

# What Is It like to Have a Gender Identity?

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By attending to how people speak about their gender, we can find diverse answers to the question of what it is like to have a gender identity. To some, it is little more than having a body whereas others may report it as more attitudinal or dispositional—seemingly contradictory views. In this paper, I seek to reconcile these disparate answers by developing a theory of how individual gender identity comes about. In the simplest possible terms, I propose that gender identity is how we make sense of our gender subjectivity, the totality of our gendered experiences of ourselves. Gender identity is constituted by gender subjectivity, but this constitutive relationship is underdetermined. While gender subjectivity may narrow the range of inhabitable gender identities, it is always compatible with more than one. To arrive at a gender identity, we arrange gender subjectivity like building materials. My theory helps us understand how different people offer seemingly incompatible accounts of their gender identity without questioning their authenticity or validity. They simply arrange similar building materials differently.

## 1. Introduction

How shall we make sense of the different constitutive accounts people offer of their gender identity? To one, gender lies in the body she was born in. To another, gender could be teased out of her youthful preference for dolls and dresses. Yet another preferred playing with plastic soldiers but recognized her womanhood in the dysphoria that spilled out of some parts of her body. As for me, I share the latter's dysphoria yet cannot say I share her womanhood. For every person who sees an experience as indicative of gender identity, countless others deny it. But no amount of denying can prevent that first person from feeling that their experience is indicative, if not constitutive, of their gender identity. Can harmony be found among such conflicting accounts of how gender identity comes to be known?

In this paper, I offer a theory of the constitution of gender identity that seeks to reconcile these accounts through the notion of gender subjectivity. I have coined the notion of gender subjectivity to refer, in rough terms, to the sum of individuals' gendered experiences of themselves. My core thesis is that gender identity is constituted yet underdetermined by gender

subjectivity. Gender identity is constituted by gender subjectivity through a process of phenomenological synthesis. However, this process is under-determined because particular gender subjectivities are psychologically compatible with multiple gender identities. To use an architectural analogy, gender identity is the form of the building whereas gender subjectivity is its material. Although the building is constituted and made possible by its material, it is impossible to infer what the final building will look like merely from its input material. Unlike buildings, however, the constitution of gender identity is an ongoing process. Because gender subjectivity is always in evolution, gender identity reflects a dynamic equilibrium rather than a static endpoint. Furthermore, the relationship between gender identity and gender subjectivity is bilateral. Gender identity can cause changes in gender subjectivity. Phenomena may be experienced as more strongly or weakly gendered because of one's gender identity. Impressing itself upon gender subjectivity, gender identity may be further consolidated. Or, on the contrary, previously inconspicuous gendered experiences may grow in salience through their encounter with gender identity, causing a shift in the latter.

Gender identity can be understood in two ways. In its narrower and more common sense, gender identity refers to simple gender self-categorization as a man, woman, non-binary person, and so on. In this first sense, people would share the same gender identity insofar as they all self-categorize as men. To use the language of the architectural analogy, gender identity is a matter of form. In its broader sense, gender identity can be further understood as having a shape that includes the grounds of gender self-categorization, the strength of one's identification, and the totality of feelings about self-categorization. Gender identity can be felt as stronger or weaker, notably by reason of the apprehended strength and cohesiveness of gender subjectivity. Gender identity refers to both the form and the substance of the building. In this latter sense, each person has their own unique gender identity though they form groupings around gender categories. For the purposes of this essay, I understand gender identity in its narrower sense except as stated otherwise, such as where I speak of subtle shifts in gender identity.

My theory of the phenomenological constitution of gender identity through gender subjectivity helps us understand how different people offer seemingly incompatible accounts of their gender identity without questioning the authenticity or validity of their accounts. Under this theory, it is possible for a cisgender woman to understand herself as a woman *because* of the body she was born in without suggesting that transgender women are any less women because of the bodies they were born in. Of note, self-understanding as a woman amounts to a gender identity

although someone may claim to *be* a woman rather than *identifying* as one. Similarly, a transgender woman may understand herself as a woman *because* of her toy and clothing preferences as a child or *because* she has bodily gender dysphoria without suggesting that gender-conforming behaviour or embodiment makes the woman. Because the psychological synthesis of gender subjectivity into gender identity is particular to the individual, accounts of gender identity that would be stereotyping or bioessentialist if universalized remain acceptable at the individual level—voiding of all exigency the temptation to question the validity or authenticity of anyone's gender identity.

