Queerness and Validation: 
A Study of Gender Expression and Perception

MAXWELL CORNETT
Christopher Newport University

Introduction

When my research began, my aim was to study the ways in which queer-gendered individuals utilize binary modes of expression in order to accurately portray their gender identity. However, through my interview process and investigative analysis, my area of focus largely shifted towards an exploration in the concept of “validation” and the process by which queer-gendered individuals feel as though said “validation” has been achieved. The general definition of validation is understood as “to show that something is real or correct.”¹ When discussing gender, however, the process of showing or proving that an identity is in fact real or correct is not a complex, often misunderstood process. My focus shifted due to the nature of responses I gathered, with all of my participants demonstrating a concentration not in how they, as queer-gendered individuals felt they were perceived, but in how they wanted to be perceived. This is an important distinction because it lead my research to not only be set in an area of individual agency and emotion, but also in an area of socialized perceptions and the barriers that prohibit queer-gendered individuals from feeling seen, validated, or recognized in their existence. Thus, my research question is as follows: how is validation defined and experienced by queer-gendered individuals?

This study aligns with both inward, self-validation and outward, recognition validation. Inward validation can be understood as a feeling of intrinsic certainty about an individual’s identity. Shaw & Lee explain this as when what one feels internally matches their behaviors, dress, activities, and overall gender performance (Shaw & Lee, 2020). This level of validation is crucial because it can be felt alone, without the gaze of others and socialized minds of the popular societal mass around. Outward validation on the other hand can be understood as recognition-based, meaning that it is dependent on the perceptions of others correctly aligning with an individual’s gender identity. Both modes of validation will be studied because inward and outward validation play substantial, intertwined parts in an individual’s life. To be validated in your own head is one thing, but to be validated in the eyes of others includes a level of acceptability and truth that runs through societal expectations.

I believe that my research and my interview analysis will showcase that validation is largely a concept that can be understood as signals (whether that be signals given from person to person or signal given internally) that affirm identity. For example, being referenced by the correct pronouns has the ability to validate an individual and increase their level of comfortability with their identity. My findings largely dictated that validation can be defined as “a sense of acceptance, tranquility, and safety as a result of either self or other’s recognition of the person’s queer-gendered identity that has been explored and questioned through the process of agency.” This definition was based on responses from the 10 participants that were all qualitatively interviewed. From their responses, I was able to explore validation and solidify the three principles (acceptance, tranquility, and safety) that lead to the manifestation of validation in queer-gendered individuals.

I Literature Review

The literature surrounding gender performance and its strong-holding, anchoring nature is largely based in socialization and learned societal expectations, limitations, and regulations. Socialization can be understood as the process by which individuals come to understand and internalize certain truths about the society in which they live (Schaffler, 1953). Because of socialization done by our “modern” society, children grow up holding certain foundational, core beliefs that alter their perspective and the ways in which they conceptualize existence. Gender, therefore, is socialized to children on a binary system with “male/boy” on one end and “female/girl” on the other.

As Judith Lorber (1993) explains, gender is a routine that carries the assumption of biology, entangling the tangible genitalia to the intangible identity (Lorber, 1993). Furthermore, as a critique of the concept, gender is often referenced as a “verb”, suggesting it is an action and performance, not a “noun” that is assigned and expected (Lenning, 2009). Nevertheless, gender continues to be socialized as a genetic byproduct (Lorber, 1993) and an impenetrable scientific construction (Lenning, 2009). The socialization process in our current social climate only includes “male” and female”, “masculine” and “feminine”. However, what happens when the socialized, gendered assumptions of the tangible does not match the intrinsic, self-manifested intangible identity?

With regards to main socialization factors, Dietert and Dentice (2017) performed a study to see how transgender men negotiated their identities with family and peers. Their study was largely aimed to discover if these two spheres of influence had severe implications for the presentation and emotional safety of transgender men (Dietert & Dentice; 2017). According to the analysis of 32 interviews with transgender men ages 18 to 57, the researchers found that relationships with family members were often very conflict-based due to a refusal of socialized gender ideals (growing up assigned female at birth), and peer relationships are often based in gatekeeping and policing, with this particular group being the primary enforcer of public acceptability. These findings suggest that trans individuals are socialized heavily by family and friends to remain not only on a binary, but on the side they were assumed to be at birth (Dietert & Dentice; 2017).

On the contrary to this claim lies a study conducted in 2008 that demonstrated that mothers were likely to approve of “cross-gendered” behaviors (Owen & Blakemore, 2008). Cross-gendered behaviors are understood to be mannerisms that would not traditionally be associated with the child’s understood gender (a young girl playing pretend with tools, a young boy playing dress up). Mothers and women who are in authority roles for young children often validate these behaviors, thus providing familial comfort in the home. However, these behaviors are often discouraged as the children grow older and start moving towards adulthood. These behaviors are then punished and seen as “deviant”.

