Examination of Gender Identity and Expression Measures within a Mid-West Sample

Results from the Population-based Gender Identity Measurement Small Research Project

Funded by the Williams Institute, UCLA

Emilia Lombardi, PhD
Swagata Banik, PhD
Katherine Mitchell and Jesper Zuber

7/31/2013
Abstract

Health research examining the disparities faced by gender minorities (transgender, transsexual, and other gender nonconforming individuals) has reached a stage where population based studies are needed in order to expand upon what smaller, community based studies have identified within the population. One of the issues hindering the inclusion of measures needed to identify gender minority populations is the lack of measures that can effectively identify gender minority populations but can be understood by gender majority populations and provide data usable by researchers. This study examined measures that can identify gender identity/gender transition and gender expression by conducting cognitive interviews with 50 people (25 gender minority, 25 gender majority). The interviews asked people to read and answer the questions; afterwards they were interviewed about why they answered the way they did. The gender identity/gender transition question was found to be understood by all participants and only requires small changes to improve its usage. The researchers found gender minority and majority participants to have problems answering the gender expression questions. The results show that the gender expression measures may not be effective when used in a population based study. Researchers conclude that the gender identity/gender transition questions would be effective in quantitative studies and be useful in identifying health disparities among gender minority populations.
There has been much discussion in regards to the need for greater research on the health of transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming people (gender minority for short) in order to address significant disparities experienced by these populations in terms of health care access and outcomes. Both the Institute of Medicine and National Institutes of Health have identified the need for greater research about the health disparities experienced by gender minorities.\(^1\), \(^2\) While many studies have been conducted on various populations of gender minorities, they have consisted of small samples collected through convenience or snowball sampling methods within specific geographic areas. As such, the generalizability of these studies is limited.

Another issue is how gender minority populations are conceptualized and operationalized within these studies. Health researchers have used terms like transvestite, transsexual, transgender, even conflating them with gay and lesbian populations or include them within the population of men who have sex with men without considering gender minority’s unique psychosocial contexts. This has resulted into lack of understanding about adequate and relevant health care needs for gender minority populations. The research literature has utilized a wide range of labels to refer to the same population, while the population itself uses a wider range of labels in reference to themselves.\(^3\) The lack of consistency in how gender minority populations are identified within research also mirrors what is found within clinical settings where protocols tend to focus primarily upon one’s physical sex without consideration about the patients gender identity.

An example of the problems that exist for conducting population level studies incorporating gender minority samples was the Survey of LGBT Americans conducted by the Pew Institute.\(^4\) It identified gender minorities by asking people “Do you consider yourself to be transgender?” They defined transgender as people whose “gender identity or gender expression differs from their birth sex possibly but not necessarily as a result of surgery or hormone replacement therapy”. In comparison, the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) asked if people were transgender or gender
nonconforming in some way in order to be included within their study. The NTDS also asked many follow-up questions in order to better understand the diversity within their sample. One finding is that 65% of their sample would strongly identify themselves as transgender. That result leads to the question of the transgender sample within the Pew report and its composition. What does it mean when people say they are transgender and how different are they from gender minorities who do not identify as transgender.

In understanding the health disparities of gender minority populations it will be important to have a better understanding of the population at hand and how their experiences and expressions will affect their health disparities. For example, Boles and Elifson (1994) identified a population with many health disparities as having a "high commitment to transvestism" which they defined as identifying as female, using female names and always presenting as women. Another study utilizing a broad definition of transgender (people who do not follow traditional gender norms) found those who identified themselves as transsexual were more likely to report economic discrimination and violence. A more recent study found that the social expression of transgender identity (measured by gender identity disclosure and time dressing in female attire) was associated with HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. The implication being that those with a greater social exposure of a gender identity and expression different from what would be associated with their assigned sex will experience greater health disparities.

Gender nonconformity is another concept that could have implications on people’s well-being. The concept gender nonconformity generally refers to the perception that one’s expression of gender is different from societal norms through comparisons with and pressure received by peers, family, and other important members of their social networks. These studies have linked gender nonconformity to experiences of victimization and distress within nontransgender populations. Measures of gender nonconformity would add to our understanding of the stigma and discrimination faced by transgender
individuals who are visibly gender nonconforming but whose gender identity would vary greatly. Such a measure would also be useful in identifying health disparities among those who do not identify as transgender but would still experience stigma and discrimination because of their gender expression.