I intentionally depart from previous attempts at theorizing gender identity that positioned transgender people as different or as uniquely in need of explanation (cf. [Tate, Youssef, and Bettergarcia 2014](#)). My theory is neutral in this respect, with gender identity being constituted in the same manner regardless of whether the person is transgender or cisgender. I am of the view that the psychological differences between transgender and cisgender people are largely overstated. While cultural ideologies and societal processes of gender categorization play a significant role in shaping gender subjectivity and, thus, the resulting distribution of gender identities, these are differences of degree rather than kind.

This paper does not discuss membership within gender categories nor the ethics of respecting people's gender identities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that, for example, trans women are women—although it is something that I believe and that has been defended in other publications ([Bettcher 2009; 2012](#); [Diaz-Leon 2022](#); [Hernandez 2021](#); [Jenkins 2016](#); [Julia Kapusta 2016](#)). My account of gender identity's constitution is agnostic in this regard, except to the extent that it could be integrated with an account of gender categorization in the future. Offering such an account is beyond the scope of the present paper.

In §2 of the paper, I describe the concepts of gendered experiences and gender subjectivity. In §3, I explain how gender subjectivity constitutes gender identity in an underdetermined manner. In §4, I reflect on some of the advantages of my theory and relate it to previous attempts to conceptualize gender identity.

## 2. Gendered experiences and gender subjectivity

I remember a warm summer's day in the suburbs. My younger sister, beloved as she was, took out a small plastic pool to give her dolls respite from the heat. She filled the minuscule pool with the chlorinated water from the adjacent human-sized pool. No more than a cup of it filled it

to the brim. Sitting on the rugged concrete, her right leg in the water and her left crossed underneath her, she turned to me asking if I would play with her. I believe she would have been around five or six years old, but I am not certain. I looked upon her pleading eyes, as thoughts raced in my head. Having just reached adolescence, I knew that I was considered not only too old for these toys but also, far more gravely, improperly gendered. I could not admit to taking pleasure in playing with dolls, such a feminine toy, without casting aspersions on myself. However, I also knew that my mother, who was sunbathing on a lounge chair nearby, expected me to entertain my younger sibling. If I refused, my sister might whine and fuss. Shielded by conflicting familial and societal expectations, I accepted her invitation with inner delight.

Some time passed—I cannot remember how long—before she took out cheap, plastic make-up brushes that she was gifted as toys rather than artistic implements. They were purple like the toy pool and she asked me if she could ‘do my make-up’. I nodded as she began crudely mimicking the application of make-up on my eyes, cheeks, and lips using pool water. She displayed little concern for the appropriateness of implements used to apply different types of cosmetics, selecting brushes more by whim than reason. The bristles felt extraordinarily soothing on my skin. As she meticulously massaged my visage with water, I basked in the momentary bliss of feeling utterly cared for. A shiver went down my spine, radiating outwards through my skin. So ends my memory.

In my adult years, I have often reflected upon this vivid memory from my youth. I cherish the memory though it would have embarrassed me had it become known to peers at the time. Reminiscing, I apprehend the memory not only as treasured but equally as deeply gendered. I have sometimes held onto this memory as evidence of my femininity, of my propensity towards activities coded as feminine. I remember—or, at least, believe I do—thinking that my enjoyment of such feminine activities was a part of myself to be hidden. Younger, however, I remembered the event as a behavioural happenstance that, though it was understood socially as feminine, did not leave any generalized impression of femininity on my character. The picture is only further muddied by my inability to tell conclusively whether any of my enjoyment lay in the gendered activity itself. One of my regrets today is not having grown closer to my sister as a child. Perhaps it is nothing more than the reminiscence of a fleeting moment of sibling intimacy, its gendered phenomenology having been inserted by my adult self later on. Memory is notoriously fickle. Yet desire for emotional intimacy and belonging-with girls are, too, coded as feminine—the spectre of gender is inescapable.

The picture I have drawn here is mundane. It belongs to the trivia of everyday life and stands indistinctive in the ranks of countless other moments, banal and grandiose alike, where we experience aspects of ourselves as gendered— whether they are gendered by others, by ourselves, or by both. As we navigate a hostile world, we encounter regimes of gender that impose themselves onto us, casting a gendered lens on our affects, attitudes, behaviours, mannerisms, relationships, appearances, and bodies. Such experiences are what I call ‘gendered experiences of oneself’. This expression captures how our affects, attitudes, character, cognition, behaviours, mannerisms, relationships, appearances, and bodies are experienced as relating to our gender, including as feminine, masculine, androgynous, female, male, manly, boyish, girly, womanly, unisex, genderqueer, butch, masc, femme, and so on. Through these encounters, we can come to recognize aspects of ourselves as gendered from the outside, that is, we recognize that others view aspects of us as gendered, and/or from the inside, as we internalize schemes of gendering and ascribe a gendered nature to aspects of ourselves. The experiences are thus often simultaneously gendered and gendering, the self standing as both a subject and object of gendering. Not everyone will ascribe a gendered nature to themselves, however. Anecdotally, many agender people report a lack of self-gendering experiences.