Another study was conducted with the aim of studying parental and peer socialization, however this particular study was conducted with queer-identified parents (Flanders, et al. 2020). In this study, researchers conducted in-person, qualitative interviews with queer parents in addition to administering five online surveys over the course of two years. Findings showed that, even though many of these individuals stated that they would be unconditionally accepting of their children of they identified as trans/non-conforming, they all strongly adhered to a socially-mediate gender binary while raising their children (Flanders, et al. 2020). For example, one parent stated that she would love for her child to wear more vibrant colors, but she would not put her son in clothes from the girl’s section for fear that he would be made fun of (Flanders, et al. 2020).

A very interesting finding that emerged from this study, however, was that children who were assigned female at birth were allowed to migrate towards “masculine” qualities more than children who were assigned male at birth were allowed to migrate towards “feminine” qualities (Flanders, et al. 2020). This finding was particularly interesting because it showcased a double standard arising for children, allowing girls to get away with mixed-gender representations and performances more than boys. MacPhee and Prendergast (2018) found something similar when they explored
children’s bedrooms looking for gendered items, clothes, and paraphernalia. They found that there was a positive correlation that existed between assigned female at birth children and masculine toys, but a negative correlation between assigned male at birth children and feminine toys (MacPhee & Prenergast, 2018).

Socialization can also occur outside of the home or peer-centered environment. In a study conducted by Garner and Grazian (2017), parents often outwardly point out sex characteristics on animals and link these physical attributes to their “gendered” behaviors. This study was primarily focused on observation of families as they made their way through a zoo. Researchers documented each time they heard a gendered connotation or sex-based assumption from a parent/adult. There were a total of 200 adults studied, and each one of them made multiple comments about genitalia linking to gender, and even assigning human-gendered characteristics to their mannerisms. For example, one mother points at a group of chimpanzees and assumes that the biggest one digging in the dirt is the “daddy”, while the smaller one lounging in the swing with a baby is the “mommy” (Garner & Grazian, 2017). These assumptions place gender outside of a human spectrum, thus socializing children to put everything, even animals in a binary categorization.

Because my research question has much to do with non-binary/genderqueer identities and the ways in which they perform gendered representations in an effort to feel validation, I then focused my attention on the ways socialization impacts individuals seeking to escape binary limitations. According to the literature, many non-binary individuals often use binary genders in order to explain their own identities to others (Corwin, 2017). Individuals who are genderqueer, non-binary, and/or transgender often use the rhetoric of “male”, “female”, “boy”, or “girl” to explain to others how they feel inside of gender and how they chose to present their gender altogether (Corwin, 2017). From this study, the researcher argued that binary genders are foundational strongholds, and are often referenced as the only two genders that are acceptable in society (Corwing, 2017).

Similarly, Richards, Bouman, Seal, and Barker (2016) find that genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender individuals often utilize their assigned gender at birth in an effort to maximize their safety (Richards, Bouman, Seal, & Barker, 2016). It is often not legal to identify as anything but assigned gender at birth, so while most of these individuals do not have a choice, they still find that legal identification not matching their internal identification can be the gateway to adequate medical care, employment, and fulfillment of basic desires (Richards, Bouman, Seal, & Barker, 2016). In addition, gender “deviant” individuals also need to feel safe in order to feel seen and validated (Paceley, Sattler, Goffnett, & Jen, 2020). Safety and outreach is imperative to spotlighting self-identification because individuals want to know that they will not be punished or harmed simply because of their internal gender identification (Paceley, Sattler, Goffnett, & Jen, 2020).

The manifestation of safety, however, is severely lacking in the United States. There is an extreme lack of representation of queer individuals as well as outreach and resources available (Nicholas, 2018). Researcher Lucy Nicholas states that “invisibility, erasure, and misgendering” are the most common practices in American society when it comes to trans and queer gender populations (Nicholas, 2018). How, then, are individuals who identify in these ways managing to exist in spaces that do not protect or validate them? Through my research, it has been stated that binary-assigned individuals value being seen as their presented gender, yet non-binary identifying individuals want to be seen as a person first (Laljer, 2017). However, the American society seems to place such an emphasis on gender (and binary gender at that), that the concept of being seen as a ‘person’ instead of a ‘gendered person’ seems impossible. Thus, my research question still remains unanswered.

II Theory

In this article, I am focused on exploring the concept of validation, the different criteria that must be met in order to feel validated, and the constant battle for validation and being seen as
an identity instead of an outcast as it relates to gender. The main theoretical perspective that I will be engaging is functionalism, specifically Emile Durkheim’s conceptualization of functionalism where society has a ‘collective consciousness’ and individuals inside of that society all hold a shared understanding of ‘social fact’. For Durkheim, the concept of ‘social fact’ can be understood as a non-rational concept relating to values, norms, and structures that impact an individual on a deep, almost intrinsic level (Durkheim, 1895). In his own words, social facts are “the beliefs, tendencies, and practices of the group taken collectively (Durkheim, 1895).” In relation to my study specifically, the ‘social fact’ of gender being a binary construct with masculinity on one side and femininity on the other is a deeply rooted ‘fact’ that cannot be easily examined. This is a belief of the general collective populace in Westernized societies as well as a practice, with gendered assumptions being assigned immediately after the birth of a baby. However, through Durkheim’s view of Sociology and the importance of investigating what is understood as normal in order to understand what is deviant, discovering the conceptualization and understanding of gender and examining it will give us a better understanding of “non-normative” queer-gendered individuals.

