

# Engendering Identity: Toward a Clearer Conceptualization of Gender as a Social Identity

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**Abstract** Wood and Eagly (2015) make a valuable contribution to the understanding of gender psychology by reviewing how gender identity has been conceptualized in different literatures. But beyond comparing and contrasting these two traditions in North American and Western European samples, we advocate for more clarity in how gender identity is defined and theorized to relate to personality traits. In this commentary, we favor reserving the term gender identity for one's gender-relevant self-categorization and outline three main reasons why traits such as agency and communion should not be conflated with gender identity: (a) They are universal dimensions of human behavior that (b) can be decoupled from gender, and (c) when linked to gender exacerbate gender differences in these traits. Broader theoretical models, such as balanced identity theory, can improve understanding of when and why gender identity becomes associated with certain traits to inform self-definition. Although the process by which gender identity becomes linked to certain traits is assumed to be universal, the content of these linkages can be culturally and temporally specific. We suggest that traits become conflated with gender identity when they are endorsed by a gender group and differentiate one gender from the other. This process can lead to active avoidance of a trait by those who feel their gender identity is incompatible with that trait. In sum, we believe there is value in drawing on broader theories of self, identity, and social groups to best understand how people come to define themselves and are defined by gender.

**Keywords** Gender identity · Agency and communion · Self-stereotyping · Masculinity and femininity

## Introduction

In their target article, Wood and Eagly (2015) provide a clear and compelling summary of two distinct research traditions for understanding the nature of gender identity, at least as it applies to the North American and Western European samples that have typically been the subject of social psychological research on gender. One approach conceptualizes gender identity in terms of the traits that have come to be associated with being masculine or feminine, traits that have most commonly been referred to as agency and communion. The second approach conceptualizes gender identity as categorizing oneself as part of either the male or female social group. As Wood and Eagly so clearly describe, gender scholars in psychology most commonly work within one tradition or the other (but seldom both) and empirical evidence from primarily North American samples suggests that both frames on gender identity predict meaningful, albeit distinct types of outcomes. Their conclusion from this review is that, *Researchers have the option of using one or the other conception of gender identity, depending on their particular question of interest* (this issue).

In our commentary, we take this summary as a point of departure for proposing that a clearer conceptualization of gender-related constructs in these literatures would allow gender scholars to combine across these two approaches in theoretically valuable ways. Our observation is that the very fact that these two distinct traditions exist and are often disconnected from one another has led to a great deal of conceptual confusion over what exactly constitutes gender identity. In that respect, we applaud the authors for so clearly juxtaposing these two literatures side by side. But whereas the authors end

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by suggesting that researchers can choose to study gender identity by either approach depending on the outcomes of interest, we instead call for more clarity and consensus not only in the definition of gender identity as a construct but also the processes by which gender identity shapes and is shaped by self-definition, self-ascribed traits, and behavior.

In this commentary, we maintain that the study of traits such as agency and communion is not in any direct way a study of gender identity, but is rather a study of self- and other-perceived behavioral tendencies that are often (but need not be) confounded with gender identity. Indeed other definitions of gender-relevant constructs often include both traits and behavioral preferences under the label of gender roles or gender expression as distinct from gender identity (e.g., Martin 2000). Although the content of the traits and behavioral preferences that become associated with gender identity might be culturally specific and indeed much of the research summarized here relies on North American or Western European samples (exceptions to this will be specified), we suspect that the process by which gender as an identity becomes linked to traits and preferences is culturally universal. If this assumption is true, broad theories about gender identity will be advanced more quickly and can be generalized more broadly by examining how, when, and why specific traits and gender roles are associated with the categorization and association of oneself as male or female. In what follows, we outline three main reasons why traits such as agency and communion should not be labeled a form of gender identity but also suggest several reasons why researchers and lay perceivers alike tend to conflate these traits with identity.

