

# What it Means to Do Gender Differently: Understanding Identity, Perceptions and Accomplishments in a Gendered World

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*Abstract: Recent changes in policies, laws, and public opinion have brought discussions about gender and gender-related topics to the forefront of cultural discourse. In spite of increased acceptance of gender nonconformity in public laws and Supreme Court rulings, we continue to see acts of hostility towards people who express their gender in nontraditional ways on both macro-system and individual levels. Viewing questions surrounding the issues of gender through an identity-oriented lens may shed light on some aspects of this complex topic. The present research utilizes social psychological and gender theories in order to better understand and explore the apparent contradictions in the gender discourse. Through the analysis of survey data on gender identity gathered from a university student population, we seek to illuminate the complex interactions that occur between self-meanings, perceptions, and behaviors related to gender identities. Specifically, we analyze: 1) how self-views of gender relate to perceptions of non-conforming gender displays, 2) how self-views relate to doing gender differently and 3) how these variables relate to perceptions of inclusiveness and safety. We find that self-meanings seem to not relate to perceptions or experiences, but that doing gender differently is related to increases in experiences discrimination and aggressions as well as perceptions about safety and inclusion. Implications and future research options are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** Identity, gender, doing gender, gender performance, gender identity

*“Obergefell v. Hodges, the case legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the country, lays bare a bitter split. That disagreement is not only about the rights of gays and lesbians to marry, but about men and women’s roles and what it means to make a family.” (Irin Carmon, MSNBC, June 26, 2015)*

*“In addition to loosening us all up sexually, marriage equality explodes gender stereotypes in a broader sense.” (Psychology Today, Mark O’Connell, September 17, 2014)*

Ideas and emotions regarding gender permeate nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Whether we look at the pay gap between men and women or see the gendered play of toddlers, this notion of gendered difference has served to divide and categorize individuals. Discussions regarding the changing structure of marriage leading up to and following the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case legalizing same-sex marriage in the United States, as well as, laws aimed at limiting people based on gender or sexuality, highlight the underlying power and reality of our collective views on gender. It may be that marriage

equality has been ruled upon, the pay gap is slightly less than it was fifty years ago, and polling done by the PEW research center over the past twenty years shows a marked shift in public opinion about sexuality and gender, but more fundamental processes of gender maintenance and identity creation, verification, and transformation are at play. These processes can highlight the differences between what people say their values are and how they behave. These differences are also imperative for researchers in order to understand where we stand as a society on gender and where we go from here.

A person's gender identity is a complex and nuanced part of their overall self-concept. This article seeks to explore the self-views that one holds for oneself as a gendered person relate to 1) perceptions of non-traditional gender displays (Goffman 1976) by others, and 2) how one may choose to "do gender" through active and situated accomplishments of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and 3) how these relate to perceptions of inclusiveness and safety in a local community. Drawing a framework of structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker 1980) and borrowing from the work of Goffman (1976) and West and Zimmerman (1986), we ask how our views of the self, as a gendered entity, influence our perceptions of gender displays in others and, ultimately, how we choose to do gender. We then go one step further to examine how doing gender different from societal norms influence a sense of safety and inclusiveness in a localized community. By looking at gender in this way we attempt to go beneath the surface of inclusiveness to understand the foundational elements of the self that lie below.

Although these may seem to be obvious questions, the apparent simplicity of these relationships overshadows a much deeper and more complex reality of gendered systems of interaction, that occupy nearly all aspects of self and institutions (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Gender systems are divisive in their

structures. Gender views of self along with social structures are slow to change (Burke and Stets 2009). Even though the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of same-sex marriage and public opinion polls show a greater acceptance of differing gender identities over the past twenty years, we, as researchers, need to know whether people's beliefs, perceptions and behaviors truly reflect these trends toward inclusiveness. If not, we should expect to see increased backlash and aggression by individuals against those who are "doing gender differently." In fact, this is what we do see with new laws in North Carolina and other states, specifically discriminating against people based on their gender identity, not to mention the countless acts of violence perpetrated against people based solely on their gender identity every day. The present research utilizes social psychological and gender theories in order to better understand and explore these contradictions. Through the analysis of survey data on gender identity within a university population, we seek to illuminate the complex interactions that occur between self-meanings, perceptions, and behaviors related to gender identities.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

One way to understand how our conceptualizations of gender--whether fluid, binary or other--influence our views of the world, as well as, our experiences within that world, is to start with a broader understanding of the self. The self is an undeniably multidimensional and complex concept whose layered structures reflect the multi-faceted reality of an individual's personality and social interactions (Mead and Morris 1934; Cooley 1983). The many roles, groups, and situations in which we all participate merge with our own idiosyncratic, creative, and biological makeup, to shape how we perceive the world, how we experience emotion, and our behavior in a world

of constant social interaction (Burke and Stets 2009).

