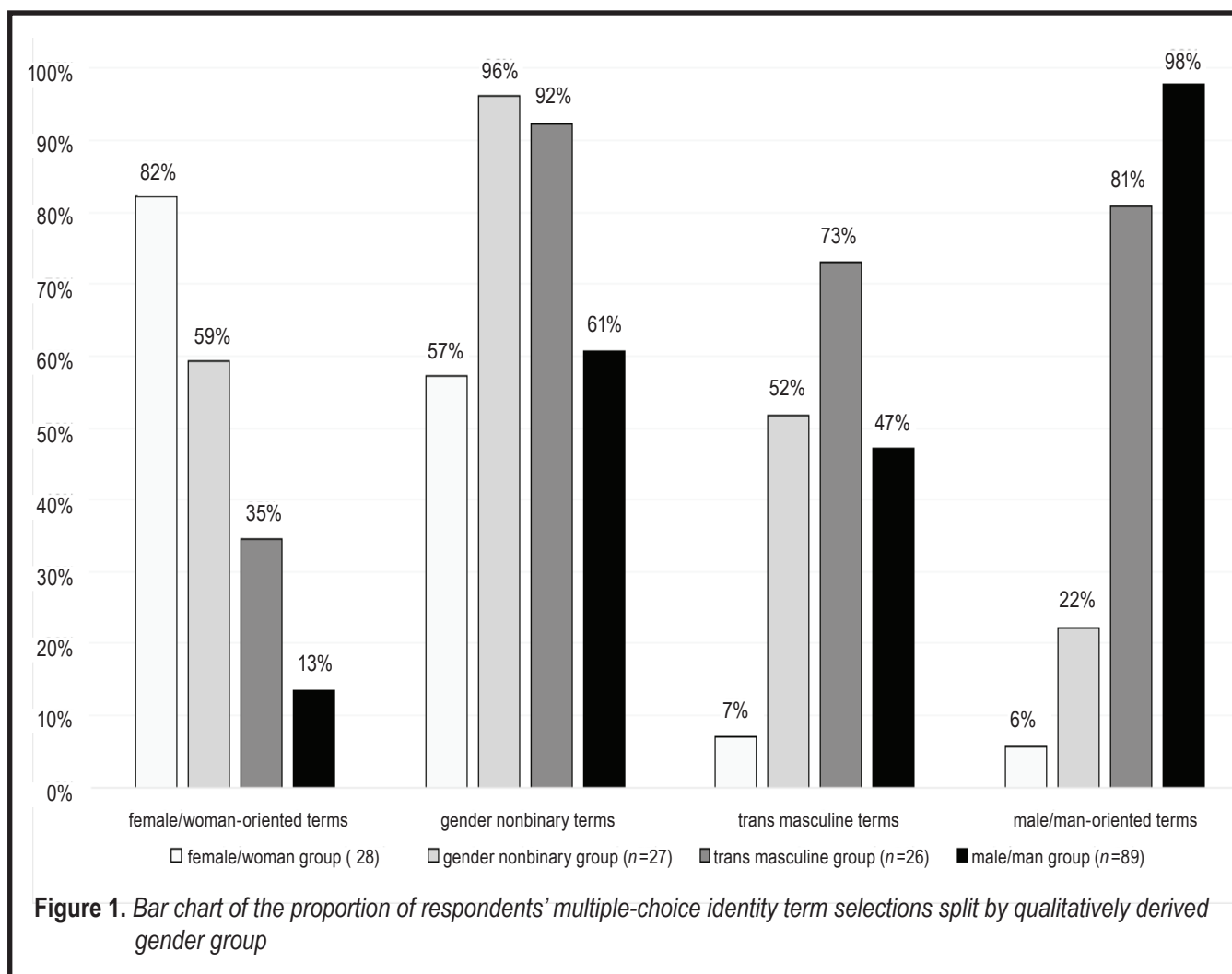
Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to compare the proportion of gendered term selections from the multiple-choice list by themed gender identity group. The pattern of gender

identity terms selected from the multiple-choice list significantly varied across the participants sorted into the four gender identity groups. Female/woman group respondents selected female-typed terms more than the other respondents,  $\chi^2(3, 170) = 52.24$ ,  $p < .001$ . On average, the female/woman group selected two identity terms overall from the check-all-that-apply multiple-choice list; the two most common terms selected were *Female* and *Gender Queer*.

