

## **Gender Identity and the Construction of Personal Narratives**

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PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

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August 6th, 2023

***Author note***

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## Abstract

Gender identity is a fundamental aspect of identity development during emerging adulthood. Increasingly conceptualized as a broader construct, gender identity is steering away from traditional positions of gender and towards encompassing a wider range of experiences. Through narratives, individuals construct their gender around the normative identity, giving researchers deeper insight into identity development. Moreover, to examine the effects of gender on narration means also to examine the positioning of gender identity within an overarching socio-cultural structure and the nature of the stories emerging from it. This study aims to implement such an approach in the context of vividness of personal narratives, where instead of looking at gender differences, we examine differences in positioning with a narrative. We investigate the question of whether differences in narrative vividness are related to differences in the experiences of positioning with gender identity? To answer this, a sample of 85 students participated in an online survey assessing their experience with their gender identity through both questionnaire and narrative prompts. The individual's experiences were measured as gender alignment, exploration, and centrality as components of gender identity positioning, while narrative vividness was coded as valence and specificity of narratives. Statistical analysis found no influence of the selected facets of gender identity on narrative vividness, but confirmed the potential relationship between gender identity labels and gender-typical experiences, indicating possible directions for a more nuanced study of gender. However, due to the limitations of the study, further research is needed to reach more conclusive results.

*Keywords:* gender identity, gender-typicality, personal narratives, narrative differences

## Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a turbulent time in identity development, hallmarked by a consideration of various dimensions of the self (McLean, 2005). Gender is one such critical aspect - a fundamental construct that sets the stage for a deeper understanding of identity. This understanding is a complex process involving the construction of a sense of personal continuity (McLean et al., 2017). Within gender identity development, there are implicit embodied aspects of identity, coupled with explicit knowledge and adherence to gender stereotypical social roles, attitudes, behaviors, or traits (Fivush & Haden, 2003, p.150). In contemporary emerging adults, these norms are more regularly challenged, allowing for a change in societal assumptions and an embracement of a more nuanced understanding of gender identity. As such, gender identity involves a variety of experiences involving both internal engagement as well as engagement with the cultural context that shapes it. Contextual influences on gender identity and subsequent development of a coherent personal life story are oftentimes expressed through language and narratives, thus providing a framework to examine experiences and how they are demonstrated through narratives (Adler et al., 2017).

The personal narrative is shaped through experiences which create an internalized life story centered around personally meaningful events; the narratives that emerge from these experiences tell the stories of how one's identity is constructed. (McLean & Syed, 2015; McAdams et al., 2006). In essence, the narrative consists of the stories one constructs to conceptualize and communicate their identity in order to bring coherence and meaning to their life across time, providing retrospective and prospective purpose (McAdams, 2018; Erikson, 1968). This autobiographical project connects experiences and identity, shaping self-defining memories, the most basic units of narrative identity, and integrating episodes within the life story

along the guiding and contextual influences of the environment (Singer et al., 2013). For self-defining memories that create narratives, narrative vividness is often emphasized due to its personal and emotional significance, providing quantifiable evidence on the perception of events. Vividness here refers to the extent to which a narrative is expressive and brings forward emotional experiences (Cox & McAdams, 2019). Vividness of narratives is the focus of this paper, where we seek to examine the relationship between experiences with gender identity and narrative establishment through a more continuous view of gender, shaped by context.

### **Master Narrative Framework**

The master narrative framework can be used to articulate the relationship between individual identity and socio-cultural influences. The framework provides a metric by which the intersection between facets of identity and societal norms can be examined as narrative constructions (McLean & Syed, 2015). Here, individuals incorporate and change pre-existing social narratives, serving as material or templates on the expected life story of an individual within that context. The normative narrative is the master narrative, or story of a certain culture that provides guidance for group membership (McLean & Syed, 2015). Considering this narrative cannot fit the experience of all members within that context, the alternative narrative serves as a contrast for those that do not position themselves with the norm. This allows for individuals deviating from it to discern a sub-group more similar to their experience (McLean et al., 2017). In seeking out a more representative narrative, individuals must still engage with the master narrative, not only acknowledging it, but also facing constraints imposed by it (Barsigian et al., 2023). In doing so, the social narrative inadvertently shapes how personal narratives are communicated and positioned within the socio-cultural structure (Azmitia et al., 2008). While this conceptualization of personal narratives can be used as a tool to examine various facets of

identity, we focus specifically on gender identity due to its applicability. Gender's silence and deep cultural assumptions prominent in multiple domains of life lends itself to this framework (Barsigian et al., 2023; Bradford & Syed, 2019; McLean et al., 2019).

### *Gender Identity and Personal Narratives*

Gender is a fundamental aspect of personal identity that varies across individuals and contexts (Barsigian et al., 2023). It is defined as the way people understand themselves as male or female in the cultural context. This includes the socially imposed characteristics of women, men, and intersex people - such as relationships, norms, and roles (McLean et al., 2016). Such imposition forges a clear link between the master narrative and gender. Life expectations make up the gendered master narrative and can pressure one to align with any given identity, in this case pushing for gender-typicality. Usually, this involves either gender identity defined as binary, fixed, and determined at birth, or assumes an unequal and inherently different role of men and women within society, creating a hierarchy of power between positionings (Barsigian et al., 2020; Porter, 2015). Differentiation between gender identities demonstrates the dialectic between the master and the alternative narratives, pushing the process by which an individual deviating from the norm constructs their personal narrative (McLean et al., 2019).