The self is an abstract concept upon which entire disciplines have been built. In order to perform meaningful analysis of specific concepts and results, we must limit and define the scope of our study. As such, we build from the core concepts of the multi-faceted self as a reflection of the structures of society and utilize a structural symbolic interaction framework for the self (Stryker 1980). This view sees self-meanings as directly and undeniably tied to the social structure. Gender is particularly well suited to this type of structural analysis, as the definitions of gender have wide-ranging interrelations with social structures in a variety of forms (Risman 2004).

### *Identity*

The core conceptual component linking structure and the self for our social-structural frame is identity (Stryker 1980). The concept of identity, the self, comes in a variety of forms (Burke and Stets 2009). For this study, we will limit our definition of identity to the set of expectations and meanings an individual holds that relate to a role they occupy, a group membership they hold, or view of their self as a unique person. Thus, the self has multiple, simultaneous, identities that mutually influence each other (Burke 2003). The self-meanings one has about being gendered often expressed as what it means to be masculine or feminine, represent one particular identity. Gender expectations and views have wide ranging and often intimate interrelations with social interactions and structures (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Gender, like a handful of other identities such as age or parental status, has the ability to influence a wide range and variety of other self-meanings, expectations, and situations. As such it is considered a diffuse

identity (Carter 2014) or a “master identity” (Stets and Burke 1996). For instance, Burke and Cast (1997) found that one’s self-meanings related to being masculine or feminine influenced how they chose to parent their children and their willingness to adapt to different parental situations. These connections between identities are complex and operate in multiple contexts (Burke 2003). In another study, Burke (1989) found that the level of masculinity or femininity affected one’s performance in school. The more feminine the gender identity, regardless of self-identifying as boys or girls, the higher the academic performance (GPA).

These self-meanings are critical to understanding situational interaction as they set a frame for individual behavior and emotion to occur through interactions. Identity Control Theory (Burke and Stets 2009), helps conceptualize the mechanisms by which identities influence action. According to Identity Control Theory (ICT), the meanings an actor attaches to a role, group membership (social), or as a fundamental part of their personhood (e.g. moral, happy, etc.) define the identity standard for that person in that situation. The identity standard sets the guidelines for what is appropriate in the situation for that person. This standard acts like a temperature setting on a



Figure 1. Photo by Janae Teal and Meredith Conover-Williams

thermostat, informing what each person expects themselves and others to do in a given situation. For instance, one's view of themselves as more or less masculine can influence their perception of the legitimacy of themselves and others in a situation (Burke and Stets 1996). Holding a highly masculine view of the world, and one's self, has shown that there is an expectation of leadership in task oriented groups and a devaluing of the work from more feminine colleagues. Our views on gender have large and tangible impacts on multiple interactions (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Understanding the set of self-meanings one has about one's self as a gendered self will be our first step towards understanding perceptions and behaviors regarding different gender specific topics.

### *Gender Display*

Each person's set of meanings and expectations ultimately leads to what ICT calls an output (Burke and Stets 2009). This output is a behavior relevant to the situational context. For example, as noted in the Burke (1989) study, those who see themselves as more feminine may perform worse on standard measures of academic success. In a separate study, it was shown that higher masculinity was related to increased use of humor as a legitimating tactic in group interactions (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Drass (1986) found that the more a person was "male-like" the more likely they will interrupt and dominate conversations. Whether with academic performance group management or another context, our gender self-meanings influence our outputs.

This output behavior elicits a response from others in the situation. Structural symbolic interactionism does spend some time on the explanation and nuance of "outputs" however, other approaches may be more useful in representing the depth and complexity of behavior, particularly in regards to gender. In order to get a better understanding of the reality

of behavior, we turn to Goffman and the dramaturgical school of analysis (Goffman 1978). Goffman's notion that "all the world is a stage" and his analysis of how all individuals present themselves in everyday interactions, like actors in a play, paints a wonderful image of how gender is performed. Analyzing behavior as a series of front stage performances or displays is a strong analytical frame for understanding gender outputs. Gender displays occur in this front stage and are informed by a culturally defined set of guidelines based on normative gender roles. Displaying one's gender is a critical element for replicating gendered structural systems. Goffman (1976) defined these displays as such: "Gender is to be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex...then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates." (P.1)

These ritualized displays and interactions are simultaneously guided by and help to create these gender categories. Wallis (2001) applied Goffman's frame for gender displays to an examination of stereotypical gender roles shown in music videos. By so doing she demonstrated how these "correlates" to sex roles played out in popular culture and media and, in turn, influenced self-understanding of gender and interactions.