Respondents with more nonbinary or fluid gender identities (gender nonbinary group; transmasculine group) selected gender nonbinary terms more often than the other identity group respondents (female/woman group; male/man group),  $\chi^2(3, 170) = 21.15$ ,  $p < .001$ . Although most of the respondents sorted into the gender nonbinary group (96%) selected gender nonbinary-typed terms, over half of these respondents also selected female-typed terms such as *Dyke*, *Fem*, or *Butch*, or trans masculine terms such as *Transgender*, *Gender Blender*, or *Gender Fuck* from the multiple-choice list. The most commonly selected term from the multiple-choice list for gender nonbinary group of respondents was *Gender Queer*. On average, the gender nonbinary group respondents selected five identity terms from the check-all-that-apply multiple-choice list.

Male/man group respondents selected male-typed terms more than the other respondents,  $\chi^2(3, 170) = 116.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . Interestingly, over half of the respondents sorted into the male/man group also selected gender nonbinary terms, such as *Gender Queer*, and albeit a small proportion, 13% also selected female-typed terms, such as *Butch* or *Dyke*. On average, the male/man group respondents selected four identity terms from the check-all-that-apply multiple-choice list.

Although a high proportion of the trans masculine group respondents selected male-typed terms, they also selected the most masculine-typed terms with *trans-* prefixes,  $\chi^2(3, 170) = 25.15$ ,  $p < .001$ . On average, the trans masculine group respondents selected seven different identity terms from the check-all-that-apply multiple-choice list. The most commonly selected terms from the list included *Gender Queer*, *Transgender*, or *Female-to-Male (FTM)*.



### Discussion

In sum, consistent with prior research, the data presented here support expanded theories of gender that transcend the limited binary organization of man and woman; they argue for a spectrum-based construct (Diamond et al., 2011; Monro, 2005) or for new nonbinary constructs that have yet to be considered. In contrast to the medical and social transition narratives, which are rooted in the gender-binary schemas of male-to-female or female-to-male transsexuals, and which emphasize a change from one gender standard to another, intersectionality has offered a new narrative by allowing for more complex (or multiple) self-concepts (Diamond and Butterworth, 2008). This study extends the intersectionality narrative in two important ways.

First, this study identifies several underlying domains, such as behavior, dress style or appearance, and transitional status, that may be involved in constructing a gendered selfhood among gender nonconforming persons assigned female at birth. These domains also serve as distinguishing within-group features for self-identified nonconforming persons by creating identity subgroupings. Future research with trans and gender nonbinary persons would benefit from additional explorations of these factors and the mechanisms by which they intersect with not only gender, but also sexuality, race, religion and spirituality, social economic status, and age cohort to more deeply understand how these intersections affect development, social interactions, self-expression, self-concept, resilience, and psychological well-being.



Second, this research supports a new theoretical framework within which trans and gender nonbinary identity development and expression may be explored empirically. For example, ample themes are presented that support a transpersonal approach to transgender and/or gender nonbinary identity development and expression. Similar to Wade's (2000) application of transpersonal theory to describe sexual experiences, the results of this study support a *theory of gender transcendence*; that is, through a transpersonal psychology lens, we may better understand how transgender and gender nonbinary identities develop beyond the spatial boundary of the physical body. As highlighted in this study, participants' understanding of themselves were not limited by their sex assigned at birth. Rather, several participants described a self-transcendence beyond biology, natal sex, or the limitations of a physical body. This was true even among participants who did not seek medical body transformations, but who pushed beyond the binary organization of gender to construct and embody newly defined spaces of identification. Thus, transpersonal psychology may offer an alternative theoretical orientation to our still nascent understanding of the development and expression of nonbinary and transgender identities. Here, the gender transcendence model privileges the varied and unique ways that people come to understand themselves as gendered beings. In allowing for all gender possibilities, the gender transcendence model also leaves open all possible developmental pathways in the journey towards authenticity.

Perhaps transpersonal psychology could also offer alternative explanations for how the transgender person's ego is wounded by society. For example, due to generally low tolerance for gender nonconformity, gender nonbinary individuals experience disproportionately higher rates of violence and discrimination resulting in poor health outcomes (Mikalson, Pardo, & Green, 2012). Firman and Gila (1997) explored trauma with a transpersonal lens, and noted that when people felt worthless, unloved, or wrong, they felt like "someone who can be eradicated" (p.15). Mustanski and Liu (2013) found that lifetime history of suicide attempts were predicted by feelings of hopelessness, depression,

victimization, and low family support. A similar investigation revealed that suicide rates among trans and gender nonbinary individuals were associated with discrimination, bullying, and both physical and sexual assault (dickey, Singh, & Walinsky, 2017). Taken together, more research from a transpersonal lens is warranted to examine the underlying mechanisms of the correlates between minority stress, violence, discrimination, and suicidality or other forms of self-harm. Similarly, a transpersonal lens could motivate additional research that examines the etiology of social or developmental resilience in trans and gender nonbinary samples.