Gendered experiences are infinitely diverse. An exhaustive mapping lies far beyond the scope of this work. I nevertheless wish to highlight several of them to emphasize their ubiquity and diversity as well as guide further reflections on gender subjectivity and gender identity. To feel some ways about the prospect of being grouped with men; to feel other ways when certain pronouns, nouns, adjectives, or gender labels are used in referring to oneself; to perceive one’s body as female; to apprehend one’s gender role as masculine; to experience gender norms as applied or applicable to oneself; to relish one’s sexiness and apprehend it as gendered; to experience gender dysphoria or gender euphoria when looking in the mirror; to desire different gendered body parts or relish those one has; to feel masculine; to desire being perceived as androgynous; to enjoy confusing people’s attempts at gender categorization; to perceive one’s mind as feminine; to prefer activities associated with boys; to have gendered peer preferences; to wish one were or were not treated as or like a woman; to wish one was born in a different body; to feel as though one belongs neither with men nor women—each of these are gendered experiences.

To say that an experience is a gendered one is not to say that it is gendered as opposed to being racialized, class-based, and so on. Gendered

experiences are intertwined with other social categories such as race, disability, sexual orientation, and class (Carbado 2013; Crenshaw 1991). Gender cannot be disentangled from race in misogynoir, for instance (Bailey 2021; Bailey and Trudy 2018). Race and racism are fundamentally implicated in gender formations, even when the person is unaware of it (Spillers 1987; Bey 2017). And as Eli Clare (2015, p. 143) points out, '[g]ender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class'. Gendered experiences are not solely about gender, but reflect the multi-faceted nature of human experience.<sup>1</sup>

Gendered experiences may be characterized by the strength, unambiguity, and consistency of their gendering. Whether the experience is felt as strongly or weakly gendered, ambiguously or unambiguously gendered, or consistently or inconsistently gendered across time and context is material to the uptake of the gendered experience in the process of constituting gender identity. The psychological salience and accessibility of gendered experiences mediate their role in constituting gender identity. It is also material whether the gendering is externally imposed and whether it flows from the internalization of schemes of gendering, as one's psychological traits may attribute greater or lesser importance to others' perception.

Gendered experiences are not static. While past experiences are largely fixed—though prone to memory biases, forgetfulness, and re/interpretation—they do not invariably predict future gendered experiences. Thus, someone who once disliked being referred to as 'she' may not feel the same in the future. While gendered experiences often demonstrate stability over time, there is no unbreakable promise against change. Trauma, among many other things, can alter one's relationship to social norms, interpersonal interactions, the body, or past experiences (Clare 2015, pp. 143ff; Meadow 2018, p. 90). Besides chronological changes, gendered experiences may also vary situationally, relationally, or temporally. Feelings about being grouped with men may depend on the context: basketball or softball? Someone may feel masculine with their male romantic partner and feminine with their non-binary romantic partner. Gendered clothing preferences may vary daily, ebbing and flowing in cognizable patterns or chaotically. While this account presupposes access to gendered

<sup>1</sup> I leave for others the question of whether the proposed account of gender identity could be applied to other identities such as racial identity, disabled identity, sexual identity, or class identity and whether doing so would offer valuable insights. There are meaningful differences between each, and I prefer not to speculate beyond the bounds of my expertise and experiences.

experiences, this access need not be ongoing nor amount to knowledge. Pre-reflective awareness at the time it was first integrated into gender identity suffices.<sup>2</sup>

What is the genesis of gendered experiences? Applying a phenomenological analysis, I bracket—temporarily suspend judgment about—this question to focus on experience. However, gendered experiences appear to me far easier to explain than gender identity, if the latter were to be understood as an irreducible property of persons. Whereas gender identity may seem unique or queer among psychological phenomena, gendered experiences appear on the contrary to be rather mundane. Take the earlier example of enjoying playing with dolls while recognizing it as a feminine activity according to societal norms. Is that not the most banal, everyday of experiences? If I leave the genesis of gendered experiences unexplained, it is because I am confident that it is much like other experiences that also lie unexplained. If I were to guess, I would suggest that gendered experiences arise from the complex intertwining of biological and environmental influences. Among those influences, social norms and ideologies are sure to play a role.