These displays, as highlighted by Goffman, do not occur in a social vacuum (Goffman 1976). There is an "environment" consisting of other people, symbols such as language and dress as well as resources like food, water, money and power that are all operating within larger structures with positions, culture, norms, definitions and the like. Our gender displays are situated and contextual. They are influenced by broader definitions of gender in the culture at large. There is a notion of what is "normal" or what conforms to the gender definitions that come with membership in social structures. These general social meanings become specific displays through interaction. Despite being a part of everyday life, gender is nothing simple.

### *Perceptions and Appraisals*

Displaying gender does not end the process of interaction. Structural symbolic interaction suggests that once a behavior and reaction has occurred, participants interpret their own display from the point of view of others in the environment. This process of taking the role of the other, also known as reflected appraisals, is a key element to human interaction (Burke and Stets 2009). It is this mechanism, according to Mead and Morris (1934), that allows for effective communication and interaction to occur between individuals. One can understand what is meant by words and behavior because one is able to take the role of the other. Individuals use verbal and nonverbal gestures of others as a mirror to perceive their own action. Cooley (1983) also highlighted the centrality of this reflective process through his use of a looking glass self. Society, writ large, as well as, others in small interactions, serve as looking glasses through which people can see their own actions reflected and by doing so adjust themselves and behavior.

The feedback one gets from others, through these appraisals, is constantly evaluated to see if it fits with the self-meanings one has for their identities in that situation (Stets and Burke 2005). If it does not match, negative emotion is likely to occur and this will likely result in the person taking action to correct this mismatch. Take for example Pascoe's (2011) analysis of the use of homophobic terms as a means to insult self-identified heterosexual high school boys. In these cases, the use of gendered and sexualized language was used to reflect different gender meanings to individuals than those that they held for themselves. These boys held self-meanings that aligned with a masculine view of "men". The language and interactions that utilized homophobic words served as reflections on those self-meanings. As such they were used to police masculine norms and customs in this environment. This was accomplished through the production of negative emotions in these

boys and, ultimately, resulted in modification of gender displays to fit a particular norm appropriate for that situation.

The identities that individuals hold are difficult and slow to change with each person more likely to change behavior (output/displays) than self-meanings (Burke 2006). For instance, to return to Pascoe's (2011) analysis, one who identifies as masculine may be more likely to respond in confrontational ways (e.g. physical violence, verbal confrontation) when called out by peers as a "wimp" "sissy" or "fag" rather than change their definition of masculinity to something different. Similarly, those who identify as masculine may utilize humor or interruption tactics to gain legitimacy within a group dynamic when challenged, rather than redefine their role in the group and/or change the underlying definition of masculinity (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Changing the definition of a situation is a difficult and unlikely response, as it requires both individuals, small group, and societal commitment to occur. Identities form over extended years of socialization, individual life histories, and countless interactions with significant others, culture, and society as a whole (Carter 2014). As the cycle of identity creation and maintenance occurs, self-meanings become more and more important to our views of the world. They are embedded in deep conceptual frames and schemas (Piaget 1952) about what the world is and one's place in that world. These deeply held schemas and identities allow for organization and more efficient processing of the world around us. Changing them can call into question norms and entire worldviews that individuals live by and require large cognitive and emotional investment. This level of change, though certainly possible, can be difficult to achieve in a social structure working to maintain normative expectations.

Given that underlying identities are slow to change, so too are the patterns of interaction that make up social structures (Stryker 1980). Self-meanings and expectations come from and help



create a system of patterned social practices that make up a social structure. The resulting structure establishes rules for interaction, and perceptions, that allow for categorizing people based on their perceived gender, and for ordering the world in certain ways. For instance, Basford, Offermann, and Behrend (2014) found that there are discernible differences between those that identify as men or women in perceptions of discriminatory and aggressive acts against other people. Women were more likely to notate discriminatory acts than men especially when they were more nuanced in nature. The differences in perceptions arise, in part, because categories of gender are not equal in access to resources or status (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Gender is not merely a system of how I view myself, but also a systematic set of social practices and cultural meanings that organize people into unequal categories based on perceived differences that are constantly reinforced through, often, intimate and personal interactions (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).

### *Doing Gender*

Although our notions about gender may allow for us to organize the world in ways that make situations more manageable, the act of being and maintaining one's gender is constant work. Gender is more than a display, a structure, a process of identity or a set of meanings; it is an active and ongoing accomplishment. Individuals are constantly doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1986) in their every interaction or role they play. Doing gender is more than performance, it is an ongoing and recurring "accomplishment" that requires work to create and maintain. To do gender is to perform, verify, invent, and embody gender identity in a situated and structured world. It involves a complex and multi-layered set of constant interactions, norms, guides, roles and the like that span nearly all contexts and situations. It is the work of maintaining these identities. Accomplishments occur within a cultural and

institutional set of meanings and serve "both as an outcome of and rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions in society" (West and Zimmerman 1986:126).