### What We Mean by Identity

The study of identity in social psychology is linked to research on the nature of the self both in relation to and in contrast from others. Individuals generally come to define themselves in terms of their centrally important traits and attributes. In Western individualistic cultures where this research originates, self-definition often emphasizes those traits that differentiate oneself from others (see Oyserman et al. 2011, for a review). A key insight of self-categorization theory and social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Turner et al. 1987) was to point out that social categories are also an important part of self-definition and self-esteem. Whereas social categories are important parts of identity even in individualistic cultures like the U.S. and Canada, in more collectivist cultures, such as Japan and China, the self is defined to an even greater extent by focusing on socially shared aspects of identity (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Because gender is one of the earliest social categories that children attend to and essentialize (at least in the North American samples that have been studied), children develop a conception of themselves and others as being male or female by around 2.5 years of age (see Martin and Ruble 2004;

Martin et al. 2002). Recent research also suggests that as young as five years of age, transgender children in the U.S. associate themselves not with their biological sex but with their expressed gender identity on both explicit and implicit measures (Olson et al. 2015). It is the tendency to categorize the self as male or female that we assert is best labeled gender identity (see also Martin 2000).

As a specific type of social identity, we can assume that a person's gender identity conforms to the more general definition of social identity laid out by Tajfel, in other words, as *that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [sic] knowledge of his [sic] membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership* (Tajfel 1981, p. 255). By applying the nomenclature common in social identity theory, the term gender identification is then best used to capture the degree to which one's gender is important to one's self-definition alongside the positive attitude or pride associated with this group identity (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). We add here that it is important to be mindful of both the cognitive (identity importance) and affective (group pride) aspects of a social identification because although related, research with North American samples suggests they can predict quite distinct responses to identity-threatening events (Schmader et al. 2015; Schmader and Lickel 2006). For example, the importance of gender to one's self-definition can make one more susceptible to stereotype threatening deficits to performance (e.g., Schmader 2002), but the pride felt for one's group identity can also help to buffer people emotionally and psychologically from identity threats (e.g., Branscombe et al. 1999). Thus, even within the group categorization tradition, it is important to acknowledge the distinction amongst these constructs.

The trait approach to gender has a longer history than this categorization approach but does not, to our eye, provide the clearest definition of gender identity per se. As the authors so thoughtfully review, the earliest method of studying gender identity was to define masculinity and femininity in terms of the behaviors and traits that most clearly distinguish men from women in the cultures studied (usually the U.S.). Later theorists like Bem, Spence, and their colleagues made a concerted effort to relabel these dimensions and separate them from biological sex (Bem 1974; Spence et al. 1974). However, there is still a tendency to assume that viewing oneself in highly agentic ways (as assertive, self-confident, and competitive) is indicative of a male gender identity, whereas being highly communal (caring, compassionate, and cooperative) connotes a female gender identity. Of course, as Eagly and Wood themselves have taught us, years of research on social role theory highlights how stereotypes of men and women stem largely from the historical distribution of men and women into different social roles (see Eagly and Wood 2012 for a recent review). By this logic, agency need not be

inherently male and communion need not be inherently female. Rather, the genderedness of these traits is reliant upon current stereotypes about men and women based on the roles they carry out. But stereotypes, importantly, can change over time and across cultural context (Diekmann and Eagly 2000). For example, although most research on social role theory has been done with North American or Western European samples, when countries such as Brazil and Chile became more industrialized and democratic, both men and women in those nations became associated with more agentic traits (Diekmann et al. 2005).

To label agency or communion as a form of gender identity glosses over a sequence of important processes by which those traits come to be linked to social categories, either in the mind of social perceivers, or for women and men themselves. An analogy to racial identity may clarify this assertion. On average, we might observe that in the U.S., a disproportionate number of African Americans excel in sports but underperform academically and are incarcerated for violent criminal activity (e.g., Lapchick et al. 2013; Morenoff 2005; Steele 2003). Yet it is doubtful that social psychologists would maintain that racial identity as a construct should be measured in terms of athleticism, academic disengagement, and aggression. Rather we would keep these constructs distinct and instead examine how such behavioral tendencies or traits become stereotypes that are linked to racial identity, and at times even endorsed by some African Americans. If athleticism or aggression seems like a poor way to define what Black identity is for U.S. samples, why would we assume that communion is a reasonable way to define female identity?