There has been little discussion within research studies in regards to how to operationalize gender minority status, however, the results do point toward two areas that can be the focus for question development. Socially transitioning from one gender to another represents a socially disruptive and psychologically stressful event as the process involves changing other people’s behaviors and attitudes (needing to use new pronouns and names, needing to acknowledge new gender role). Individuals transitioning will likely experience problems within many social spheres that would lead to greater social and health disparities. Gender nonconformity is also socially disruptive in that many people react negatively to appearance and behaviors that do not correspond to societal norms of gender. Thus, the specific aims of our study are as follows:

1. Examine how gender minority and gender majority populations respond to questions asking about their gender identity/gender transition status.
2. Examine how gender minority and gender majority populations respond to questions asking about their gender expression.
3. Make recommendations in regards to questions to use within population based studies.

The measures being tested are focused on two concepts: Gender transition/gender identity and gender nonconformity. Socially transitioning from one gender to another represents a socially disruptive and psychologically stressful event as the process involves changing other people’s behaviors and attitudes (needing to use new pronouns and names, needing to acknowledge new gender role). Individuals who transition from one gender to another will likely experience problems within many social spheres that may lead to greater social and health disparities. Physical gender nonconformity is
also socially disruptive in that many people react negatively to appearance and behaviors that do not correspond to societal norms of gender.

The proposed study utilizes cognitive interviewing techniques to examine the utility of measures of gender transition/gender identity and gender nonconformity to see if they are effective in identifying transgender populations as well as being usable within gender majority populations. Utilizing both types of measures would allow for a broad understanding of the stigma attached to gender minority populations.

**Methods**

The study recruited twenty-five gender majority and twenty-five gender minority individuals (encompassing a range of gender identities and expressions) age 18 and up from the general population of Cleveland and Akron, OH. Recruitment utilized internet resources, community venues and word of mouth. Participants were informed that researchers were interested in conducting a health survey in the area and that they needed feedback regarding demographic questions that will be used in order to be confident that the questions accurately identify social groups when linking those groups to health issues.

**Interview Activities**

The study used scripted, semi-structured probes and spontaneous probes when appropriate. Participants were asked to read questions out-loud, answer the questions, and explain why they answered the way they did. In addition, participants were asked whether they found the questions to be hard or easy to answer, to define sex and gender or masculine/feminine appearance and mannerisms, and whether they believed their friends and family could answer the question. Additional
questions were asked in regards to people's understanding of the wording of questions (i.e. what does sex assigned at birth mean to you?).

Interviews were conducted primarily face to face within the investigators office or off site in a closed room. Five interviews were conducted online via Adobe Connect (an internet based system allowing people to communicate and to share electronic materials) to allow for those who could not travel to interview sites. In both instances participants were able to read questions (off a sheet of paper or computer screen) out loud, interact verbally with the interviewer, and have their interviews audio recorded. All interviews were conducted by the principle investigator, and audio recordings were transcribed for analysis.

Twenty-five gender majority individuals were interviewed for the study. Of these, 15 were female assigned and 10 were male assigned at birth. Three participants were African-American, and their average age was 32 years (range 19-61). Twenty-Five gender minority individuals were also interviewed. Of these, 20 were assigned male at birth and 5 were assigned female at birth. Three participants were African-American, and their average age was 45 years (range 19-81; removing the 81 year old brought the average down to 43). All participants were interviewed face to face.

*Gender Transition/Gender Identity*

This study tests the measures as identified by the Center of Excellence for Transgender Health.(18) There measure has been a popular choice among many researchers, and a version of this question is used by the CDC in their HIV surveillance program. The two-step measure consists of two questions, one asking about one’s sex assigned at birth and another about their current sex or gender. This measure seeks to identify those whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex, focusing on those who transitioned from one gender to another. However, our understanding of how gender minority and majority populations respond to these measures is still limited. Issues to be examined
include people’s understanding of assigned sex, people’s decisions regarding their choice of responses and how it may be related to their gender identity.

*Gender Nonconformity Measure:*

Wylie, et al. have developed measures that they tested on an adolescent sample. Their measures focus on gender appearance and mannerisms and other people’s understanding of how feminine or masculine they are “on average”. Issues to be examined within this study include people’s understanding of “on average”, and what comes to mind in regards to appearance and mannerism. The utility of the gender nonconformity measure is its ability to capture a wider population of individuals regardless with whether they are gender nonconforming or not. Many studies cited earlier have used similar measures on gender majority populations but not with gender minority populations.