Doing gender is not simply one thing, it is a set accomplishment of a set of meanings that underlie multiple roles and identities and lead to gendered performances, perceptions, emotions and behavior based on what it means to be gendered. Though the self-meaning that underlies a performance of gender may be slow to change, it is not a static concept, but rather a dynamic and ongoing accomplishment. As Jody Miller points out doing gender "provides a means of bridging the agency/structure divide in a way that allows theorists to go beyond constructing women (and men) as simply passive victims of structural conditions." (Miller 2002:434) We display gender and verify its meaning through situational contexts and reflected appraisals. It is a structure unto itself and a highly individualized part of what it means to be a member of a society. These concepts can help us understand its role in some detail, though they cannot represent the breadth of gender's influence in our lives.

The literature on the self and gender has a long, varied and robust history, however, can constantly be expanded, and refined, particularly within the context of shifts in the larger macro structures of society, such as marriage and public policy. This work will attempt to join and further the discussion on gender and the self by bringing together the conceptual frames of identity, gender display and doing gender, to analyze different non-conforming gender situations. It will mix concepts from different but related lines of thought from structural identity theory to Goffman's theory of social theater and performance, along with the work of doing gender help paint a vivid picture of gender relations, meanings, behaviors and the self.

## Research Questions

Given the frame we have set above, we begin by exploring the relationships between identities, gender displays and doing gender. We do so by asking about the relationship between self-meanings and people's comfort and flexibility with different, non-conforming gender displays. If self-meanings are central to one's view of the world there may be some difference in comfort with that world when it does not fit in the normative structure of gender relations. Given recent charged discussions in the U.S. culture at large regarding gender and gender fluidity as shown in the debate over same-sex marriage and laws related to restricting transgender communities, understanding how identities and perceptions relate seems poignant. We focus on understanding how identities influence one's display of and acceptance for different, nontraditional gender displays within different situations. Beyond this, we explore more deeply the influence of doing gender in different ways. We ask if one's willingness to personally engage in nontraditional gender identities, or to "do gender" differently, related to their perceptions of inclusiveness and safety in their localized communities. By looking at these questions, we go deeper into the reflections that individuals see in their community and how those might be change based on their performance of gender.

In this exploratory study, we do not propose any specific hypotheses in, however, we do suspect that as one's self-views regarding gender are more in line with their sex assignment at birth, and the cultural norms as a whole, the more uncomfortable they will be with gender displays that are different than those norms. Furthermore, it may be that within our gender social structures, that the more likely one is to display gender in non-conforming ways, the more likely they would be to feel less safety and inclusiveness in their community.

## Methods

We collected data through an online survey distributed to 900 college students enrolled at a mid-sized university on the west coast of the United States. The sample population of students was gathered by the institutional research office which created a list from the total student body of approximately 8,500 enrollees. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent via email with two follow-up reminders over the course of two weeks. The data collected was then coded and inputted into SPSS for further statistical analysis.

Overall, 192 students responded to the survey for a 21.3% response rate. Of those who responded, 66.7% (n=128) reported being assigned as female on their birth certificate with 32.8% (n=63) answering "male" and .5% (n=1) indicated an intersex designation at birth. The percentage of women who answered the survey was larger than the population of the university as whole (women = 57%). The mean age of participants was 23.8 years old with a minimum age of 18 and max of 60 years old. The sample population, as is to be expected, skewed younger with 89.2% of respondents under the age of 30. The majority of respondents (74%) reported having 60 or more college units, indicating a young but college experienced respondent pool.

The survey instrument focused on student perceptions of gender, gender non-conformity, and the current state of gender equity on campus. Questions regarding student perceptions of self and others were constructed using the conceptual framework of identity theory, gender displays, and doing gender, as well as, borrowing from the Gender Self-Perception Scale (Kasabian 2015). The survey was designed collaboratively in partnership with students engaged in an undergraduate sociology course offering. The invitation was written and came from students in this course.

### *Gender self-meanings*

As Westbrook and Saperstein (2015) pointed out in their review of surveys that ask about gender, asking about one's gender identity can be a difficult exercise. In our case, in order to try and understand the concept of gender identity we utilized respondents' self-reported levels of masculinity and femininity. Six total questions were presented to participants asking them to rank how masculine and feminine they felt today, overall for the past week and overall for the past month. For each time period (day, week, and month) two separate scales were offered one for level of femininity and one for masculinity. For the purposes of this analysis, we did not analyze the differences between respondents' daily, weekly, and monthly masculine and feminine score. An average score was computed for both feminine and masculine across all time periods in order to create two composite variables for average masculine and average feminine scores, respectively. In addition to the masculine and feminine scales, individuals were asked to declare their sex as assigned on their birth certificate as well as whether they self-identified as gender non-conforming. These variables are also utilized in understanding aspects of gender self-meaning.

