"A little shiny gender breakthrough": Community understandings of gender euphoria

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15 minute talk, questions at end of session

I’m coming to you from Chicago, which is located on the traditional unceded homelands of the Council of the Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations.

I’m a PhD student in psychology and I'll be presenting some empirical qualitative work today on gender euphoria that I've done with Stephanie Gauvin and Sari van Anders.
What is Gender Dysphoria?

- The distress arising from conflicts between a person’s gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex (American Psychiatric Association, 2016)
  - Physical body (Pulice-Farrow, Cusack, Galupo, 2019)
  - Social gendered experiences (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, Lindley, 2019)
- Often seen as a diagnostic term

I’ll start with a term that is probably familiar to many if not all of you, gender dysphoria, which is the distress arising from conflicts between a person’s gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex. Just a note that I use gender/sex as an umbrella term to indicate the entanglement of people’s social genders with their physical, bodily sexes, though not everyone experiences it this way. Research has demonstrated that gender dysphoria can be about sex or the physical body, as with feelings of discord between a person’s sex characteristics and their gender/sex identity, and it can also arise from social gendered experiences, such as people using the wrong pronouns or name for someone. You’ll notice I cited the American Psychiatric Association for the definition. That’s because dysphoria is a term created by psychiatric and medical fields and is often seen as and used as a diagnostic term, though of course many individuals also find it useful in describing their experiences of their gender regardless of a medical context.
What is Gender Euphoria?

Created by and for gender/sex minority communities

So gender euphoria is the positive homologue of dysphoria. Ashley and Ells describe it as a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person’s gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth. And yes that is Florence Ashley who presented yesterday!

Unlike dysphoria, the term gender euphoria was created by and for gender/sex minority communities. I use minority here to mean people minoritized on the basis of their gender/sex in a cisnormative society, including transgender and nonbinary people, among others. In these communities, I am increasingly seeing gender euphoria being discussed in things like youtube videos, blogs, magazine articles, and more.
Gender Euphoria: Many Gaps in Knowledge

- Rarely recognized in published academic literature
- Many unknowns:
  - Does everyone mean the same thing by it?
  - Who is using it?
  - What does it feel like?
  - What experiences bring it about?

And yet, it has rarely been recognized in published academic literature. If this term is pretty new to you, you’re not alone. This leaves us in the research community with many unknowns, including questions like,

- Does everyone mean the same thing by it?
- Who is using it?
- What does it feel like?
- What experiences bring it about?
Current Study

- Qualitative online survey with community members
- Research questions:
  1. What is gender euphoria?
  2. What is its relationship to gender dysphoria?
  3. How is gender euphoria experienced?

So with the current study, We’re really just trying to start from square 1 here since it’s so poorly understood in research. We wanted to hear from community members themselves about what gender euphoria is, its relationship to dysphoria, and how it's experienced.
We recruited participants on social media like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Participants had to be familiar with the term gender euphoria to participate. We ended up with 47 participants, who generated about 500 data excerpts, which allowed us to get at a breadth of people’s experiences.

They had a wide range of gender/sexes, including those with nonbinary identities, cis and trans women, cis and trans men, and additional gender/sexes including men and women who did not identify as cis or trans.

They were fairly young with a mean age of about 26. Most were non-heterosexual, including the cis women and men, so almost all participants were LGBTQ. 85% were white, with a few who were African American, Latinx, and multiracial.

The sample was also highly educated, with 96% having completed at least some college.
Qualitative Survey

Ten Open-ended questions about:

1. Where they had heard the term
2. How they define gender euphoria and dysphoria
3. The relationship between these terms
4. Theirs and others’ gender euphoric experiences

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2. How they define gender euphoria and dysphoria
3. The relationship between these terms
4. Theirs and others’ gender euphoric experiences

We conducted a thematic analysis of participants’ responses and next I will present the themes we created as well as some examples of responses in each of these themes.
1) It describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one’s gender/sex

“The electric feeling of happiness and excitement in expressing one's gender, especially when that gender identity and expression are marginalized or ostracized. A little shiny gender breakthrough, if you will. (nonbinary participant, 24)

A feeling of being affirmed, validated, joyful, or comfortable in one's gender identity. (nonbinary participant, 29)

... literally life-saving. (nonbinary participant, 21)

When asked to define gender euphoria, participants said that it describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one’s gender/sex. I love this first quote and I think it sums it up quite nicely:
2) Experiences can be external, internal, and/or social

Participants described gender euphoric experiences as including external aspects like things you do to or with your body, internal or psychological aspect, and/or social experiences.