*Analysis*

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed prior to analysis within a dedicated qualitative research program (NVIVO). The principle investigator for the study analyzed the transcripts and initially identified sensitizing concepts and to examine the diversity of reports given by the participants, while subsequent analysis focused on people’s understanding and interpretation of each question. The analysis was conducted separately by gender majority/minority status.
Results

Gender Transition/Gender Identity

1. What is your sex or gender? (Check ALL that apply)
   (1) □ Male
   (2) □ Female
   (3) □ Other: Please specify: _____________________

2. What sex were you assigned at birth? (Check one)
   (1) □ Male
   (2) □ Female
   (3) □ Unknown or Question Not Asked
   (4) □ Decline to State

Gender Minority

What is your sex or gender?

Gender minority participants generally answered the questions as expected by basing their answer on the first question on their gender identity. Participants answered the question using phrases like “female is my gender identity”, “I identify as male”, or simply “I am female”. Nine people utilized the other option, four of which did so in addition to identifying as male or female. The other category was to include a reference to their gender minority status in addition to their identified gender. The ‘other’ category was also used by individuals who did not have a consistent male or female identity (crossdressers and others with a non-traditional understanding of their gender).

All but one participant saw sex and gender as being two different categories. For many gender minority participants, sex referred to one’s biological status and gender referred to one’s identity (internal sense of themselves as men or women). Examples include

- “sex is your biological, ahh, sex according to your physical makeup, where gender is your internal identify of who you are by your own identity.”
- “gender to me is a mental thing, a belief, a feeling, an identification if you will. Ahh, sex is really a strange term. Sex could be sexual orientation, a blend of both genders, it could be who is the bigger gender, or It could be confused with the physical stuff. Sex can be confusing.”
• “I heard a quote a couple of years ago, I don’t remember who it was, but I was told that sex is between the legs and gender is between the ears.”

This distinction influenced how many would answer their questions. When focused on just the first questions some participants would provide two answers, one referring to their male or female identity and the other option to provide additional detail regarding their gender minority status. There were also four responses who defined sex as a behavior: “sex is when two people have intercourse”, “Sex is what two people do”. However, they were still found to answer the question about their sex assigned at birth.

**What is your sex assigned at birth?**

• Everyone was able to answer the question regarding their sex assigned at birth. When asked to define “sex assigned at birth” their answers focused on their anatomical status, with many specifying whether they had a penis or vagina or sex organs, or in some cases DNA. People also mentioned birth certificates as being part of the assignment process. Examples:
  - Interviewer: Can you tell me what “sex assigned at birth” means to you? Ummm, it’s whatever they put down on your birth certificate.
  - Interviewer: Can you tell me ‘what sex assigned at birth’ means to you? It’s what your DNA and chemistry decide to make you at birth.
  - Interviewer: Can you tell me ‘what sex assigned at birth’ means to you? Your sex is assigned at birth due to your genitals.

While there was a clear consensus regarding sex being a biological or legal characteristic (birth certificate), many participants (16) also mentioned that assignment was done by someone else other than self. Approximately two-thirds of the participants described sex assignment as being done by a doctor or other health care provider or generally by another person referred to as “they”. Examples include:

• “Mainly ‘assigned at birth’ means what did the doctor think when they had a look.”
• “It means the doctor’s perception of you sex at birth.”
• “They see that you have the sex organs of a female or male.”
• “What they mark off on your birth certificate. It’s basically what they think you are.”
• “What the doctor determined when he looked between my legs.”
The other participants provided their answer without attribution and focused primarily on their own physical status and biology.

- “The sex you were born as, depending on your genitals.”
- “It’s what your DNA and chemistry decide to make you at birth.”
- “I guess what you were born biologically, male or female.”
- “How our body was formed at birth, whether or not we have the male genitalia, the female genitalia.”

There was a definite consensus among the participants that “sex assigned at birth” referred to one’s biology or physical state at birth, many gender minority people also viewed it as a process being done to them (nonconsensually) rather than a neutral activity. There were two participants who discussed intersexed experiences, but they were still able to answer the questions without any problems.

Gender minority participants were found to answer the questions in the expected manner. Few expressed nontraditional gender identities and expressions, and were still able to answer the questions by utilizing the “other” response category. When asked about making changes to these questions many requested that the gender identity question (what is your sex or gender) only ask about sex or gender and not include both as many gender minority participants found it confusing. Of the two, it would be best to only ask about gender rather than sex, especially when using the additional question regarding their sex assigned at birth. Most gender minority participants preferred having the question asking about one’s gender be asked prior to the question about their sex assigned at birth. One person noted that the questions seem better oriented toward identifying transsexual individuals.

**Gender Majority**

*What is your sex or gender?*

All gender majority participants answered both questions with the same answer; those who answered female (or male) in question one answered female (or male) in question two as well. No one
used any of the other options. Many people said either male or female when answering either question, and others made “I” statements (“I am a female”, “I would choose male”). Participant’s answers were given in a very straightforward manner with very little elaboration.