### *Gender Displays*

In order to operationalize the participant's responses to non-traditional gender displays, a set of questions was posed presenting different situations involving displays, by others, of gender non-conformity. Prior to answering these questions, gender non-conformity was defined for respondents as such:

"We would like to ask you a few questions regarding your experience with gender non-conformity. Gender non-conformity involves a person not conforming to the typical societal gender norms or standards."

There were five questions in total that asked respondents to rank their comfort level with: 1)

working with someone, 2) having a supervisor, 3) taking a class from an instructor, 4) working in a group with someone, or 5) having a family member who is gender non-conforming. These scores were averaged together in order to create a variable measuring average comfort with gender non-conforming displays by others.

### *Doing Gender*

Two questions were utilized to gauge respondents' willingness to "do gender" in different ways. These questions asked participants to rank: 1) their comfort level with being in a romantic relationship with someone who is gender non-conforming, and 2) their comfort with being recognized as gender non-conforming. These questions asked the respondents to rate their comfort with personally enacting gender in ways that are non-conforming. The answers to these were averaged to create a single, composite variable for analysis.

### *Inclusiveness and Safety*

Several variables were utilized to gauge student perceptions and experiences of inclusiveness on campus. First, a series of questions asked students rate their level of agreement with experiences related to different acts of disrespect based on gender. Specifically, students were asked if they have experienced any overt or covert disrespectful comments that were directed at them, based on gender from either students or faculty on campus. The answers to these items were averaged to create a new composite variable indicating experiences based on gender.

Participants were asked to rate how safe the campus is for gender expression, as well as, whether the university did "enough" to support gender expression. The relationships between these variables were analyzed using Pearson's correlation tests to evaluate for statistical significance and strength of relationships. We



will describe some basic frequencies on our survey variables followed by an analysis of theorized relationships between self-meanings, perceptions, 'doing gender' and experiences.

## Results

Over 80% of respondents indicated that they are comfortable situations involving gender non-conforming displays (Table 1). As can be seen, overall there is strong agreement among respondents that for situations involving work, family, and friendship respondents reported feeling comfortable with displays of non-conforming gender by others. In each of these situations, the mean comfort level for these five measures combined was 4.74 ( $n=192$ ,  $SD=.62$ ). The range of answers was narrow with a minimum mean score of 4.68 (family) and a max mean score of 4.76 (working with and taking a class). Each of the situations presented was intended to gauge respondents comfort levels with different gender displays by others. The respondents were not asked to place themselves in a role associated directly with a gender non-conforming identity. This combined average score will be our measure of comfort with gender displays.

On the other hand, when asked about more personal displays of gender non-conformity, respondents indicate less comfort. The mean level of comfort reported for being in a romantic relationship with someone who is gender non-conforming was 3.36 with a median score of 4 ( $n=192$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ). Although skewing higher, the average was 1.4 points lower than comfort with displays by others. In this case, the respondents were asked to go beyond their thoughts about general social acceptance, to express their views about placing themselves into an intimate and personal role with someone who is gender non-conforming. There is a commitment of the self, needed to accomplish this level of involvement that is different than what is asked in the broader social situations.

Similar to levels of comfort found in response to romantic involvement with someone who is gender non-conforming, respondents also showed lower comfort levels with being recognized as gender non-conforming. Comfort level being recognized as gender non-conforming averages to 3.33 ( $n=192$ ,  $SD=1.4$ ) with a median score of 3. This is approximately 1.4 points lower than combined average comfort with gender displays in social situations. Like with the question about romantic relationships, this measure asks respondents to place themselves in a role that is being personally recognized as gender non-conforming. When we combine the scores from these two questions, the resulting average level of comfort with these calculates to 3.35 ( $n=192$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ). This composite average will be utilized as our measure of "doing gender" differently.

Generally, students expressed that they felt the university is a safe place to express gender. On average, students scored 4.06 and 3.69 for feeling safe for themselves, and other students, respectively on a scale of 1 (totally disagree) through 5 (totally agree). The median score for both of these variables was 4. In terms of whether the university does enough to support gender expression, students reported a lower level of approval to this question with a mean score of 3.16 ( $n=190$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ) and a median score of 3. In these cases, similar to the measures of comfort regarding gender displays versus personal involvement, there is a marked difference between whether respondents feel safe, which is more personal, and the more outward directed variables of whether they believe others are safe to express their identity or whether the university is doing enough to support the community at large.

Most students also indicated that they had not experienced acts of aggression from student or faculty either covert or overt related to their gender identity. Overall, students reported an average score of 1.43 on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) when asked if

they had experienced disrespectful comments about themselves based on gender.