Returning to our phenomenological lens, we notice that the gendered nature of experiences is not a pure given but may be influenced by reflection and conscious endeavour. Reflecting upon gendered experiences, we are sometimes able to alter our impression of their gendered nature, to influence the saliency of different gendered experiences, and to abandon internalized schemes of gendering and view the gendered nature of the experiences as wholly external. Endeavouring to self-create, we may also shape future gendered experiences by shaping how we relate to the object of our experience, not to mirror a pre-existing sense of self but to craft it for ourselves. As expressed by [Ashley and Ells \(2018, p. 24\)](#) in the context of transgender embodiment, '[c]reativity is one of the manifold ways in which we may assert ownership over our bodies, transforming them into an art piece that is truly ours out of previously alienating flesh'. Like labouring over a painting for years, the act of self-creation may generate a unique relation and attachment to objects of gendered experiences.

The totality of our gendered experiences is gender subjectivity and forms the basic substrate of gender identity. It is the material from

<sup>2</sup> Although experiences that a person has forgotten or is otherwise unaware of may indirectly shape their gender identity, for example, by spawning trauma responses and coping mechanisms, indirect influences of this kind do not function as gendered experiences *per se*, under the theory being proposed, but rather shape other gendered experiences.

which gender identity is shaped. Drawing on the vocabulary of existential phenomenology, gendered experiences are part of facticity. They are a given, a matter of fact. But they are not who we are. Rather, it is the stance we take towards our facticity, how we interpret it, that defines who we are as gendered beings, as individuals with a gender identity.

### 3. Synthesizing gender identity

Gender identity is constituted yet underdetermined by gender subjectivity. Taking gender subjectivity, we undertake a phenomenological synthesis from which results gender identity, our self-conception as belonging to one or multiple gender categories. This process is constitutive. As the architect arranges material into a building defined by its form, so does phenomenological synthesis arrange gender subjectivity to constitute gender identity. Yet the process is also underdetermined, gender subjectivity always being compatible with multiple gender identities. Experiencing gender euphoria towards a body socially coded as female, while often interpreted in favour of womanhood, is wholly compatible with understanding oneself as a man or a non-binary person. Depending on who is doing the interpreting, many alternative gender identities may feel plausible, or a few, or one, or none. Nor is a building static—the architect may choose to add, remove, or reorganize rooms or rework the façade during renovations. Neither the form of the building nor its constitutive material is invariable. From gender subjectivity, it is impossible to predetermine the resulting gender identity. However, the underdetermination of gender identity should not be understood as implying the indeterminacy of gender subjectivity. If gendered experiences were indeterminate, lacking in interpretive value, gender identity could not be constituted by gender subjectivity. It would be a roll of the dice. It is precisely because gender subjectivity is perceived as meaningful, as constraining interpretation, that phenomenological synthesis is possible and gender identity may result.

That the relationship between gender identity and gender subjectivity is both constitutive and underdetermined follows from extending the teachings of existential phenomenology to gender identity (Sartre 1943). Existence precedes essence. We do not have an inbuilt sense of gender identity that precedes our existence, that we are born with. To hold otherwise would mean denying our agency. We are always more than the sum of our experiences. We are, to use famous words, condemned to be free. Phenomenological synthesis overcomes underdetermination, taking gender subjectivity and constituting gender identity



out of it. This is not to say that phenomenological synthesis is ‘chosen’ in the sense of having conscious control over the result, however. The constitution of gender identity is largely a spontaneous and pre-reflective process, one over which we have as little (or as much) control as we do over whether we find an argument convincing or a book entertaining.

Briefly abandoning our architectural analogy for a literary one, it may be helpful to think of gender identity as a form of narrative identity (Schechtman 2011; Velleman 2005). In interpreting a story, the critic looks to cognizability, consistency, coherence, and countless other markers to draw out meaning (Abbott 2008). Meaning is not intrinsic to the text—the interpreter makes meaning, drawing from their own character and values to form a sense of what interpretations make more or less sense, are more or less valuable. There is a rationality to interpretation. Not all interpretations are equally plausible. Yet interpretations of a text are plural, with no two interpretations of the same text being quite identical.<sup>3</sup>

Often, the process of constituting gender identity may be understood as positing a gendered essence that explains gender subjectivity as a manifestation, consequence, or by-product. In this pre-reflective mode, an essence is presumed from which existence may flow. Gender subjectivity is apprehended as evidence of a pre-existing gendered essence which may take many forms including gender identity, brain sex, bodily form, gender assigned at birth, social gender role, or gendered socialization. These gendered essences may be cast in essentializing terms, such as the ideas of ‘being born a woman’ or ‘being born in the wrong body’ but they need not—these accounts are hardly representative of the complexity, nuance, and diversity of gender identities. Through phenomenological synthesis, a gender identity is adopted that imbues gender subjectivity with meaning. In deliberately oversimplified terms, we could imagine the process as the psyche asking: ‘Which gender category would make the most sense out of my feels?’