Gender majority participants were mixed in regards to their understanding of sex and gender.

Ten participants identified sex and gender to refer to the same thing. Examples:

- What is your sex and what is your gender in those questions, I think of it as the same
- When I see the words, uh, sex or gender, I could almost say you could use them as synonyms.
- Personally, I feel that they’re basically the same

Nine participants made distinctions between sex and gender. Examples:

- I think gender is more where your mindset is and, sex is more where your physical features are.
- I believe its sex is biological and gender is what you identify more with.
- Sex, I’d have to say, would be, um, what your reproductive organs are. Gender is probably more where you identify with between the two sexes.

There were also two participants who mentioned that sex can also refer to sexuality or sexual behavior.

Regardless of whether they saw sex and gender as being the same or not, it did not affect how they answered either question.

What is your sex assigned at birth?

Gender majority participants were able to answer the question about their sex assigned at birth. When asked, participants referred to biology (e.g. presence of a penis or vagina) or birth certificate.

Participants were split in regards to their perception of how sex is assigned to people. Ten participants attributed assignment to a physician or other people.

- What the doctor said when you were born.
- It’s what your parents gave you, not necessarily what you identify with.
- What did the doctor say you were, you know, it’s a boy, it’s a girl.
• The way your parents interpreted your birth.

Twelve participants just made reference to biological or physiological characteristics.

• If you were born with, um, male genitalia vs. female genitalia
• Sex assigned at birth means, uh, like your physiology.
• I don’t know, just...my female organs.
• Whatever genitalia I was born with.

Regardless of whether they attributed their assignment to others or not, there was consensus that sex assigned at birth primarily referred to their biological status when born and answered the question accordingly without any problems in understanding its purpose.

Gender majority participants did not have any problem answering the questions and did so in the expected manner (sex or gender and sex assigned at birth were consistent with each other). When asked if they had any problems answering the questions there were those who wondered why we were asking the same question twice, but they realized that it was oriented to capture people with different experiences.

First it sort of took me aback, like, ‘what?’ Why are they asking two different questions? Like would my answer be the same? And then, I realize that, maybe for someone else, the answer might not be the same, and that’s why it’s being asked.

While participants themselves did not have a problem answering the questions, some felt that there might be others who will.

• They would be confused by the second one.

  Interviewer: Okay. By others, who comes to mind? Um, actually my husband, um, uh, who is a perfectly intelligent person, but would look at this and say, ‘why are you asking me that?’
• Maybe intelligence level? Like I said, if they don’t, if they’re just reading it and just, if they’re going through it too fast instead of actually processing what the question is, then I feel like they may misunderstand or misinterpret what it’s really asking.
• I think everybody would answer the questions. I think their response to it, in terms of understanding why it’s asked, would depend on the, each individual and where they are.
• My mom and my aunt and uncle, they’re in their 70s and 80s probably wouldn’t quite understand. They might have an idea, but I don’t think they’d understand exactly what
you mean by sex and gender, and I think they would be very uncomfortable with that, with a question that said ‘sex or gender’.

Others stated that someone whose answers would differ between the two questions may experience some discomfort when answering these questions.

- If I were to have a different gender than my sex, then I might feel really uncomfortable answering it.
- Sometimes people are really scared to...say that they might be something else other than what, what they were assigned.
- Because if you were to, you know, go ahead and put that first one, obviously, you could go ahead and just say, “oh, I’m male.” Maybe you had a sex operation or change into something; you don’t wanna, you know, come back to, or have to explain after answering the second one.
- Um, well, if you were a female assigned at birth, but then, question one was asked second, and you put male, then someone would say, oh, what, like, they might be confused, or it might make the person feel embarrassed to answer that that way...

Gender majority participants were split in regards to changing the order of the questions (seven participants for either. Those who did not want the order changed felt that asking people about sex assigned at birth first would confuse people.

- I wouldn’t be quite sure what I was being asked, and I’d also start to over think why I was being asked it.
- To see question two as first about what sex was I assigned at birth, um, I guess it would have caught me a little bit more by surprise.
- It’s good the way they are, starting off with the question that’s very familiar

Those who wanted the change referred to the time order of the questions with sex assigned at birth preceding people’s current sex or gender.

- If you asked this first, it’s, you could almost expect to be asked what your sex is now if you are first asked ‘what was your sex assigned at birth.
- Maybe it would be, it might be better to flip them around. Interviewer: Why? I guess, I think, was thinking just more in terms of timeline.
- Because birth is first, and then, if your...mind catches up and things change.