The ‘collective conscience’ is a concept that relates to a conglomeration of values, norms, and structures that belong to a society. With regards to this idea, Durkheim states that “man cannot live among things without forming ideas about them according to which regulates his behaviors (Durkheim, 1895).” The collective conscience of a growing, breathing society as well as the altering perception of the societal elements encapsulating individuals are constantly influencing each other due to the reciprocal relationship between the collective conscience and social facts. The concept of the ‘collective conscience’ is imperative to my research because it shapes the way individuals understand and police gender in the American, Westernized society. Identifying the collective conscience, manipulating its statements of “normal” and “deviant”, showcasing the ways in which individuals are punished for not conforming to the accepted norms.

With the terms “normal” and “deviant” comes an investigation of how ones come to see certain existences as containing levels of proper and improper societal standing. For this, Durkheim offers a statement about socialization and the ways it alters the perception of societal people:

“...it is indisputable today that most of our ideas and tendencies are not developed by ourselves, but come to us from outside, they can only penetrate us by imposing themselves upon us (Durkheim, 1895).”

Durkheim is stating that we as a collective unit in society do not have original ideas or perceptions of the developing world around us. We are each a product of the collective conscience, the social facts around us, and the greater attitudes that we all must align with. When thinking about gender, specifically, this thought-process is clearly evident. The binary is fully ingrained in the foundation of our culture- from gender reveal parties before a baby is born, to colored pink or blue blankets at birth and acceptable attire for school. This nature of “fact” thus becomes a socialized belief, one that is not easily penetrated or malleable. How, then, is validation for queer-gendered individuals possible if socialization, social face, and collective conscience are consistently telling the dominant narrative that those deviations are not worthy of collective acceptance?

Due to the gaps left by functionalism, it is also important to utilize symbolic interactionism in an attempt to explain the ways in which peer, familial, and even self interactions fuel certain levels of validation and rejection. Validation is an extremely important concept in my research, which is the primary reason for symbolic interactionism’s inclusion. With regards to this particular paradigm, I will be using Cooley’s concept of “The Looking-Glass Self” to aid in my explanation and investigation of the ways in which individuals moderate their gendered expressions based on the ways in which they assume they will be read by others. To explain the concept in Cooley’s own words, the “Looking-Glass Self” can be understood in the following way:

“....the thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s
mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our [self]-feeling. We are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on (Cooley, 1902).”

This concept largely puts perception at the foundation of reality, manifesting self-expression based on expected validation or invalidation. A queer-gendered individual may change how they present themself based on the anticipated validation that will come as a product of their appearance. Moreover, the concept of “The Looking-Glass Self” could account for how vital other individuals are to the process of external validation as well as internal validation. Cooley’s concept pushes the queer-gendered individual to simultaneously go through the process of attempting to match inward identity with outward presentation in the hopes of receiving that gendered-recognition that can exclusively be felt in the gaze of other’s eye and mind.

Another functionalist speaker who is key to mention is Mead due to the expansive nature of socialization in my research and the in-depth analysis of socialization that Mead dedicated his work towards. While Durkheim was mentioned when discussing socialization, it is Mead that offers a heavy and well-rounded conceptualization of the topic. Mead notes specifically that “the essence of the self is cognitive (Mead, 1934)” with socialization accounting for an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and systems of accepted truths. Socialization is impactful because

“...the self is something which has development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals that process (Mead, 1934).”

Thus, socialization has the ability to develop intrinsic validation by internalizing what queer-gendered individuals need to exhibit to actually feel as though their identity matches their presentation as well as extrinsic validation by others recognizing what being queer-gendered looks like and acting appropriately around an individual with that identity.

Durkheim’s theories of ‘collective conscience’ and ‘social fact’ aid in my research tremendously, but will be transformed in small ways that fit my research area. When Durkheim was talking about his theories, he was generalizing them to an entire society, one collective with individuals who are “normal” and ones who are “deviant”. I believe that it is critical to split society into two factions: those who are cisgender and those who are queer-gender. There is a clear collective conscience that is present in the cisgender faction and one that is different in many ways in the queer-gender faction. These two groups are pulling from vastly different experiences in the same society, thus creating ‘social facts’ that are radically different and accepted/punished in vastly different ways. While there is clearly an umbrella of the Big Social Conscience, I believe that there are two sub-groups that need to be identified and created with relative meanings and understandings. By grouping every individual into one general group without accounting for a “cultural relativism” that manifests from differing experiences, we are placing individuals on a hierarchy of gender performance without accounting for the ways in which the meaning of gender is constructed and understood as fact or fiction.