Like gender subjectivity itself, phenomenological synthesis arises from an infinitely complex array of factors that belongs to the minutiae of individual psychology. Your attitude towards authority; your political and ideological leanings and commitments; your attachment to gender norms; your regard for bioessentialism; your desire to fit in; how much you weigh recent versus long past experiences; the relative emphasis you place on self-perception as opposed

<sup>3</sup> But literary texts are relatively static, unlike gender subjectivity—a limitation of the analogy.

to others' perception of you; your degree of risk aversion; your attitude towards consistency, uncertainty, and ambiguity; your belief in self-creation; how much you view a given gender identity or gender modality<sup>4</sup> as desirable or undesirable—all these play a role in how you pre-reflectively evaluate your gender subjectivity and constitute a gender identity out of it. Since these factors may intersect with other identities, gender subjectivity and the distribution of gender identities may differ across social groups. For instance, autistic people may afford greater weight to recent, ongoing experiences and less to social norms, leading to a higher likelihood of being trans (Jackson-Perry 2020; Walsh et al. 2018).

For the same gender subjectivity, different architects will select different columns as load-bearing based on personal predispositions. Whereas some trans people link their gender identity to bodily discomfort and dysphoria, others do not experience gender dysphoria nor desire medical transition. Though there may be no hard and fast rules, I suggest that affect in relation to gender categorization, belonging-with, gender labels, and pronouns, as well as experiences of gender euphoria and gender dysphoria, are often load-bearing among trans people, playing a central role in the constitution of gender identity, whereas external gender categorization, gendering of the body, and the application of gender norms are more often load-bearing among cis people.

Although I write of the synthesis of gender identity as a largely pre-reflective process, reflection can play an integral part in the process. Elements of gender subjectivity may be consciously dismissed, acknowledging the gendered experience but discounting its relevance to gender identity for theoretical reasons. Some persons offer theoretical reasons for holding gender identities. Robin Dembroff (2018; 2020) has argued in favour of inhabiting non-binary identities as a form of resistance against dominant gender norms. I have anecdotally observed cis and trans women alike emphasize feminist and self-protective reasons for identifying as a woman. A survey of people who re-identified with the gender they were assigned at birth, conducted on anti-trans blogs, cited political and ideological concerns as a leading reason for their shift in gender identity (Stella 2016; Urquhart 2021). However, I wish to emphasize that reflection of this kind may fail to influence the constitution of gender identity regardless of the strength of the belief.

<sup>4</sup> Gender modality refers to how one's gender identity stands in relation to their gender assigned at birth (Ashley 2022).

We cannot theorize ourselves into a gender identity willy-nilly, though gender identity may indeed follow.<sup>5</sup>

Gender identity so produced may be situational, temporal, and relational beyond the situational, temporal, and relational nature of gender subjectivity itself. People may view their gender subjectivity through a different lens depending on the context. The factors influencing phenomenological synthesis are not so rigid as to preclude context sensitivity. As Talia Mae Bettcher points out, the usage of gender categories like ‘woman’ varies across sub/communities (Bettcher 2012). Indexing their beliefs and attitudes to context, individuals may synthesize their gender subjectivity into different gender identities. Let me provide a concrete example. A friend, reflecting upon hir experience of pronouns, recently shared with me hir experience of different identities: ‘For me, she/her fits with Sam/Samantha The Professional, or Samantha The Daughter, rather than Sam or Sammy The Agender Femme (who is my preferred person!)’<sup>6</sup> While the contextuality of gender identity is difficult to separate from the contextuality of gender subjectivity in this passage—something I will return to later—the notion of multiple consciousness offers a point of entry towards understanding. In ‘When the First Quail Calls: Multiple Consciousness as Jurisprudential Method,’ famed Critical Race Theory scholar Mari Matsuda explained the labour of perspective-taking among law students and lawyers of colour as they navigate a hostile and oppressive legal world, sometimes adopting the viewpoint and values of the dominant legal culture while at other times inhabiting their unavoidable understanding of the oppressiveness of that very culture (Matsuda 1989).<sup>7</sup> Salient in multiple consciousness is that it is not mere pretend. In that moment, the viewpoint is internalized, is adopted as your own even if it does not reflect your ‘preferred person’—to use Sammy’s terms. Multiple consciousness need not always be a defensive psychological mechanism nor strategically deployed, however, and may reveal more banal forms of perspective-taking. Perhaps the plainest example

<sup>5</sup> Some readers may find it helpful to consider this point through the notion of alief. Alief refers to the sort of belief-like attitudes that may lead someone standing on a transparent balcony to experience fear despite knowing that they are safe (Gendler 2008). Since belief does not entail alief, careful reflection leading to a change in belief may fail to produce a corresponding shift in alief and, thus, gender identity.