While there was not a consensus in regards to whether the order should be changed, individuals were still able to answer the questions.
Gender Nonconformity

1. A person’s appearance, style, or dress may affect the way people think of them. On average, how do you think people would describe your appearance, style, or dress?

2. A person’s mannerisms (such as the way they walk or talk) may affect the way people think of them. On average, how do you think people would describe your mannerisms?
   - Very feminine
   - Mostly feminine
   - Somewhat feminine
   - Equally feminine and masculine
   - Somewhat masculine
   - Mostly masculine
   - Very masculine

Appearance and Mannerisms

People’s responses, regardless of gender population group, generally mirrored their gender identities. If they espoused a female (or male) identity their responses were predominately within the feminine (or masculine) range of appearance and mannerisms, but there were some exceptions. Among the gender majority group there were three people with female gender identities who found their mannerisms to be somewhat masculine, and one of these women also stated having a somewhat masculine appearance. Other than the small number of exceptions, participants’ responses (regardless of majority or minority status) were consistent with their gender identity. It’s important to note that most participants (gender minority and gender majority) did respond as the question. Many gender majority participants still saw a problem in that other people’s perception can vary between people and contexts.

Issues regarding contextual variation in one’s answers were discussed in both groups. Participants who crossdressed stated how their answers would vary depending on their gender expression at the time.

- I think the answers are somewhat…hard to decide as to what you are without thinking about it for a while, unless you act feminine…a lot…or you act feminine and masculine. Uh, I belong to a
group of, uh, dressers, and at that point you’re... you try to be as female as possible. Uh, once I put my other clothes on, I try to be as masculine as possible.

• I guess you could say a typical day, but you could go one day from dressing the way someone may think is very masculine to what someone may think as very feminine, you know?
• There are going to be some girls who are very sporty and athletic, so they might say that they dress mostly masculine, or very masculine, and then very feminine, obviously, for girls who think they’re girly girls, but I think it’s very, um...uh...it’s hard, ‘cause sometimes these words are, like, ‘what defines being feminine?’ ‘What defines being masculine?’
• Because not everyone has the same definitions of what’s the most feminine and what’s the most masculine.

One gender majority participant mentioned how gendered appearances can change over time and different generations could have different definitions.

in the seventies, things really started to, uh, relax, and it was like that, and women started wearing trousers to work, and they started to, you know, changing their suits from skirts to, uh-uh, trousers and jackets... and women started wearing jeans more often. You know, my mom didn’t, I wasn’t allowed to have a pair of jeans until I was in high school. You know, girls just didn’t wear those, you know.

Asking People to Assess Their Gender Expression “On Average”

Wylie, et al (2010) advised adding the phrase “on average” to limit the uncertainty people had in assessing their appearance in regards to the time and context in which people make their assessments.(19) However, that did not prevent that problem with some participants. Among the gender majority sample many spoke of the different groups and times that can affect their answers.

There were seven comments regarding how one’s answer is dependent on a particular group or time period.

• As far as average, I mean that’s, just, I guess you could say a typical day, but you could go one day from dressing the way someone may think is very masculine to what someone may think as very feminine.
• On average, let’s say, we had twenty people, where would I range? And some, like, I would think that some people would say ‘very masculine’ and, uh, these maybe would be, uh, some more, quote, unquote girly girls, or something like that, they would say, ‘oh, very masculine’ and there would be some guys that, uh, compared to me, some, like, people would say that they dress very masculine compared to me, and, uh, I would think that those would be the ones that say I dress more effeminate.
• When you’re around somebody that he would consider really masculine, you tend to act more masculine, you’re around people that are really feminine, you—you can, um, tune yourself to that as well. Um, but this is just like, on average, and this might go towards, uh, also just saying, uh, uh, maybe even what kind of people you hang out with?
• With my group of girlfriends, I’ll probably be, you know…Well? ...Sometimes I’ll be really obnoxious with them, but then there’s times I’m with a bunch of guys, where I’m, like, really crazy with them too, so, I don’t, I don’t know, but then, then there are moments where I’m not, so...(laugh) it changes all the time. It fluctuates, and if I fluctuate, then the average is going to fluctuate

When asked how people assessed their average approximately half of responses made by the gender majority sample were in reference to a general other, culture/stereotypes, or even their family or friends (appearance 14/24 responses; mannerisms 17/24).