III Methods

III.1 Project Design and Analysis

This research project took place in the Spring of 2021 at Christopher Newport University. All of the participants were interviewed using Google Meet due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. Eight of the ten participants were sampled through Instagram which represents a convenience
sampling, with one being a result of snowball sampling. This particular research project was qualitative due to the nature of virtual interviews. I believed that qualitative interviews would be the most beneficial avenue to take due to the hyper-personal nature of identity and the specific, individualized answers that I knew would result as a direct manifestation of interviewing that would not come from a survey or other form of data collection.

The interview questions maintained equal depth throughout the interview guide. I made a specific attempt to omit any “warm-up” or “easy” questions for the specific aim to have a deep conversation from the start, thus setting up the expectation of transparency and honesty from the start. Additionally, I added my own personal experience with gender after one of my participants gave their answer. This was largely because I felt it was imperative to establish a sense of understanding and belonging in the same identity groups in order to manifest an environment of safety. Interviews were largely semi-structured due to the nature of branched-off questions and clarification questions that would emerge from the participant’s answers. Semi-structured interviewing was preferred due to the ways in which semi-structured interviews “can provide detail, depth, and an insider’s perspective, while at the same time allowing hypothesis testing and the quantitative analysis of interview responses (Leech, 2003).”

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. Each interview was transcribed first by Otter.ai and then was revised and edited in order to maintain accuracy in the data. From the transcription, coding was completed (both open and axial) in an effort to group responses in a manner that was easily linked and understandable. The coding process was completed with extreme care and brutal effort as coding “enables artful and creative interpretation and analysis of the data (Linneburg & Korsgaard, 2019).” It was also imperative that cycles of coding were conducted in an effort to record as much data as possible and sort it appropriately. Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) also explain that coding should “be seen as an adventurous trip revisiting venues and allowing ongoing reflection and learning – not merely confirmation, but rather an art skillfully conducted.” Because of this, codes were grouped and built upon as the number of interviews grew. The first step was to create open coding for each individual interview, then axial codes for each of the 10. After that, the axial codes from each interview were grouped together, further filtering and simplifying the codes to be an overall representation of the whole of the interviews.

III.2 Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

My approach promotes validity and reliability in a multitude of ways. Primarily, because my codes are formed directly from my data gathered from my interviews, validity is ensured due to the direct link from data to final analysis (Korsgaard & Linneberg, 2019). I often used direct quotes, verbatims, and in-vivo coding as extra measures which can also increase the assurance of my research’s validity (Johnson, 1997). By including direct quotes and verbatims, direct evidence of a finding or analysis can be explained, therefore allowing the evidence to be spotlighted and showcase. Additionally, using exact wording further solidifies that the research that was conducted as well as the questions that were asked are in depth, pertain to the material, and elicit responses that have value and depth.

It is difficult to say if this particular research study is generalizable. Gender identity itself is something that is so individualized and so personal when it comes to queer-gendered individuals. While the binary is ever-present, male and female dichotomy is a ruling classification, and societal pressures and expectations are extremely generalizable when it comes to American society, the actual embodiment of queer gender can not be generalized as a whole. Of course there are similarities from individual to individual and levels of titling and naming existence may draw together similar experiences, no one individual will inhabit the exact same internal identity as another individual. Thus, generalizing experience as a whole is, I argue, impossible.

This being said, I believe that it is possible to see a concept like validation and the ways in which individuals feel validated as generalizable. Validation is not so much based on individualization,
but on being seen as a part of a whole. I believe that the experience of being validated and the actual feeling of validation is something that can be generalized, regardless of gender identity. This concept of generalizability pertains to both intrinsic and extrinsic validation. It’s possible to generalize internal validation as a sense of accomplishment and accuracy, with someone’s internal understanding of their identity being properly fitting with what they see on the outside; this is a visual representation of the internal ideal. It is important to note that this form of validation is based most importantly on internal conceptualization and not on feeling as though their identity is correctly read by others. This form of validation is solely based on factors that contribute to the self’s feelings and attitudes towards their own gender.

External validation is based on receiving recognition that the manifestations of an individual’s gender identity is noticeably aligned and understood by other people. Recognition does not always have to be a verbal display like using correctly gendered (including queer-gendered) pronouns, but can also be recognition by disregard. While this concept seems oxymoronic, it is simply an explanation of fitting in with society. Disregard can look like being able to walk in public without being stared at or having the ability to use a gendered bathroom of preference without the patrons of that restroom inciting physical, verbal, or mental violence. It is not a disregard for the individual altogether, but it is simply a way to extend that an individual person belongs, and is not worth the effort to scrutinize in an autonomic, unconscious manner.

III.3 Issues and Limitations

One issue I had when completing my research project was having access to older individuals who identify in a queer-gendered way. I was able to access college-age students due to my proximity in higher education, but finding individuals who graduated or were in their 30-40s was a challenge. I wanted to include this particular age range largely because identifying as queer-gendered is not an identity that stops with age. It was important to also hear voices of individuals who were not in a population of younger-adults or college-aged adults in order to get a more comprehensive picture on the experience of being queer-gendered.