<sup>6</sup> Name chosen by the friend to preserve anonymity.

<sup>7</sup> Matsuda’s notion of multiple consciousness holds important echoes of W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1897) notion of double consciousness and Frantz Fanon’s (1951) vivid description of experiencing himself as a Black man. Multiple consciousness is however broader in that it does not speak solely of the dual first-person and third-person self-consciousness that results from anti-Blackness, but of human capacity for perspective-taking more generally.

is the phenomenon of associative regression, popularized in the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, whereby individuals hanging out with people from their past begin thinking and acting as they used to back then (Fryman 2008). Even more banally, you may have experienced yourself thinking and acting in a more restrained or mature manner in certain settings—experiencing not only a change in behaviour, but a genuine change in conscious perspective as a result of context. A commonplace psychological phenomenon, multiple consciousness may also operate a contextual shift in gender identity for some.

Gender identity is dynamic rather than static. Gender identity may demonstrate substantial consistency and stability across one's lifetime, but this should be understood as a dynamic equilibrium rather than a crystallization. Gender identity is continuously made, remade, interpreted, and reinterpreted as one's gender subjectivity changes shape. New gendered experiences or changes in the factors influencing phenomenological synthesis may lead to noticeable or subtle shifts in gender identity alike.<sup>8</sup> Periods of significant change in gendered experiences, such as puberty and the onset of dementia, carry elevated likelihoods of noticeable shifts in gender identity (Baril and Silverman 2019; Kennedy 2020). To give but one example of what I have in mind, it is harder to have gender dysphoria about one's breasts before having breasts (although the prospect of having breasts may already be dysphoric).

Where significant psychological stress results from inhabiting one's gender identity, the gender identity may be increasingly felt as unstable or uninhabitable, precipitating a reassessment. Observing significant gender dysphoria while identifying with the gender you were assigned at birth is one such example, the experience of gender dysphoria clashing with the assumption that you should not experience it to such a distressing or impairing degree if the gender identity is well-suited to you. In the process of reassessment, examined and unexamined beliefs may be called into question—like belief in bioessentialism or the belief that transition isn't possible for you (Lavery 2020; see also Urquhart 2021). This process frequently precedes epiphanies of being trans and/or non-binary (Kennedy 2020).

Conceiving gender identity as dynamic does not entail that conversion practices—external attempts to change or discourage trans people's gender identity—are effective. The constitution of gender identity through gender subjectivity is a complex phenomenological process that is noticeably resistant to deliberate influence, as shown by research on

<sup>8</sup> By subtle shifts, I am here referring to the broader sense of gender identity.

the consequences of conversion practices (Turban et al. 2019; Wallace and Russell 2013). To use yet another analogy, the direction of a car may be changeable at the driver's whim, adapting to the realities of the road, but that does not mean crashing into it is an effective or safe way of changing its direction. Because gender identity is understood as a core element of the self, conversion practices instead lead to psychological harm and may have the opposite effect on gender identity, leading to entrenchment in reaction to the threat.

While I describe gender subjectivity as constitutive of gender identity, the relationship between the two is bidirectional. As we begin building a sense of self around a gender identity, whether provisional or settled in equilibrium, our feelings may adjust (Halim et al. 2018; see, for example, Losin et al. 2012; Slaby and Frey 1975). When requesting that others use new pronouns for you, you communicate how you wish to be seen and what it means to respect you. The use of other pronouns or feeling misperceived may sting even more. Homing in on an understanding of your gender identity can shift the lens through which you view the world, altering both the meaning of gendered experiences as well as influencing your perception and affect related to gendering. People may also develop new experiences of body dysphoria and phantom sensations as they psychologically attune to a new gender identity. Changes in how others treat us due to changing bodies, gender expressions, names, and/or pronouns are a further process through which gender identity alters the shape of gender subjectivity, albeit mediated by the externalization of that gender identity (Marvin 2015).