### *Self-Meanings (Identities)*

Respondents reported slightly higher levels of femininity than masculinity. Looking first at measures of self-ascribed masculinity and femininity, we see that the respondents' overall average masculine score was 3.18 ( $n=191$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ), slightly lower than the overall feminine score of 3.59 ( $n=191$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ). Given that 66.7% of respondents indicated a female assignment at birth, it is, perhaps, not surprising that sample population would skew towards a more feminine score. We examined the relationships between sex assigned at birth and masculine/feminine scores, and see that for those who indicated a female gender category, there was an average feminine self-rating of 4.29 ( $n=128$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) and an average masculine score of 2.55 ( $n=128$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). Similarly, for male respondents, the average feminine score was 2.13 ( $n=62$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) and masculine scores averaged to 4.49 ( $n=62$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ).

A majority of students (80%) indicated some level of gender non-conformity as part of their gender identity. Overall, 31.8% indicating that they identify as gender non-conforming while 47.9% identified as somewhat gender non-conforming. Only 7.8% responded as not defining themselves as gender non-conforming while 12.5% indicate they were unsure. We examined the relationships between these different scores of self-meaning utilizing a Pearson correlation test, and found that average masculine and feminine scores did show a statistically significant correlation ( $p<.001$ ;  $r=-.784$ ), but that self-identification as gender non-conforming was not significantly related to either masculine nor feminine scores ( $p = .610$  and  $p = .559$  respectively). This may indicate that asking about self-identification as 'gender non-conforming,' does not measure the same underlying set of self-meanings as does asking

about masculinity and femininity. Given the apparent distinctness of this variable, it is excluded from measures of self-meaning going forward.

There does not appear to be a relationship between measures of masculinity and femininity, and comfort levels in social situations, where gender non-conformity is displayed. As shown in Table 2, utilizing a Pearson correlation, we detected no significant relationships between masculine and feminine scores and average comfort level in these social situations ( $p=.54$  and  $p=.94$  respectively). These results indicate that there exists no statistically significant relationship in this sample between gendered self-meanings, as expressed through masculinity and femininity ratings, and comfort with social situations involving others displaying gender non-conforming identities. Given the overall high level of acceptance with the displays of gender non-conformity by others expressed by respondents, this result of no relationship is not unexpected.

If we turn to the variables regarding 'doing gender' (romantic relationships + self-recognition), we see that there is also not a statistically significant relationship between both masculine or feminine scores, and this variable ( $p=.08$  and  $.36$  respectively). In this case, a person's self-meanings as masculine or feminine do not appear to be related to their comfort level with either being a relationship with someone who is gender non-conforming, and/or being recognized as someone who is gender non-conforming. This result, assuming these are adequate measures of self-meaning and behavior, seems counter to the notion that self-meanings are connected to comfort with displaying different behaviors.

We do see that these two variables of comfort with gender displays and comfort with doing gender differently are positively correlated ( $p <.001$   $r = .517$ ). This indicates that, as comfort with displays of gender increase, so to do comfort with doing gender differently and vice versa. The fact that these two variables are

Table 1. Comfort with Non-Conforming Gender Displays

|                   | I would feel comfortable working with someone who is gender non-conforming? | I would feel comfortable taking a class from a gender non-conforming instructor? | I would feel comfortable working for a supervisor who is gender non-conforming | I would feel comfortable if a member of my family was gender non-conforming | I would feel comfortable being a close friend with someone who is gender non-conforming | I would feel comfortable being in a romantic relationship with someone who is gender non-conforming | I would feel comfortable being recognized as someone who is gender non-conforming |
|-------------------|---|--|--|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 1.0%  | 1.0%   | 1.0%   | 2.0%  | 0.5%  | 18.2%   | 13.8%   |
| 2                 | 1.0%  | 0.0%   | 1.5%   | 2.6%  | 2.0%  | 12.5%   | 13.3%   |
| 3                 | 3.1%  | 5.7%   | 4.6%   | 4.1%  | 4.1%  | 18.2%   | 25.5%   |
| 4                 | 9.7%  | 8.3%   | 9.2%   | 7.1%  | 8.2%  | 17.2%   | 17.3%   |
| Strongly Agree    | 82.7%   | 84.9%  | 80.6%  | 82.1%   | 82.7%   | 33.9%   | 28.1%   |
| Mean              | 4.76  | 4.76   | 4.72   | 4.68  | 4.75  | 3.36  | 3.33  |
| Median            | 5   | 5  | 5  | 5   | 5   | 4   | 3   |
| N                 | 191   | 192  | 190  | 192   | 191   | 191   | 192   |
| SD                | 0.66  | 0.65   | 0.72   | 0.84  | 0.68  | 0.68  | 1.504   |

related could indicate that they are connected to similar underlying constructs that are not captured by the masculine and feminine scales.

Similar to the comfort level with different situations, there appears to be no significant relationship between respondents' gender self-meanings and perceptions of safety and inclusion on campus. As indicated in Table 2, no statistically significant relationship exists between self-views on masculinity and femininity and perceptions of the university's level of inclusiveness and/or safety related to gender issues. Furthermore, there was no statistical relationship between self-meanings of masculinity and femininity and experiences of disrespect on campus due to gender ( $p=.994$  and  $p=.152$ , respectively). The lack of relationships in these cases may indicate that the questions utilized to get at underlying gendered identities are not adequate. Gender self-meanings are likely more nuanced than masculine/feminine scales can capture. Masculinity and femininity are abstract and, perhaps, too broad to uncover the underlying gendered self-views of respondents, as well as, the relations to perceptions and experiences.