There are at least three reasons why we advocate for maintaining a conceptual separation between traits like agency and communion and the concepts of gender identity/identification. The first is that agency and communion are better described as universal dimensions of human behavior than as characteristics indicative of gender identity. The authors briefly make this connection, but here we underscore that research on personality, values, and stereotypes all converge on two broad and orthogonal dimensions of variability in human behavior: the tendency to be other-oriented (i.e., communal) and the tendency to be self-oriented (i.e., agentic) to varying degrees and under varying circumstances. For example, these two key dimensions not only date back to Bakan (1966), but are also empirically validated as orthogonal dimensions in the interpersonal circumplex model (Wiggins 1979), models of core human values (Trapnell and Paulhus 2012), and the stereotype content model (Fiske et al. 2007). Moreover this two dimensional structure replicates in countries that represent a diverse array of cultural systems (e.g., Martínez-Arias et al. 1999; Saucier et al. 2014; Thalmayer and Saucier 2014; Ybarra et al. 2008), even those that are quite isolated from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic – WEIRD – cultures (Henrich et al. 2010). The universality of this two

dimensional structure of human variability fits with evolutionary assumptions that each tendency represents appropriate strategies to deal with distinct adaptive challenges (e.g., Fiske et al. 2007). In light of the wealth of evidence that people in general vary and are seen to vary along dimensions of communion and agency, it makes little sense to tie the definition of these dimensions to gender identity.

A second reason why the field should move away from defining gender identity in terms of agency and communion is that over time, these traits can become decoupled from gender. Whereas gender differences in agency, as measured in U.S. samples, were pronounced in the 1970s, when trait measures of masculinity and femininity (and associated constructs) were developed (Bem 1974; Spence et al. 1974), this is no longer the case. Twenge (1997) provides evidence that since roughly 1970, women in the U.S. have steadily increased in self-rated agentic traits. Indeed, by 1995, women described themselves as agentic at levels that matched those of men, and Diekmann and Eagly (2000) provide evidence from U.S. samples that people expect differences between men and women in agentic tendencies to completely disappear over the next few decades. Although men still rate themselves lower in communal tendencies, if men continue to take on more caregiving roles in a society, the gender gap in communion in that society would also be expected to narrow over time (Croft et al. 2015). There may indeed have been a time when agency and communion were confounded with gender identity, but as this close connection weakens in some cultural contexts, it is more important to understand when and why identities link to certain traits rather than to assume they are one and the same.

This last point connects to a third reason why we recommend a shift away from defining gender identity in terms of certain traits. When traits become linked to gender in people's minds, the development and internalization of those traits can become unnecessarily constrained. Gender socialization processes lead people to internalize those traits that are seen as being most strongly linked to their gender and reject those that are not (e.g., Martin et al. 2002). Making traits and tendencies salient as part of gender identity can therefore exacerbate observed gender differences. Such effects might be particularly pronounced among men, who tend to reject communal traits and tendencies because they are seen as conflicting with the stereotypical view of what it means to be male (e.g., Vandello et al. 2008). For example, studies with North American samples have shown that men perform more poorly on measures of empathic accuracy when their gender is made salient or they know that their empathic abilities are being assessed (Ickes et al. 2000). Such evidence suggests that even though communal traits like empathy are a fundamental dimension of human behavior and key to important societal and health outcomes (Croft et al. 2015), conceptualizing these traits in terms of female identity inhibits many men from endorsing these valuable traits for themselves. Such processes have

contributed to an asymmetry in changing gender roles, whereby U.S. women's increasing endorsement of agentic traits has not been matched in pace by men's self-definition as communal (Croft et al. 2015; Diekmann and Eagly 2000; Twenge 1997). Thus, decoupling trait terms from how we define gender identity might also promote equal opportunity for these positive traits to be embraced for men and women alike (see also Ruble and Martin 1998).

### Toward a Broader Framework of Gender Identity

Rather than assuming that certain personality characteristics can be conceptualized as a form of gender identity, we advocate for broader frameworks that can articulate how one's gender identity and identification reciprocally shape and are shaped by the behavioral preferences and traits one expresses. Balanced identity theory (Greenwald et al. 2002) provides one such framework (though there might be others) for understanding how gendered self-categorization and one's degree of gender identification predicts a tendency to self-stereotype as being communal and/or agentic. Although not specific to gender, the theory assumes that a general tendency to maintain cognitive consistency promotes the formation and maintenance of a balanced set of cognitive associations between oneself, one's social ingroup, and related traits. Thus, the degree to which we identify with a group, the degree to which we associate that group with certain traits, and the degree to which we ascribe these traits to ourselves converge in the interest of maintaining cognitive balance.