Additionally, several unexpected patterns emerged in this study. For example, although the cisgendered women and transsexed men explained that their identities were predominantly in accordance or not in accordance with their birth sex (respectively), each group selected more than one identity term from the multiple-choice list. This may indicate that there is an existential space where identity is less about the body, and more about the interpersonal gender role (e.g., Butch; Stone Butch) (Bergman, 2006). This is aligned with research that suggests that some trans masculine individuals who were assigned female sex at birth may carry over a social solidarity or social identification from their earlier social cohorts with Butch lesbians and Dykes (Devor, 1997). In these social spaces, trans men who are early in their coming out process may find commonality, community, or same-ness among Butch- or Dyke-identified persons. However, there may exist socially located points in queer subspaces where the observable (physical) gender differences became so great that trans men may no longer feel welcome, or in community, in lesbian spaces (Halberstam, 1998). That is, the trans masculine person or trans man may hold onto social affiliation with earlier identities until testosterone use renders the physical self to be perceived as male, and thus categorically excludes him from women's spaces. In this study, the data revealed that even long after respondents were physically distinguishable as males or as men, their associations with these earlier masculine social identities among butch lesbians and dykes persisted. With further exploration of life stories, we may better understand the journey of the



self toward embodied authenticity and learn how these social shifts affect the emotional health and well-being of trans and/or gender nonbinary persons.

More research is needed to examine patterns of identity attachment and change among trans men who feel community amongst gay men. As gender identity or expression changes, how do sexual attractions or sexual identities change? Recent research suggests that sexuality shifts among trans men are common following a medical transition (Meier, Pardo, Labuski, & Babcock, 2013). For example, in one study of over 600 trans men who were assigned female at birth, 40% who had begun a medical transition reported a shift in sexual orientation over time. Over half the sample reported attractions to both men and women. Future research examining the intersections of sexuality and gender may identify additional domains that more finely distinguish additional identity groups in a qualitative thematic analysis of gender identity. Questions also remain about how people with trans and nonbinary identities develop with resilience when coming of age or coming out in societies of varying levels of rejection and discrimination.

Transpersonal psychology, and work by Daniels (2002) on transpersonal selves in particular, may offer a unique framework for these in-depth investigations. Consistent with transpersonal theories of the self (Daniels, 2002), the identity groupings that emerged in the thematic analysis presented here meet several of the assumptions about transpersonal identity. First, the identities are developmentally achieved; that is, all of the participants in this study were adults that, at the time of participation, had developed a stable status of gendered self-concept.

Second, the gender expression data presented here support that the identity achievements go beyond the ego and existential self. That is, in going beyond both the cultural and biological prescriptions of gender, participants in this study developed a core understanding of the *authentic* self beyond the *physical* self. While this study did not explore any distinct spiritual qualities of these gendered self-concepts, other investigations support the psychospiritual characteristics of persons who experience themselves as neither man nor woman, but as a third gender (Sell, 2001).

For future research considerations, it is possible that the theory of gendered transcendence proposed here is a more sensible framework for studying spirituality among individuals with trans and gender nonbinary lived experiences, than to use normative religious frameworks. Bockting and Cesaretti (2015) suggested that society's continued use of binary frameworks contribute to the social stigmatization of transgender people in two ways: The more traditional approach of dualistic separation between science (the body) and religion (the spirit) contributes to pathologizing transgender individuals as being out of sync with a natural order. Transpersonal approaches that focus on the intersections of psychology and spirituality, and that strive to understand the full range of human experience, may prove more helpful rather than hurtful in future explorations among trans and gender nonbinary developmental experiences (Caplan et al., 2003).