A sampling bias that occurred was that most of my participants were recruited through Instagram. This could be problematic because individuals who use Instagram are most commonly between the ages of 18 and 29. Due to this statistic, my data was already set up to be skewed towards a younger demographic and age of participants. Another important bias that occurred with using Instagram is that the individuals I talked to all have a great level of comprehension and intelligence about not only their identity but the ways in which they can communicate about their identity and the identities of others. All of these individuals have very public, vocal platforms that they share their experiences and perspectives through which makes for an amazing interview, but also adds a level of bias to my work.

Additionally, there are a lot of individuals who are just coming to terms with their identity due to extended introspection conducted during the pandemic. As individuals took less time going out, seeing other people, venturing in-person to work, they were able to get a better, deeper understanding of themselves and their true identity, not just the one they are socialized and encouraged to inhabit. This came as a limitation to me because my study is aimed more for individuals who have experiences with the outside world and how their identity is exhibited and shaped through their perspectives of that world. Individuals who are largely just now getting to the point where they feel as though they are accurately portraying their gender identity typically had a more difficult time answering my questions, and two of my interviews had to be scratched fully due to a severe insufficiency of information.

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IV Analysis and Discussion

As I was investigating the ways in which queer-gendered individuals define and feel validation, I was able to uncover three major themes as well as a definition of validation. All three of the themes relate to attitudes that demonstrate a common theory of validation, one that will be explained and elaborated on after elaboration of the three categories of responses. The three themes that encapsulated responses from my 10 qualitative interviews were 1) Tranquility in Exploration and Questioning Process, 2) Persistent Binary Expectations, and 3) High Levels of Agency.

These three categories can be analyzed under functionalism and symbolic interaction due to their relation to socialization, social fact, collective conscience, and Cooley’s “The Looking Glass Self”. These two theoretical representations demonstrate levels of internal and external explanations of identity validations, and, when paired with my research, offer a demonstration of importance.

IV.1 Tranquility in Exploration and Questioning Process

The first major theme of Tranquility in Exploration and Questioning Process can be understood as an analysis of factors that manifest feelings of safety in an individual’s journey of identifying where their gender-identity falls. This category of responses relates the process of feeling as though an individual is allowed to experiment with gender identity, gender presentation, and gender assignment in an effort to feel both intrinsic (self) validation and extrinsic (outward) validation. For example, respondent 41057 “KJ” demonstrates how seeing individuals on their higher education campus who were visibly queer helped them to feel more comfortable in their own identification journey:

“I did not know what, or what non binary person was or existed until I started applying to college. And I met [queer individuals]. So [they] are the first non binary people I ever knew. And so once I met them, that kind of like started the snowball effect of figuring things out. It still took a while, but like, it really wasn’t until I had a friend ask me my pronouns for the first time that I was just like, I want to use, like, all that stuff. So it kind of took someone telling me like, hey, it’s cool. Like you can be trans.”

This response exemplifies the category of tranquility in Exploration and Questioning Process because it demonstrates how KJ felt as though they could explore and experiment after they met individual who were already existing in the manner of identifying as queer-gendered. KJ felt as though it was a safe space for them to fully live out their identity because they saw that there were other individuals already living a truth that KJ wanted to live.

Additionally, when respondent 16153 “Rey” was asked about when they felt as though they were most likely to feel as though they could experiment with gender and feel as though they were validated, they replied:

“ I pretty much surround myself with queer people. Very much. So I mean, like, most of my friends are that way, my partner is that way. And so I try to surround myself with people that I know are going to be accepting...”

Rey felt as though they were most protected and most encouraged to experiment with gender when they were around other queer individuals. They felt like they were being accepted, they were being understood and they were encouraged to branch out simply because there were others around them who were doing the same thing.

It is important to mention that with this theme comes a sub-category of “Language Development” responses. This sub-category relates to the ways in which being around other queer-gendered individuals and seeing identities played out in a physical manifestation allows for an individual to gather knowledge and vocabulary that relates to that existence. By learning the vocabulary and
words to describe how they identify and feel, an individual is able to then further explore and experiment with gender in not only a physical space, but in a linguistic space as well. Rey demonstrated this category when stating the following:

“Rey: I’ve just never really identified with anything. And so in high school, understanding that now I have to exist in the world. As a woman, I was like, Well, I don’t want to do that. So I must, I must be a man. But I think it really I really have identified this way, forever. in some capacity. I definitely didn’t have the words for it, though.

Interviewer (Max): Yeah, so sort of a thing where once you learned the vocabulary for it, you were like,

Rey: Oh, shit, that is non binary. Okay.”

Rey is explaining here how actually finding the vocabulary for their internal identity made it possible for them to not only name what they were feeling, but explore inside of the identity’s definition and find the pieces that made them feel comforted and validated.