This model has been applied to understand how gender categories and stereotypes can lead women to disassociate with math and science. If science is associated with being male, and I am not male, then I experience a state of cognitive imbalance if I try to incorporate science into my self-concept (Nosek et al. 2002; Schmader et al. 2008). Although most research on balanced identity theory has been carried out with individualistic samples in North America (see Cvencek et al. 2012, for a review), at least one study carried out with Singaporean school-aged children suggests that the model generalizes to a more collectivist cultural context (Cvencek et al. 2014). Balance processes might, therefore, be one way in which gendered self-categorization and gender identification inform which traits and preferences one internalizes. Furthermore, although the content of these associations to gender identity might vary depending on cultural context, the process by which these links are established, maintained, and predict behavioral tendencies are theorized to be culturally universal.

As applied to the formation of gender identity, the theory would predict that there are likely reciprocal relationships among gender identity, gender stereotypes, and self-stereotyping (that is, the process whereby traits become part of one's personal identity). In other words, people will self-

stereotype as communal and/or agentic to the degree that these traits are cognitively associated with the gender identity one claims. But it might also be the case that seeing oneself express traits that are prototypical of one's gender (self = competitive) could also increase gender identification (self = male), given that one has gender stereotypes about these traits (males = competitive). Through this analysis, we call for more research that seeks to understand these dynamic connections between our gender identity, our personal identity, and the traits we do (or do not) associate with each. Testing these relationships might prove to be a more fruitful path forward than continuing to treat the trait approach to gender roles and the categorization approach to gender identity as separate and disconnected literatures, each with distinct predictive utility. The benefit of unified perspectives is that rather than assuming that certain traits are a form of gender identity, we can instead understand when these traits become linked to gender identity. And if balanced identity theorists are correct in assuming that processes of balance are a universal aspect of the cognitive development of identity, then such perspectives can be more readily applied to understand why gender identity might be differentially associated with traits across time and cultural context. In the interest of expanding on these ideas, we put forward several distinct observations that might elucidate why there is such a strong tendency to equate agency and communion with distinct gender identities both among theorists and the general public.

First, traits seem to become a component of one's social identity when they are endorsed by a group as an accurate reflection of group characteristics. Earlier we used the example of racial identity in the U.S. to highlight more clearly the need to separate traits and behaviors from social identity. We suspect that it is easier to acknowledge that the stereotypical traits and behaviors of the average Black American are not good measures of Black identity, because there is less of an expectation that Blacks themselves would consider the tendencies to be athletic or academically disengaged as self-defining. In contrast, data from U.S. samples suggests that men and women alike tend to endorse the belief that women are more communal than men (Diekmann and Eagly 2000). When such stereotypes are consensually shared and a source of group pride, they become more linked to one's social identity. For example, the Asian American identity scale (Oyserman and Sakamoto 1997) actually does include items that assess the collectivist traits and tendencies that are stereotypically associated with and embraced by Eastern more than Western cultures (Markus and Kitayama 1991). But for the purposes of theory development across many different types of group identity and the culturally-prescribed content attached to those identities, we assert that it would be more prudent to distinguish between a tendency to identify as Asian American (Asian identification) and a tendency to endorse collectivist traits as self-defining (self-stereotyping).



A second observation is that traits seem to become a component of one's social identity when those traits allow for intergroup differentiation. Given evidence that agency might no longer differentiate men from women in the U.S., it makes less sense to assume that agency will remain a strong marker of male identity. That said, other more specific facets of agency might continue to distinguish men from women. Most notably, several theoretical traditions point to a distinction between being achievement-oriented (i.e., striving to set and meet the goals one sets for oneself) and being dominance-orientated (i.e., striving to prove oneself to be superior to others) (Henrich and Gil-White 2001; McClelland 1987; Tracy and Robins 2007). Research that finds no gender differences in self-reported agency in North American samples likely reflects an equal average level of achievement orientation between men and women that is paralleled by, if not the result of, women's increasing opportunities to pursue educational and employment goals over the last century (e.g., Diekmann and Eagly 2000). However, men in most (albeit not all) cultures still display greater social dominance motivation and desire for social competition than do women (Croson and Gneezy 2009; Gneezy and Rustichini 2004; Sidanius et al. 1994). Indeed, other relatively recent research that does show pronounced gender differences in self-rated agency among North American and Western European samples has operationalized agency using items such as 'dominant,' 'boastful,' and 'selfish' (Guimond et al. 2007). Based on our analysis, we would predict that dominance-based agency is currently more closely linked to male gender identity than is achievement-based agency. Research that seeks to examine how and when certain traits are tied to gender identity would therefore do well to measure these different ways of being agentic.