• Well, on average, I just say like the social stigma. It’s usually what people go by, you know. Stereotypes. How society is in that point in time.
• I just thought about, like, the extremes of how I’ve heard people react to my appearance? And, um, tried to find the balance in between, or, uh, tried to find like, what is used most frequently.
• Just applying what I know, being raised in Ohio, seems to be a pretty average, it’s my take on pretty average look at, uh, at, um, say, things nationally or whatnot, so I just kind of apply what I know and where I was raised.
• The same as before. Um, again, this stage in my life, I act fairly, I have a fairly typical way that I act in public and people, um, over the years, and people watching, observing people’s reactions to me and having conversations, you know, uh, I was able to form some sort of average in my head.
• Oh, I thought about, um…what my spouse and what my close friends and what my work colleagues would say, um…and...that was where I was headed with the somewhat feminine and then I balked, and I bumped it to mostly feminine.

There were some that just focused on their own assessment (appearance 11/24; mannerisms 7/24).

• On average I wear jeans or sweat pants (laughs). There’s only, like, one day a week I dress up and look very feminine, so on average, I would say mostly.
• Most of the time, what I usually wear. And then, I usually wear...probably jeans, you know, t-shirt, or a hoodie, that’s why I said…but it’s colorful sometimes, so I said somewhat feminine, but not masculine.
• Average, I think about, in this case, I think about, like, the past, like, week like what have I done...different.
• I just kind of thought about, like, how, like in the question, it says ‘walk or talk’, um, how I sit, um, like, stuff, um, yeah, stuff like that, how I sit and how I act, like overall.

The gender majority sample were generally split in making attributions to others or themselves about their appearance, but more made attributions to others when asked about their mannerisms.
Compared to the gender majority sample, the gender minority group made more attributions (in regards to what?) to oneself than others (appearance: 12/24 attributions to self, and 8/24 attributions to others; mannerisms: 13/24 attributions to self and 5/24 attributions to others). Some of the self-attributing comments participants made when asked how they came to their sense of average include:

*Interviewer: How did you come to your sense of average?*

- I dare someone to say I look masculine. Laughter. I mean, I don’t see how I could be possibly be perceived as anything other than very feminine.
- How did I come to the average? Well, I mean, it’s average to me. I appear as a woman every day.
- What’s the average? Umm, well, again, I tend toward the feminine and, so, I think, in general, that is how people would see it.
- Oh, on average, OK. OK, for my average, how do I think people, well I guess kind of my own self-perception to a degree.

An aspect that was more relevant to the gender minority sample was the concept of “passing”, whether or not other people can identify them as gender nonconforming in some way.

- People hesitate actually to use pronouns around me so, so it’s based on that.
- Well like when I’ve gone out with folks, and a, like in a social setting, this hasn’t happened in quite a while. I’ll come out to them as trans, and they’re like ‘no way.’ (laughter) So I evidently do pass.
- The majority of the pronoun used to address me is kind of the way I answered it.

*Uncertainty due to context and interpretation*

Another barrier for people was their ability to interpret how other people assess their gender appearance and mannerisms. A woman who expressed masculine appearance and mannerisms identified an issue in regards to how different people could have different perceptions about gender and the uncertainty that can cause.

How do people perceive me? And I also just go off what I always hear…. I think it was, I think, I think it can be hard, because you don’t always know how you act like. You may feel that, like I could feel that I was very masculine, that I was just hard core, but other people around me could feel that, um, you know, I was just equally feminine or masculine, so, because I want to be, or it could also be where you want to lie on it.
Gender minority participants also voiced uncertainty in regards to how they are perceived.

- I would hope when I’m wearing work clothes, I would hope that some form of femininity comes out. When I’m not in work clothes, when I’m dressed to go out or something, I would hope that they would think, mostly feminine, if not very feminine.
- If I represent that as female, totally female, I hope I pass.
- I’m gonna say that I am hopefully somewhat feminine, is how I’m going to hope that most people see me, where I’m really kind of hoping that everyone sees me as very feminine.

**Difficulty in answering the question**

Many participants, both gender minority and gender majority, found these questions difficult to answer not only for themselves but potentially for others. The perception would be that some people would be confused by the wording and purpose of the question.

- Gender minority: I think if I just had a high school education, it’d be kind of hard to understand these questions.
- Gender minority: I had to think about it a little more. I wouldn’t call it hard, but a little harder than the other question.
- Gender majority: People like things black and white, and so, maybe a couple members of my family might be…confused
- Gender majority: There are a number of people who… I know a number of people who, uh, would want to have a better understanding of the background of why this question is being asked… For what reason do you need this information?
- Gender majority: I think that most people that I…am closely associated with, or related with, would understand and respond to the questions. I also know people that I’m associated with who would be clueless as to the origination of the questions and what they really mean.

A few gender minority participants reported that these questions caused them some distress due to the need for them to think about how others may perceive them.