Altogether, this category of responses relates to the concept of validity because it provides a look into the ways in which validity is based in comfort. This particular finding is similar to the ways in which findings from my literature review highlight how queer-gendered individuals much feel safe in order to feel validated (Paceley, Sattler, Goffnett, & Jen, 2020). However, the added level of tranquility takes validation one step further. An individual can feel safe but uncomfortable. Their mental and physical being can be fully protected and in a secure environment, but they can feel uncomfortable with the attitudes, perceptions, or social facts in a given placement. For example, KJ explains that their parents are very warm and welcoming to them, but they do not understand or fully grasp what it means to be queer-gendered. They recall a conversation that was had when they began to start hormone replacement therapy (HRT) by performing weekly testosterone shots:

“KJ: My parents when I told them that I’m starting T they were like oh a male daughter. Like, they literally pay for my testosterone, all that shit. But they do not comment on my transition, and they call me “she/her”. They pay for my testosterone. Like it’s not a secret. I have a very good relationship with them. Yeah. So it’s interesting, because end of day, whether or not you use the person’s pronouns is a respect thing.

Interviewer (Max): Yeah.

KJ: And like whether or not you see their gender as valid. And so like, it can be really difficult having such a good relationship with them apart from this.”

KJ is not in danger. In fact, they specifically state that they have a very positive relationship with their parents. However, this level of safety and protection is not indicative of a level of comfort. They are actively uncomfortable with their parents using the wrong pronouns and actively uncomfortable not being seen as their accurate gender identity. Therefore, validation is not just something that comes as a result of safety, it also comes as a result of comfort.

IV.2 Persistent Binary Expectations

This next theme relates to the ways in which queer-gendered individuals are still expected to adhere to binary regulations even when they identify outside of the stereotypical “male”/ “female” binary or somewhere along a binary spectrum (gender queer, demi-boy, demi-girl, genderfluid). Regardless of their gender identity, there is still a level of conformity that is expected when discussing gender performance.
One respondent, 35195 “Chutoy”, relates to how they feel as though they do not want to conform to binary expectations of what it means to be a “woman” even though they are a transgender woman. However, they specifically note that they still encounter and interact with heavy levels of pressure to conform in order to be seen as valid:

“Something that is definitely true is there’s no real way to be a woman. There’s no one way to be a woman and there’s no one way to be a man or be androgynous or be non binary. That’s definitely true. But there’s still that pressure to kind of fit in and conform so that like, you’re feeling valid. That took me a really long time to internalize was just like, I didn’t necessarily need to conform to like, what, like a specific idea of what a woman was.”

Chutoy is saying that they know validation is seen and largely assumed to be feeling as though an individual fits into binary assumptions, but they are also simultaneously stating that they had to do extra work in order to let themself believe that there was no “correct” or “incorrect” way to be a woman. If we consider theoretical explanations for this feeling, it would be most prevalent to incorporate Durkheim’s sense of social fact and collective conscience. In terms of social fact, I argue that the social fact is that validation is defined as “fitting it” in the greater social culture. Thus, the collective conscience is a deep rooted belief that the only individuals who can truly feel validated in their gender identity are the ones that are assumed to be cisgender and the ones who use binary expectations to their advantage.

This has heavy implications for validation. If validation is dependent on conformity, then how are queer-gendered individuals that are actively participating in binary deviations in both mental and physical ways going to feel as though their inward identity is ever recognized (extrinsic validation) or valuable (intrinsic validation)? From my research, I argue that validation and the search for its manifestation and meaning comes to a halt when conformity is seen as the only route to validation. Because of this, a subcategory for my research that is imperative to mention is Desire for Invisibility. This category of responses was present in every interview that I conducted. At some point during our discussion and without prompting, every queer-gendered individual mentioned that they would rather just not be noticed at all than be recognized as queer-gendered. Respondent 16153 “Rey” explicitly states when asked how they believe people perceive them states: “Well, yeah, I mean, I try very hard not to be identified.” Additionally, they state “…it’s affected the way that I move through the world…”.

If each one of my interviewees are responding in this matter, then I believe this occurrence of a desire for becoming unidentifiable is a statement that needs deeper and profoundly more in-depth examination. This specific subcategory does not, in my opinion, relate to queer-gendered individuals wanting to pass as cisgender or wanting to not be read as queer, but I believe it relates to the ways in which the social fact of conformity meaning validation pushes individuals who make little attempt to conform (or have no ability to conform given their present access to medical transition, HRT, or lack of interest there of) to aim for invisibility altogether. If you are invisible, you can not be misgendered, you cannot be harmed, and you can not be called-out. Therefore, external validation is put on hold and given a red light in an attempt to remove any negative consequence of being queer-gendered.