Our third observation has more to do with understanding when and why certain traits are actively excluded from one's social identity. Those who study racial identity in the U.S. have noted that a tendency to associate academic achievement with being White, and a desire to differentiate Blacks from Whites, could lead some African Americans to see academic achievement as being oppositional to Black identity (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). The same processes might be operating in studies that have shown that North American heterosexual men, in an effort to avoid being miscategorized as gay, display dominant tendencies as a way to reassert their male identity (Bosson et al. 2005; Bosson and Vandello 2011). We suspect that such concerns about miscategorization might also lead many men to avoid communal roles or the internalization of communal attributes. We have begun a line of research that attempts to measure North American's beliefs that communal traits and goals are incompatible with displaying and pursuing dominance. Our goal in this ongoing research is to test whether men avoid endorsing communal traits associated with compassion, empathy, and social connectedness to the degree that these traits are viewed as incompatible with being dominant.

Only by articulating these associations among traits, self-identity, and social identity, can we identify the mechanisms by which identity develops and changes.

Finally, our focus here on a social-cognitive view of gender identity should not imply that biology plays no role in one's tendency to self-categorize as either male or female (which typically but not always aligns with one's biological sex) or one's tendency to exhibit communal, achievement, or dominance traits and goals. Given the early age and absolute certainty with which transgendered individuals associate gender with the self in a recent U.S. study (Olson et al. 2015), or evidence that girls with congenital adrenal hyperplasia in the U.S. are more likely to identify with males (Pasterski et al. 2015), we agree that both traits and gender categories have some biological basis as Wood and Eagly (2015) also note. However, perceiving these tendencies in oneself and associating them with one's gender identity is, at its heart, a social-cognitive process. Hyde (2014) has argued convincingly on the basis of large meta-analytic studies that whatever differences in central tendency exist between men's and women's behaviors and traits across cultural samples are dwarfed by much larger individual variation within these overlapping distributions. Similarly, biological factors might play a larger role in individual, rather than group, variation in communal and agentic traits. Those traits or behavioral preferences might then be self-perceived as being indicative (or not) of one's gender identity, depending on how strongly those traits are culturally associated with gender groups. Over the last 50 years, the biological differences between men and women have changed little if at all, and yet women in the U.S. are now dramatically more likely to see themselves as independent, assertive, and achievement-oriented (Twenge 1997). Such changes can only be understood through cultural and not biological evolution (Croft et al. 2015).

Of course, a great deal of research is still needed to investigate the processes by which gender identities develop. It remains unclear whether individuals with stronger gender identification incorporate gender-stereotypes more into their self-concept because: a) they perceive themselves to be more prototypical of their own gender, or b) because they are more likely to attend and conform to other's attitudes about what constitutes a prototypical male or female. Second, although balanced identity processes are assumed to underlie the development of gender identity and self-stereotyping across different cultural contexts, research is still needed in a greater diversity of cultures (or subcultures) who reject binary views of gender categorization in favor of fluid notions of gender or more diverse gender systems. And finally, the boundary conditions of the association between gender identity and self-stereotyping are relatively unexplored. Not all traits that seem to differentiate men and women become associated with gender identity, yet no clear theory predicts when traits will become markers of an identity, either in minds of perceivers or of targets themselves.

## Conclusion

To sum up, in this commentary we do not dispute Wood and Eagly's observation that these two distinct literatures on gender identity exist and have predictive value. But beyond comparing and contrasting them, we have advocated for more conceptual clarity and theoretical insights that seek to connect these literatures together. Although there are certain ways that gender identity is distinct from other ways that people categorize themselves, there is value in drawing on broader theories of self, identity, and social groups to best understand how people come to categorize themselves as male or female and associate that gender identity with some traits and not others.

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