Gender identity may also influence the process of phenomenological synthesis itself. Psychological commitment to a gender identity may lead to confirmation bias and favour particular interpretations of past events. While, upon reflection, I am unable to ascertain whether my attachment to the memory of playing with dolls and make-up with my sister is due to my affection for her or evidence of feminine-coded preferences, I have frequently interpreted it as evidence of the latter in order to shield my sense of gender identity against perceived external threats of cisnormativity, transnormativity, and transmisogyny. Despite the negative connotations of the term 'bias', these phenomena are psychologically mundane and inhere equally in trans and cis people—if not more in the latter. All narrative identity relies on cherry-picking and selective re/interpretation of the past; such retconning is no more inauthentic or disingenuous when pertaining to gender than in other facets of narrative identity.

In the simplest possible terms, gender identity is how we make sense of our gender subjectivity. Gender identity is constituted yet

underdetermined by gender subjectivity. Gender subjectivity, the totality of our gendered experiences, is interpreted through the process of phenomenological synthesis, resulting in a sense of gender identity. The constitutive relationship between gender identity and gender subjectivity is complex and multidirectional yet psychologically ordinary.

#### **4. Some advantages of the theory and relation to previous conceptualizations of gender identity**

The first and foremost advantage of my theory is that it makes sense of divergent accounts people give of their gender identities and helps explain why people with similar gender subjectivities may inhabit different gender identities (Lee 2001). No gender subjectivity is unavoidably or necessarily connected to any given gender identity. My theory avoids relying on essentializing notions such as brain sex while also avoiding portraying trans people as uniquely prey to gender norms or stereotypes. Gender norms and stereotypes are integral parts of all gender subjectivity, although not necessarily internalized. The theory also allows us to distinguish gender identity from gender dysphoria, gender euphoria, and feelings towards gender labels, gender belonging, pronouns, names, and peer preferences while recognizing the constitutive significance of these experiences. It helps us understand narratives of having always been trans and accounts of having been ‘mistaken’ about being or not being trans in the past, since gender identity and political commitments may influence the interpretation of past experiences. Rather than there being a pre-existing gender essence, gender subjectivity is narratively re/constituted through the positing of such an essence. My theory explains why some people may adopt vivid gender labels like ‘feminazgûl’, ‘trashgender’ or ‘-\_(ツ)\_/’ because of the inability of common labels to capture the nuances of their gender subjectivity (Ashley 2021). And lastly, my theory offers some insight into whether trans people would exist in a hypothetical world without gender: even in the absence of gender identity, gender dysphoria and euphoria would in all likelihood continue to exist and some individuals would continue to undertake what we presently call a gender transition—likely even more.

In this paper, I have developed an account of the relationship between gender identity and gender subjectivity. I have not attempted to define or elucidate at length what kind of stuff gender identity is. In their recent work on gender identity, Katharine Jenkins has identified three conceptions of gender identity: the norm-relevancy account, the dispositional account, and the self-identification account, defending

the first one (Jenkins 2018). According to the norm-relevancy account, a person has a gender identity if they experience the social norms applied to that gender as being applicable to them. According to the dispositional account, someone's gender consists of their disposition to behave in socially gendered ways (McKittrick 2015). In other words, someone has the gender identity 'man' if they have sufficiently many, sufficiently strong dispositions to act in a manly manner. According to the self-identification account, gender identity is sincere self-identification as a member of a gender category (Bettcher 2017).<sup>9</sup> While I have not strictly committed myself to a conception of gender identity and I believe my theory can accommodate any of these accounts, I have presumed something akin to the self-identification account.<sup>10</sup> The dispositional and norm-relevancy accounts strike me as more aptly placed at the level of gender subjectivity than gender identity. Not all people, regardless of whether they are cis or trans, perceive themselves as having the dispositions associated with their gender identity, nor as being interpellated by the gender norms associated with it. While the two accounts identify important gendered phenomena related to gender identity, they mislocate the significance of those experiences.

Critically, I believe that my theory of the constitution of gender identity strengthens the self-identification account and defends it from some of Katharine Jenkins' trans-positive critiques. Jenkins identifies six desirable features of accounts of gender identity:

D1: The definition should render plausible the idea that gender identity is important and deserves respect.

D2: The definition should be compatible with a norm of FPA [first-person authority].

D3: The definition should be compatible with the idea that some trans people have a need for transition-related healthcare that is based on their gender identity.

<sup>9</sup> The definition leaves open the question of what kind of self-identification matters. In previous work, Talia Mae Bettcher (2009) has distinguished metaphysical from existential self-identity, arguing that the latter best explains why gender identities should be respected.

<sup>10</sup> A self-identification account raises the question of whether people who cannot form a gendered self-understanding may nevertheless have a gender (Barnes 2022). Although I do not commit myself to self-identification as the sole basis for gender categorization in this paper, it is worth noting that a self-identification account still allows us to speak of people as being socially situated as men or women without them being men or women, something which notably occurs with many closeted trans people. Nor does it preclude basing some policies or practices on gendered experiences such as misogyny. Thus, it seems possible to address the descriptive concern identified by Elizabeth Barnes by using more precise language while remaining committed to a self-identification account.