This category interacts with my research question in a very complex way. If queer gendered individuals are abandoning validation and instead finding comfort in invisibility, it could be assumed that there is a large movement away from validation. However, I argue that this is simply a divorce from the attachment of external validation and a commitment and focus to internal validation. Queer-gendered individuals are not aiming to be invisible from themselves and removed from existence, they are instead focusing on the importance of valuing their identity themself instead of depending on others to do it for them. Therefore, the category of Desire for Invisibility is not a showcase of negligence or removal from attempting to be validated, but instead provides insight into the ways validation is not solely based on perceptions of others.
IV.3 High Levels of Agency

When discussing the third thematic category, it is important to operationalize ‘agency’ for my research. ‘Agency’ in this study can be defined as the ability for individuals to produce actions and/or thoughts that are independent of the common social conscience or social facts. This definition relates to the ways in which an individual is capable of defying common understandings of existence while simultaneously knowing what those common understandings are. To put it differently, agency is not a reflection of a lack of intelligence or a lack of awareness, but is simply a reference to a lack of deeply foundational motivation to conform and a more prominent narrative of individuality and personhood.

With regards to my specific research, this concept is imperative because it spotlights the ways in which queer-gendered individuals are not oblivious to the notions of binary gender or uninformed about the ways in which gender is resent in the world. They, instead, are fully aware and capable of understanding binary gender, but chose to deny these standards and expectations in an effort to present according to their identity. Let me be clear- queer-gendered identities are not a choice and not simply a defiant act. Identity is a stronghold and anchoring part of an individual’s personhood. Performing those identities and applying queer-gendered presentation, however, is a choice that any queer-gendered individual can decide upon at any point in their life.

Agency is seen heavily in my research when participants discuss the ways in which they present their identities in both their physical expressions (ways of dressing, walking, talking, accessorizing) and mental expressions (ways of conceptualizing the world around them, types of people they befriend, professions that fit with their characteristics and mannerisms). Respondent 63916 “M” explains how they use agency when determining their identity. They spotlight how agency was imperative when figuring out that they were queer-gendered and how they believe it impacts their life:

“All of these qualities that society has assigned to a woman, assign that to me, before they knew who I was, where they have all these assumptions, all these connotations, all of these things that I didn’t really consent to having, like I never said, Hey, I want this, or I want these things. And I just, I didn’t like that, it never sat well with me. And I realized that, okay, I don’t like being called a woman. What do I like being called a man? Maybe it’s something on the opposite side of the binary. And I realized, no, I don’t”

The above quote showcases agency because M is explicitly stating that they know exactly what societal expectations and standards were placed on them as they were assigned female at birth, and they knew what it meant in society to be male, but they never asked for those standards to be placed on them. They realized that the binary, female-coded connotations as well as the male-coded connotations felt uncomfortable and utilized their ability of agency to defy the binary and access identity-based language that led them to identifying queer-gendered.

Additionally, respondent 01864 “Milo” details how there has been an increase of transgender individuals identifying themselves and offers agency as the explanation: “We’re seeing a lot more people becoming trans. Because, like, purely because that utility of gender is more accessible.” Milo’s explanation details the ways in which utilizing gender as if it is a physical, malleable tool is aiding in the ability for individuals to identify themselves and feel as though they are ready to be outwardly identified. Due to this level of agency, validation is thus easier to attain because the identity has been named, decided on, and internally validated (to some extent) because it is wholly a manifestation of a way of existing that was decided upon based on nothing but that singular individual’s decision.

Validation and agency are highly connected because if an individual can name their identity and decide what their presentation looks like, they are going to be more likely to know what actions, ways of existing, or ways of performing gender feel match their internal identity. Similarly, they will
most likely know what level of outward recognition and interaction matches their internal identity as well. Because of this fact, agency and the ability to defy binary expectations while knowing what is expected boosts validation because it furthers not only an understanding of gender, but it fosters a manifestation of knowing what validation looks like, feels like, and sounds like due to the explorative and deeply-rooted individual nature of agency.

IV.4 Definition of “Validation”

By analyzing not only the participant’s responses but also my thematic categories, an operational definition of ‘validity’ can be made that aligns with the respondent’s manifestations and understandings of validity. The definition of validity that can be understood is as follows: a sense of acceptance, tranquility, and safety as a result of either self or other’s recognition of the person’s queer-gendered identity that has been explored and questioned through the process of agency. All three beginning elements of this definition (acceptance, tranquility, and safety) play a crucial role in the definition and manifestation of validation.

Acceptance is important because an individual can feel safe and comfortable, but not accepted. For example, we can return back to KJ’s response of how their parents are very loving and have a good relationship with them, but they still believe that they have a male daughter and refuse to use KJ’s correct pronouns. While they love KJ and provide a safe and comfortable space for them to exist in, they do not accept them to a level that facilitates validation.

Tranquility becomes important because an individual can feel safe and accepted, but uncomfortable in their given space or situation. For example, M spotlights feeling safe and feeling accepted, but simply being uncomfortable with how their presentation is perceived as they attend their higher education institution:

“I want to look in the mirror and be like, Hey, I look good. This makes me happy. I’ll still have days where I’m like, I’ll put a dress on and put on makeup and everything and I’ll get to the end of the day, come back home and I’m like, that wasn’t the vibe today.”