#### *Displays, Doing Gender and Perceptions*

We next examined what relationships exist between one's comfort with gender non-conforming displays, doing gender differently, and perceptions of the campus safety and inclusion. Being comfortable with non-conforming gender displays appears to be related to perceptions of gender inclusiveness on campus. As demonstrated in Table 2, the results indicate that one's level of comfort with gender displays is statistically related to whether they feel the campus does enough to support gender expression ( $p<.001$ ,  $r = -.347$ ), and whether they agree that campus is a safe place for students to express their gender identity ( $p<.05$ ,  $r = -.160$ ). Both relationships are negative in direction indicating that as one's comfort, with displays of non-conforming gender, increase their

agreement that the campus is safe and inclusive decreases. Agreement that the campus is a safe place for respondents to express their own gender identity was not related to comfort with non-conforming gender displays in a statistically significant way ( $p=.217$ ). These results seem to confirm earlier that measures asking about comfort in different social situations, and campus culture more broadly, are directed towards gender as a social topic and less about personal views about self-meanings and gender.

Comfort with doing gender differently was also significantly related to both feelings of safety and inclusion on campus broadly, as well as a respondent's personal sense of safety. These are represented in the Table 2. As can be seen, all the correlated relationships are negative indicating an inverse relationship. As one's comfort level for personal displays of a gender non-conforming identity increase, levels of perceived safety, for, both, self and others, as well as, perceptions about campus inclusiveness decreases. There is a distinct and personal view of the university as less safe and inclusive for this group. It seems more than social acceptance, it is about personal experience.

#### *Doing Gender and Experiences*

In addition to relating to one's perception of safety and inclusiveness, comfort with doing gender difference was also related to their experiences of subtle and overt disrespectful comments based on gender ( $p <.001$ ,  $r=.278$ ). Unlike the relationship with perceptions of safety and inclusiveness, this correlation is positive indicating that as one's comfort increases with doing gender differently, the likelihood that one has experienced disrespectful comments based on gender is increasing. It seems that these results indicate a significant relationship between one's willingness to perform non-conforming gender roles and their experience with the university environment.

Table 2. Correlations Table: Identity, Gender Displays and Doing Gender

|   | Masculinity             | Femininity | Comfort with Non<br>Conforming<br>Displays | Comfort with<br>Doing Gender<br>Differently | Campus Does<br>enough to<br>support gender<br>expression | Campus is a safe<br>place for students<br>to express my<br>gender identity | Campus is a safe<br>place for me to<br>express my<br>gender identity | Experiences of<br>disrespect on<br>campus |
|---|-------------------------|------------|--|---|--|--|--|---|
| Masculinity   | 1                       | -.784**    | -0.127                                     | -0.11                                       | 0.098  | 0.008  | -0.021   | -0.001                                    |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.000      | 0.08                                       | 0.129                                       | 0.18   | 0.91   | 0.776  | 0.994                                     |
|   | N                       | 191        | 191  | 191   | 189  | 190  | 190  | 190                                       |
| Femininity  | Correlation Coefficient | 1          | 0.067                                      | -0.034                                      | -0.009   | 0.072  | 0.109  | -0.104                                    |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0          | 0.36                                       | 0.644                                       | 0.901  | 0.32   | 0.135  | 0.152                                     |
|   | N                       | 191        | 191  | 191   | 189  | 190  | 190  | 190                                       |
| Comfort with Non<br>Conforming Displays                                 | Correlation Coefficient | -0.127     | 1  | .517**                                      | -.347**  | -.160*   | -0.09  | 0.09                                      |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.08       | 0.36                                       | 0.000                                       | 0  | 0.027  | 0.217  | 0.214                                     |
|   | N                       | 191        | 191  | 192   | 190  | 191  | 191  | 191                                       |
| Comfort with Doing Gender<br>Differently                                | Correlation Coefficient | -0.11      | -0.034                                     | 1   | -.400**  | -.283**  | -.184*   | -0.09                                     |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.129      | 0.644                                      | 0.000                                       | 0  | 0  | 0.011  | 0.011                                     |
|   | N                       | 191        | 191  | 192   | 190  | 190  | 191  | 191                                       |
| Campus Does enough to<br>support gender expression                      | Correlation Coefficient | 0.098      | -0.009                                     | -.347**                                     | 1  | .646**   | .482**   | -.275**                                   |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.18       | 0.901                                      | 0   | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0   |
|   | N                       | 189        | 189  | 190   | 190  | 190  | 190  | 190                                       |
| Campus is a safe place for<br>students to express my<br>gender identity | Correlation Coefficient | 0.008      | 0.072                                      | -.160*                                      | -.283**  | 1  | .688**   | -.304**                                   |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.91       | 0.32                                       | 0.027                                       | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0   |
|   | N                       | 190        | 190  | 191   | 191  | 191  | 191  | 191                                       |
| Campus is a safe place for<br>me to express my gender<br>identity       | Correlation Coefficient | -0.021     | 0.109                                      | -.184*                                      | .482**   | .688**   | 1  | -.357**                                   |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.776      | 0.135                                      | 0.011                                       | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0   |
|   | N                       | 190        | 190  | 191   | 190  | 191  | 191  | 191                                       |
| Experiences of disrespect on<br>campus                                  | Correlation Coefficient | -0.001     | -0.104                                     | 0.09  | .278**   | -.304**  | -.357**  | 1   |
|   | Sig (2 tailed)          | 0.994      | 0.152                                      | 0.214                                       | 0  | 0  | 0  |   |
|   | N                       | 190        | 190  | 191   | 191  | 191  | 191  | 191                                       |