In another study on spirituality and religiosity among elder transgender persons, Kidd and Witten (2008) reported that the religious beliefs of transgender elders differed from normative Judeo-Christian-Islamic belief systems to such a degree that the transgender study participants expressed difficulty in completing the religiosity component of the survey instrument. This phenomenon is not limited to religion; contemporary psychological assessments are also not normed with transgender samples, which can severely limit their application or render the results difficult to interpret (Keo-Meier et al., 2015). Given these limitations, it is important to broaden the application of transpersonal frameworks to expand our understanding of the nature of self among persons with transgender lived experiences. Empirical literature will only benefit from deeper explorations of identity development (*becoming*), embodied self-concept (*being*), how one organizes themselves in society (*belonging*), and the intersectionality of the roles played by race, age cohort, and spiritual or religious affiliation.

As important as it is to highlight the benefits, it is also important to consider the potential limits of transpersonal applications to transgender lived experiences. If contemporary transpersonal psychology moves towards greater embodiment

(Esbjörn-Hargens, 2004)—a grounding of the spirit in the flesh, the integration of body and mind—it is important to consider what may be the existential impact on those who reject the bodies in which they were sexed at birth? What are clinical best practices from transpersonal or humanistic frameworks with which to work with an individual who feels like a healthy mind trapped in a rejected body? What existential crises may arise when a person who has already come out as a masculine lesbian, now comes out again as a gay man? If, however, transpersonal psychology may continue to offer space for theories of developmental transcendence beyond the physical bounds of the material and biological worlds, these questions may inform new research applications using a transpersonal theoretical framework. As noted by Frager (1989), the transpersonal approach is based on “an interest in studying human capacities and potentials and a fundamental premise that these capacities are far greater than our current understanding and theorizing” (p. 289). It is our responsibility as investigators to be open to new ways of being, new ways of thinking, and new ways of describing the lived experiences of those whom we survey. Indeed, we have much yet to learn.

### **Limitations**

One major limitation of this study is that it is not known how representative this sample is of a broader gender nonconforming population. Moreover, given the anonymous and confidential nature of this study's design, there is no way to determine an accurate response rate for study recruitment. However, the demographics of the current study's sample are similar to what was summarized in the most recent report of the U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS; James et al., 2016).

Among those who responded to the current study survey, the sample was mostly White, and although the median income was quite low, about half the sample was employed with a majority of the respondents having completed at least a college degree. Similarly, a majority of those sampled in the USTS were White (82%), between 18 and 44 years old (83%), with an income below \$25,000 (55%), and completed at least some college (87%). Also, similar to the respondents in the current study, 48%

of respondents in the USTS used more than one gender identity. More specifically, about one-third of the respondents in the USTS indicated that their identity was best described as gender nonbinary or gender queer and about one-third identified as men or as transgender men.

Despite these sample similarities, both surveys were conducted online, and there are biases inherent to online data collection. Although access to the Internet has become more ubiquitous, there are still differences in those who regularly use the Internet and those who don't. For example, Internet users are more likely to be White and young (Kraut et al., 2004). Moreover, this study did not randomly sample participants, and it is still as of yet unclear what the true population size is for transgender people in the United States. Thus, this study's results should be extrapolated with some caution.

It is also important to note that the differentiation of the sample respondents into four gendered self-concept clusters is certainly not the only way to summarize variations of the gendered self. For example, though all sample respondents considered themselves “gender nonconforming” in response to the call for participation, their gender self-concepts and expressions were quite disparate. Grouping respondents in any thematic way represents a constant struggle against the loss of each respondent's authentic and unique voice. Perhaps the most impressive implication of these data is that it highlights North American cultures' linguistic limitations for a representative discourse on gender. Future research would benefit from ongoing qualitative exploration of how gender self-concept expands (or contracts) parallel to an ever-changing cultural landscape.

### **Conclusion**

This study offered one step toward filling a large gap in the transpersonal literature on the structure and content of gendered self-concepts among self-identified gender nonconforming people who were assigned female at birth. It is the author's hope that the evidence presented here conveyed adequate respect and admiration for the chorus of voices that allowed this work to evolve from their generous contributions. It is clear that more work remains to be done to unearth the linguistic and developmental

processes of constructing an authentic gendered self in a manner that transcends the gendered binary of man and woman.

With gender at the core of people's identities, relationships, sexual interactions, and roles in society, the experience of transcending gender norms in any way is arguably one of the most meaningful experiences in the human condition. Moreover, the themes of being, becoming, and transcendence beyond biology and sex assigned at birth warrant further investigation using a transpersonal lens. Hopefully, future research will build upon the data presented here to develop new transpersonal theories in connection with clinical practice, developmental psychology, and studies on sexuality and spiritual experience as a means to broaden our existing knowledge base.

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