- I would really like to be perceived as mostly feminine and yet I know I’m not, and so these questions are probably touching on insecurities that, that I have.
- A person’s that either trans or very insecure about themselves or, umm, a person who is very insecure about themselves would have a very hard time answering this question. **For what reason?** They, a person who is trans and/or a person who is insecure, I’m trying to keep those as separate people, the reason they would have a hard time is trans, well, an insecure person would have a hard time answering this question because they, I want to say shallow, but shallow is not exactly it either, they don’t feel comfortable with who they are, and they don’t know how to change, or maybe they do know how to change, but they can’t change fast enough.
One gender minority participant recalls a negative experience as they discussed this question.

Uh, I’ve even had one girl take one look at me, and just crack up hysterically, laughing, and I just went ‘huh?’ and I bowed down, and I whispered to her, I says, ‘you know it’s not nice to do that to a person’. I’m presenting as female... and you obviously perceive me as a male dressed in women’s clothes. I take this seriously. I’m not a joke.

Gender minority populations will likely experience many problems in regards to how society responds to their gender expression and identity. These problems or the fear of it may affect how gender minority people respond to the questions about how they feel other people see their gender. The questions’ wording asking people to assess how they think people would describe their appearance or mannerisms could cause some distress for people who have been harassed or feeling insecure about their gender, and may cause them to answer the question differently from others or not at all.

**Gender Work**

Gender minority individual’s responses to these questions may be influenced in ways other than distress. Many of the gender minority participants discussed how they worked to develop the appearance and mannerisms associated with their gender identity.

- I do make the effort, and part of it is just the...and this goes back to the background that I gave before, about 50 years of living a different way, and when you’re watching television programs, when you’re just watching people in the mall or down the street, and you’re watching their mannerisms, and you’re watching how other girls move, and you’re learning from everything that they do all the time, you’re watching the hand movements.
- Didn’t grow up, I didn’t grow up as a little girl; I didn’t know all the styles and the makeup from a young age, and all the things that go with it. All of a sudden, I chose this world, and I’m in it, and I have to live in it, and I have to be in such a way as to fit into it, otherwise it’s going to be extremely difficult for, um, for me. So, I picked up on that very quickly, and, so, it’s like none of us have prepped
- I try to mimic their motions. Um, I have worked at trying to move like a woman; I’ve worked at trying to behave as a woman; mannerisms, um, modulation of the voice, and all these things help into presenting as a woman.
- I speak like a woman, and I take great pains to work on my voice so it sounds very feminine. I love it. I’m as feminine as I can possibly be, and I’m proud. And, once again, I’m sure that the people around me would describe me as very feminine.
• As a trans-woman, umm, you work pretty hard to be accepted in society as yourself. And, I think a lot of what we do is, if you’re not gender queer or something, you try to live up to people’s expectations, at least mostly.
• But, umm, more in terms of I take more care with my appearance now. I pick my clothes carefully. I, umm, I choose, well I’ve always had the, when I’ve had choices, I’ve always picked masculine things. Umm, I had masculine behaviors that were acceptable on the fringe of...I became more uncomfortable as the passed out of the Tom Boy phase.
• You do your job and I guess some people choose to be, ahh, ambiguous in their gender. I choose to be feminine because that’s the way I view myself. And that they way I would like other people to view myself. Like I say, I’m doing my job.

Given the time, energy and resources many gender minority spend in regards to their gendered appearance and mannerisms there may be a reluctance to be very critical. Gender minority participants’ resocialization can make the questions about their appearance and mannerisms much more pointed as they have to assess how good of a job they are doing in maintaining the appearance and mannerisms associated with their gender identity. This is a very different experience from gender majority participants who do not have the same experiences with gender or put much thought into it.

• Just because of the way I think people look at me, too. I mean, they just know I’m a mom, and I just come across, I think, more...feminine...
• Those are good questions. Um, uh, they’re thought provoking. Um, I probably...god, I haven’t really thought about it.

Some gender majority participants talk about how they learned about gender as a child.

• Interviewer: the traditional...can you explain what you mean by that? well, I don’t know, I guess, what I grew up with
• Well, it’s funny, because my mom, um, uh, always brought me up, and there were certain things that were or were not very ladylike.
• I think a lot of us, myself included, uh, rely on what I’ll call the traditional things you would have learned when you were a very young child.

Gender majority participants do not have the same relationship with society as gender minority people do. While everyone is under scrutiny in regards to the gendered appearance and mannerisms, gender majority participants do not have the same threat of having their gender identity negated by the actions of others. This distinction creates a different scenario in how each group approaches and answers these questions.
Discussion

The present study found mixed results in examining two sets of measures of gender minority status. The measures for gender transition/gender identity were found to be easy to use and understood by both gender minority and majority populations, while the measures for gender nonconformity were harder for participants to use and had results that call into question its reliability and validity. Of the two sets of measures, gender transition/gender identity shows promise within general health studies.