Here, M is describing how they are not feeling like they are in any danger or feeling as though they are not accepted or unwelcome in their identity, but are simply uncomfortable with the ways in which their existence was perceived by the outside world. For M, this perception is based on a lack of their internal identity matching their external presentation. The example with the dress encapsulates how identity contains a level of inward agency and outward perception. Thus, it is foundational to feel as though an individual is comfortable in those two levels simultaneously in order to feel validated.

Safety is key because, as my previous literature review states, any sense of tranquility or acceptance can not be manifested if safety is not present. Being safe and feeling as though an individual is protected is the very first step to queer-gendered identity and even precedes agency or the exploration process. It is impossible to explore if there is a constant feeling of danger, physical or mental.

While it could be assumed that all three of these elements could be felt through external validation alone, internal (intrinsic) validation is crucial because it allows for the formation of identity to become a process that is not dependent on perception, but instead is dependent on the vitality of self-determination and self-identification. By focusing on intrinsic validation, a queer-gendered individual is able to manifest acceptance, tranquility, and safety in themself without the constant outside pressure of validation throughout their world experience. It is important to note that, because of socialization and the process of internalization of norms and acceptability standards, it is impossible to truly remove oneself from the socially constructed values, definitions, and overall society in which their definitions of validation have been formulated. However, internal validation allows for queer-gendered individuals to find comfort in their own identity instead of depending on the comfort of others’ validation.
Having both internal and external validation is crucial because it allows both self-determination from intrinsic validity and perception from external validation to combine, forming a higher level of compatibility between self conceptualization and outside view. Having only one form of validation would inhibit an individual’s contentment in their expression thus creating tension between the self and the outside world. This relates back to the conceptualization of “tranquility” and its foundational importance in the definition of validity.

V Conclusion

My research centered around the following question: how is validation defined and felt by queer-gendered individuals? This research topic was inclusive of both inward, self-validation which centers around an understood certainty of identity and outward, extrinsic identity, which is dependent on action and recognition of others that matches an individual’s internal queer-gendered identity. My original hypothesis was that certain signals referenced validation, such as being called the correct pronouns. However, the overall purpose of this study was indeed to create a final definition of validation through the analysis of the conducted interviews and the data collected.

The literature review was expansive focusing on socialization and factors that led to feeling validated through the eyes of the general population as well as the eyes of the self. However, through an analysis of the literature I discovered that there was a prominent gap in research relating to gender-queer identities, and, more specifically, relating to individuals who do not hold binary transgender identities. My question remained unanswered through reading previous research and studies and I was still left wanting to examine how individuals felt and defined validation.

Theoretically, I aligned my research with Durkheim and Cooley in an effort to frame my research in the mind of social fact, collective conscience, socialization, and “The Looking Glass Self”. Each one of these perspectives were imperative because they allowed me to look into my research with a trained perspective, thus formulating and manifesting categories of responses that could be explained in the greater social world.

From there, I conducted 10 qualitative interviews using Google Meet due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight of the ten participants were sampled through Instagram and one participant was a result of snowball sampling. All questions that were asked (whether scripted or non-scripted) contained the same level of severity. Additionally, I am a visibly queer individual and I felt as though all of my queer-gendered participants would appreciate a more direct and honest approach to the interview process due to my position as a member of their same community. My identity is important to mention because I believe my identity as queer-gendered is what gave me the capability to talk so openly and directly with the individuals I interviewed. All interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. Overall I had three themes that arose from my participants’ responses: 1) Tranquility in Exploration and Questioning Process, 2) Persistent Binary Expectations, and 3) High Levels of Agency. Each of these themes were further analyzed to create a definition of “validation” with that definition ultimately being “a sense of acceptance, tranquility, and safety as a result of either self or other’s recognition of the person’s queer-gendered identity that has been explored and questioned through the process of agency”. This definition reflects that there must be three key elements in order to feel validation: 1) acceptance, 2) tranquility, and 3) safety. These elements must all be present simultaneously in order for validation to be felt or have the ability to be manifested by a queer-gendered individual.

My research aided in an understanding of validation as well as an understanding of what elements must be present in order for validation to be truly felt. With a limited number of respondents due to time constraints, it would be difficult to generalize the data collected here to the entirety of the queer community. However, I believe that this research shows evidence that queer-gendered individuals manifest validation in similar ways. With my research added to the growing number of studies that examine gender, identity, social constructs, and socialization, a better picture of the ways in
which queer-gendered individuals validate themselves and feel validation from others broadens the understanding of what it means to be queer and how the life-experience of queer people impacts society as a whole. Validation is a link to inclusion and representation which can allow people to access important and foundational institutions like education, health care, and employment. With validation better explored and explained, queer individuals and cisgender individuals alike can communicate on a level of intelligent understanding and inclusion. Therefore, this research is not only imperative to identifying ways in which queer-gendered individuals want validation, need validation, and how it manifests for them in multiple elements of existence, but also for the betterment of society and the cooperation of different identities as a whole.
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