D4: The definition should be clear and non-circular.

D5: The definition should apply equally well to binary and non-binary identities.

D6: The definition should combine well with broader critiques of current gender norms and social structures.

Jenkins concedes that the self-identification account meets D2, D4, D5, and D6. My theory maintains these conditions and arguably strengthens them. For example, due to its reliance on phenomenology and gendered experience, my theory may support epistemic authority over one's gender on top of the ethical first-person authority that Talia Mae Bettcher has argued for (Bettcher 2009). According to Bettcher, we do not have epistemic first-person authority over our gender because we lack a strong epistemic advantage over the kind of mental attitude involved in avowing our gender. Given how common self-deception, wishful thinking, and unconscious attitudes are, avowals of gender identity are too fallible to attract epistemic authority. Instead, she suggests that we hold an *ethical* authority over our gender. Through avowal, we assert ownership and responsibility over our gender and others should in return take our professed gender identity as authoritative. If we understand gender identity as phenomenologically constituted, however, there is no underlying fact to compare, no gendered essence about which to be wrong. Though a synthesized gender identity may be uncomfortable or unstable, it makes little sense to think of it as false or mistaken. Given how gender identity comes about, under my theory, an epistemic form of first-person authority over gender may well be salvageable. While I withhold definitive judgment for the time being, the question seems worth revisiting.

While lauding parts of the self-identification account, Jenkins critiques it for struggling to explain why gender identity is important and deserves respect (D1), and for failing to explain the relationship between gender identity and the need for transition-related healthcare (D3). The self-identification account struggles to meet D1 and D3 because it is too 'thin' and fails to spell out why sincere gender self-identification is particularly meaningful.

My theory of the constitution of gender identity fills this gap, explaining the thickness of gender identity by grounding it in meaningful and pervasive experiences of the self as gendered. Gender subjectivity is meaningful insofar as the affects, attitudes, behaviours, mannerisms, relationships, appearances, and bodies to which it relates are imbued with significance. Gender identity matters because we craft it from a substrate that



matters to us. Gender identity matters, *inter alia*, because we experience distress at being misgendered; because we feel like we belong with some rather than others; because we feel strongly about how we are treated due to how our gender is perceived. In the words of Andrea Long Chu (2018), 'I doubt that any of us transition simply because we want to "be" women, in some abstract, academic way. I certainly didn't'. Gender identity, being constituted of meaningful material through a phenomenological process of self-creation, matters. The depth and richness of individuals' gender identity stands in stark contrast with the thinness of what a stripped-down self-identification account has to say about gender identity in general. However, I suggest that it is precisely because gender identities are so nuanced and diverse that few non-minimalistic definitional claims may be made about gender identity. Viewed thus, the deflationary, minimalist nature of the self-identification account may be less of a flaw in the account than an inescapable by-product of the irreducible complexity of gender identities. The complexity of gender identities eludes any other kind of definition.

The need for transition-related healthcare may be explained in a similar manner. Individuals may experience the need for transition-related healthcare by virtue of gender dysphoria, gender euphoria, or creative transfiguration, experiences that are part and parcel of the gender subjectivity from which gender identity is built. Since not all trans people experience gender dysphoria or gender euphoria, or undertake creative transfiguration of their body, not all trans people want transition-related healthcare. And since I have described gender dysphoria, gender euphoria, and creative transfiguration as experiences that precede gender identity, as existence that precedes essence, they are not the sole province of trans people. Some cis people have reported experiencing them and I do not presume to doubt their experience or gender identity (Ashley and Ells 2018). Whether and which trans people should be prioritized in allocating transition-related healthcare is far beyond the scope of my paper, although I want to express discomfort at the prospect of establishing hierarchies of deservedness given the negative consequences of gatekeeping on trans wellbeing (Ashley 2019; MacKinnon et al. 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

Constitutive accounts of gender identity are as varied as the people that express them. In this paper, I have suggested that harmony may

be found between those accounts by understanding gender identity as phenomenologically synthesized out of gender subjectivity, out of our everyday experiences of ourselves as gendered. Because this process is underdetermined, no gender identity necessarily flows from gender subjectivity but it no less flows from it. Understood this way, it becomes possible for someone to ground their gender identity in identifiable gendered experiences without universalizing these experiences into a general account of gender. What ties together accounts of gender identity is not the unending quest for the fount of gender, but the process by which it is made and remade out of gender subjectivity.<sup>11</sup>

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