In the external theme, people mentioned things like surgery, hormones, adorning the body with clothing and cosmetics. One person said:

"I finally had surgery in 2018. I knew it would be positive, but I didn’t understand how much it would change my life—to recognize my gender in the mirror, to look like I feel in t-shirts, to even wear form-fitting clothes! It’s amazing. (transmasculine participant, 56)"

In the internal theme:

"I experience the most comfort and euphoria when I know that other people will never be able to label, consume, or insert their gaze on my gender because that act of defining belongs solely to me. (nonbinary participant, 23)"

In the social theme:

"I...feel a little burst of gender euphoria every time a stranger seems visibly confused by my gender (nonbinary participant, 29)"
3) “Gender euphoria” originated in and circulates in online and in-person gender/sex minority communities

“I mostly see it from other trans or non-binary folks who are discussing their gender journeys on social media. (nonbinary participant, 24)

“In discussions with trans friends, online on trans spaces (esp twitter), discussion with therapist, books by trans authors. (trans woman, 24)

When asked where they encountered the term, participants said that “Gender euphoria” is circulating largely in online and in-person gender/sex minority communities, and its these communities where it originated. As one person said,
4) The relationship between euphoria and dysphoria is complex

**Diverse understandings of intensity**

*Gender dysphoria is essentially my default state of being, such that the pain it causes isn't always high enough to register on my radar - gender euphoria in contrast is a much rarer experience, making the positive feelings I get from it being much more memorable in my mind, and thus having a bigger impact.* (trans woman, 24)

*Dysphoria is more clearly negative, whereas euphoria is slightly above neutral.* (nonbinary, 27)

Lastly, though nearly everyone agreed that euphoria is positive and dysphoria is negative, there were diverse understandings of their respective intensity. Some felt that dysphoria was more constant or chronic whereas euphoria was a rarer and thus more intense feeling, like this participant who said:

... But others felt that dysphoria was *more* intense, like this participant who said that the intensity of dysphoria varied.
4) The relationship between euphoria and dysphoria is complex

Diverse understandings of who experiences euphoria

...if one experiences euphoria but not dysphoria, their euphoria is still freedom from dysphoria they didn't consciously realize they felt. (trans woman, 25)

I think someone could experience gender euphoria without having experienced gender dysphoria. (cis woman, 28)

Other participants talked about who experiences euphoria. One person said I think you could make the case that if one experiences euphoria but not dysphoria, their euphoria is still freedom from dysphoria they didn't consciously realize they felt
So in sum, we found that...
We see these findings as having implications in at least three domains
Implications for quantitative and qualitative research

- Quantitative scales
- Who experiences what kinds of euphoria and why?
  - Is this experience specific to transgender and nonbinary people?
- Dysphoria and euphoria: tightly linked or no? For some but not others?

As the purpose of this study was to provide first steps to understanding this phenomenon, there are many future directions for quantitative and qualitative research.

With this data, we can begin to build scales to measure gender euphoria and relate it to outcomes like physical and mental health.

Our findings also leave open lots of questions for further qualitative work. **Who experiences what kinds of euphoria and why?**

Is this experience specific to transgender and nonbinary people, as some of our participants implied or explicitly said? Or could cisgender people also experience something at least analogous?

And it might be good to further investigate the relationship between dysphoria and euphoria and how this relationship differs for people, as there was a fair amount of difference in how tightly linked they are.
We also see some implications for clinical practice. Clinicians working with clients who experience gender dysphoria might benefit from not only helping to manage their dysphoria but also to facilitate euphoria by having them explore what brings them joy, contentment, and validation. This can follow a therapeutic strengths-based approach that emphasizes the positive aspects of human life.
Implications for histories of medicalization

- Dysphoria has structured much of the medical discourse of the past few decades
- Euphoria may help decenter dysphoria as the only medically relevant trans experience
  - Could be justification for transition-related medical care (Ashley & Ells, 2019)
- Fight for trans rights can be framed not only as reductions in gender-related harm, but also more equitable access to gender-related pleasure

Lastly, we believe that our results have implications for the histories of medicalization of trans experiences. Gender dysphoria has structured medical discourses over the past few decades, including updates to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual used by many mental health professionals in the US. While dysphoria is an important experience for many trans people, it is not the only or defining feature of many people’s relations to their gender. A wider recognition of gender euphoria could help decenter dysphoria as the only medically relevant trans experience. In this vein, Ashley and Ells argue that gender euphoria can be just as legitimate of a justification for transition-related medical care as dysphoria, and thus should be covered under private and public health insurance. And this kind of thinking highlights that in general, the fight for trans rights can be framed not only as reductions in gender-related harm, but also more equitable access to gender-related pleasure.
Thanks to our participants, my co-authors Stephanie Gauvin and Dr. Sari van Anders, and the rest of the van Anders Lab.

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Thanks for listening!

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