Gender transition/gender identity questions were able to be used to encompass a wide diversity of identities within a gender minority sample and be consistently answered by the study’s gender majority participants. The measures were able to differentiate between gender minority and majority groups. There was a consistent understanding of the concepts within each question for both groups, especially with the idea of “sex assigned at birth”. Both groups understood the phrase that to mean one’s physiological/legal status placed upon them when they were born. The one difference between groups is how they view sex and gender. Sex and gender among the gender minority sample were seen as different concepts, with sex referring to one’s physical status and gender being one’s internal sense of themselves as a man or woman. Among the gender majority sample, many saw sex and gender to refer to the same thing. The first question should be revised to just state gender rather sex and gender in order to better accommodate gender minority populations. This can be done without affecting responses given by gender majority populations.

Participant’s understanding and utilization of the gender nonconformity measures were found to have many problems. Overall, people’s responses on seven point scale mirrored their gender identity. Those who identified themselves as women predominately chose one of the feminine options and those identified as men chose one of the masculine options. Men within both groups also showed less variation among the options compared to women (men were likely to choose mostly masculine for
either question regardless of majority/minority group). This raises the possibility that if used within a larger study that it could lead toward a bimodal distribution based on people’s self-determined gender identity, limiting its utility as a quantitative measure.

The gender nonconformity questions also required more time and introspection by participants. Some of the problems people had dealt with context, for example, those with an inconsistent gender presentation (crossdressers) may have different answers depending on when the question is asked. An important distinction between gender minority and majority populations in regards to how each group came to assess their gender in relation to others. Many gender minority individuals are likely to experience discrimination, harassment, and even violence from others because of their gender expression or identity. This can especially be an issue for transgender, transsexual, or gender nonconforming people of color who have been found to experience a high rate of violence and discrimination in their lives. (21, 22) Having to assess their gender in light of these experiences may be distressful for some people.

Another key difference between gender minority and majority groups is the amount of effort, time, and resources gender minority people place in developing and maintaining the appearance and mannerisms that are associated with their gender identities. The gender resocialization that gender minority individuals experience creates a very different dynamic when contemplating how others perceive them. When gender minority individuals are asked to assess their gender in relation to others it represents how successful they are in presenting a gendered appearance and mannerisms that are associated with their gender identity. This could be very stressful for many gender minority individuals, and perhaps more so for those with experiences of harassment and violence. The result may be that people may answer these questions in light of their own opinion and experiences rather than their perception of others. This issue along with the others mentioned creates some doubt in the utility of
the gender nonconformity measures within larger population studies to identify gender minority populations.

The present study was found to have similar results compared to the work of Wylie, et al. Both found people who answered these questions in regards to their own perception of appearance and mannerisms instead of with the perception of others. (19) The inclusion of the phrase “on average” did not seem to improve people’s understanding and some even reported not even noticing it even though they read it aloud. Unlike their study, individuals within this study did not place a value on either masculinity or femininity. Their results also showed a bimodal distribution with those with male gender identities with higher scores and female gender identities with lower scores corresponding with the scoring in the measures (lower scores indicating femininity and higher scores indicating masculinity).

**Limitations**

As this was a qualitative study it cannot be generalized to any population other than itself, but it did allow for an understanding how a group of gender minority and majority individuals understand and answer questions on gender transition/gender identity and gender nonconformity. However, the small number of interviews did not allow for a detailed examination of the impact of diversity upon each group’s answers. The study also did not have many male identified gender minorities compared to male identified individuals among the gender majority group.

Participants were questioned about their appearance and mannerisms separately with their responses to the question about their appearance talked about first followed by their mannerisms. This may have affected their responses to the question about their mannerisms. For example, participants may have been primed to talk about their sense of average for the second question (mannerisms) because it was discussed previously for the first question (appearance).
Conclusion

The invisibility of gender minority people plays a large role in the health disparities they experience. The authors of this study found that the gender transition/gender identity questions could be a useful tool in identifying gender minority populations while minimizing misunderstandings among gender majority populations. Based on these findings it is likely best to first ask people about their gender and then ask about their sex assigned at birth. These questions are likely to be useful within larger population studies to identify gender minorities so to better examine the health disparities that smaller studies have identified among this group of people. This would be an important step in coming to terms with gaps of knowledge in regards to health disparities identified in the Institute of Medicine report regarding LGBT health.(1)
References