\*\* p &lt; .001

\* p &lt; .05



Unlike asking directly about self-meanings, we see that when asking about the act of gender we uncover difference among respondents about their experiences and perceptions. It may be that asking for specific reactions to defined situations requires a greater level of engagement with the underlying meanings of gender that individual's hold. It is a distinctly different question to ask if someone feels they are masculine as opposed to whether they would date someone who does not identify with the gender binary. Both seek to understand the individual's understanding and views about gender, but the abstract nature of the masculine and feminine scale may be a more difficult question to tie directly to gender views.

## Discussion

The results from this study show that gender is a complex and nuanced concept. Contradictions in personal views of self and others were indicated in a variety of different results. Respondents indicated an overall acceptance of gender non-conforming displays, but less comfort with personal displays of non-conforming gender identities. One's self-views regarding their perceptions of masculinity and femininity seemed to have little relation with their perceptions about different social situations, including their experiences of safety. This appears to be somewhat out of line with the notion that self-meanings directly relate to perceptions of situations. With that being said, it may be that this type of abstracted questioning is, in fact, too broad and vague to truly get a person's view of self as gendered. A key component of thinking of identity is to get at the right level of analysis to understand self-meanings and their effects on other variables. More research is needed to understand what the underlying factors are in this case.

Being comfortable being recognized as gender non-conforming and/or being in a romantic relationship with someone who identifies as gender non-conforming was related

to not only a sense of social justice, but personal experiences and beliefs based on gender identity. Those who step away from typical gender categories in more personal ways saw the world as less safe and inclusive than those who showed less comfort with being outside the gender binary. This difference could have important consequences as it highlights the fact that 'doing gender' differently is not the same as proclaiming acceptance of non-conforming identities. The lived experiences and perceptions of those outside the typical gender identities are distinctly different than those who stay more within the bounds of defined gender roles.

More work is needed to tease out these concepts into more defined analytical components. Furthermore, additional research is needed to dive deeper into the self-meanings, particularly regarding the fluidity and dynamism of gender. Most research, and to a degree this research, assumes both static and binary definitions of gender. The data collected here seem to indicate there is more at play with the concept of gender than self-meaning and verification. More should be explored into the notion of gender as an ongoing accomplishment. It may be that gender identities operate simultaneously on multiple levels. The way "I" perceive my gender socially, relationally and individually, are supported by the literature as distinct from each other (Burke 2003). This multiplicity in levels of gender self-understanding would explain the discrepancies between reported comfort with others' gender nonconformity versus one's own. Further research is needed in order to explore and test whether this is indeed the case. Other conceptual frames may also help in analyzing these data such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This may help provide clarity to the influence of power and gender identity in perceptions of safety and inclusion by focusing on the normative structures of masculine patriarchy. The data gathered in this exploratory study highlight the gaps in understanding surrounding the dynamic

reality of gender that goes beyond merely masculine/feminine scores. It may be that understanding how fluid one views one's self as regarding these self-views is critical to understanding their lived experiences.

### Limitations

This study focused a small and relatively homogenous population. As such, these findings are far from generalizable to the overall population, but relevant for the sample (university students) under study. It is possible that some students may have self-selected in or out of the study given the introductory letter that indicated the survey topic of gender and the experience of gender identity. Further research would help to discern this selection bias, if any, in the sample. More work is needed to explore these ideas further and their application in different forms of analysis. This research should pay close attention to how questions of the self are formulated. Additionally, this work has mixed several different conceptual frames. As such, it has not, perhaps, given any single one of these the depth of analysis that it would call for in looking at gender. Certainly more work is needed to expand and deepen the analytical framework set forth here, both in terms of data and concept.

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