For those that do not position themselves with these values and behaviors, the construction of a personal narrative requires more conscious engagement with both the master and alternative narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015). Furthermore, the individual must either accept the norm and act accordingly, or engage with it further and seek out other possible narratives, thus creating vastly different positionings and experiences with gender identity (Hammack & Cohler, 2009, p. 301). In deviating from the norm, engagement with the narrative

provides a way of coping with lack of community, either through exploration of alternatives, or awareness of identity as a central aspect of the self (McLean et al., 2017). The process of gender identity conceptualisation creates experiences that are integrated within the personal narrative. Core beliefs are exemplified with vivid detailed, sensory, contextual, and emotional features. (Cox & McAdams, 2019). Thus, this illustrates individuals' engagement with the context and its influence on their positioning with the narrative.

These positionings are what we will refer to as 'alignment' between individual experience and the story one is a part of. Increasing alignment with a narrative bridges the potential discrepancy between individual narrative position and that imposed by the environment, thus creating a community to which they belong (Bradford & Syed, 2019). This helps avoid potential negative mental health outcomes and feelings of alienation or inadequacy due to not fitting in with the narrative one positioned themselves with (Barr et al., 2016; Careless & Douglas, 2008). This constraint applies to those aligning with the master narrative as well, albeit less apparent due to the tendency to unconsciously internalize the dominant narrative (McLean et al., 2017; Puckett et al., 2015). Alignment with a narrative, in short, is the feeling of belonging to a community and events highlighting this position, or lack thereof, strongly engaging emotional processes which can be seen in the narratives themselves (Cox, 2013; D'Argembreau & Van der Linden, 2008).

In seeking out a narrative that elicits a sense of belonging, active engagement with them serves as a means from which the personal narrative develops. Here, we refer to this as 'exploration', how one investigates the existing narratives and incorporates them into their personal narrative (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). In other words, it is a means by which those that do not entirely align themselves with a master narrative develop their positioning with other,

possibly alternative narratives. This elicits higher reasoning or depth of processing in understanding the self in order to avoid feelings of uncertainty and ultimately commit to more specific context to place one's identity in (McLean et al., 2017) The active process of exploration brings about the opportunity to engage in narrative construction both intrinsically, through reflection, and extrinsically, through communication with others (Bost et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2017). This frequency in narration can be linked to an increase in coherence and understanding of life events where; at its simplest, increased repetition of narrative refines the narrative itself (Blagov & Singer, 2004).

Once committing to a narrative one aligns with, centrality of identity can play an additional function of mitigating the potential experiences of discrimination and oppression from the master narrative (Settles, 2004; Lurye et al., 2008; Tillewein et al., 2022). Centrality can be understood as salience of identity since aligning with certain narratives more than others can increase awareness of it and the experiences pertaining to it (McLean et al., 2017). To those that experience stress from their gender identity, whether from engaging in that role or being stigmatized due to it, centrality can decrease the negative psychological outcomes resulting from such experiences by contributing to a strengthened feeling of belonging in aligning with a narrative (Sellers et al., 2003). For example, those that identify with gender roles outside of the binary norm, negative mental health outcomes due to discrimination can be lowered with higher centrality of gender identity (Settles, 2004). Centrality increases identification with a narrative, thus increasing awareness of experiences related to the domain of identity one attaches significance to. In essence, identity centrality creates a viewpoint through the lens of that identity, allowing those individuals to engage in more identity-relevant experiences (Hinton et al., 2021). Similar to both alignment and exploration processes, this increased identification and



engagement with experiences, both refines narratives and shapes the perception of them (Thomsen et al., 2023; Rubin et al., 2014).

### **Previous studies**

Current literature on this topic claims differences in narrative vividness sought primarily through gender identity labels; namely, differences in narrative production between men and women. A number of studies have seen gender differences in reporting self-defining memories and the narrative vividness that emerges, finding that women construct more elaborative and emotive narratives than men (Fivush & Haden, 2003). However, inconsistent findings have emerged across studies, leading researchers to question whether categorical gender entirely contributes to such differences (Gryzman et al., 2016). Further examining this effect, studies have found differences can be attributed to socialization. Potentially linking to the narrative style of parents being directed differently to both, it appeared emotive expression was more emphasized in gendered narratives in girls than in boys when parents tell stories to their children (Gryzman & Hudson, 2013). Still, effects are more conflicting for adults, indicating potential individual differences within this context. Such differences may be attributed also to the extent to which individuals 'subscribe' to the normative identity and its values, or how gender-typical they are (Gryzman et al., 2016; Martin & Ruble, 2010; Tobin et al., 2010).

Gryzman et al. (2016) suggested that this domain of gender identity should be additionally tackled to examine such conflicting research, and to employ a more mixed methods approach to it, utilizing both narratives and other measures to examine narrative differences and positioning with gender identity. In doing so, they found that more gender-typically identifying individuals additionally demonstrated such differences in narrative vividness. Still, these studies

primarily focus on gender-typicality in the traditional, binary sense. As such, we aim to expand on this definition by incorporating previous findings and extending them to the variability and nuance that gender identity contains in investigating the vividness of narrative construction.

### **The Current Study**

In the present study, we examine if differences in positioning with gender identity are related to differences in narrative vividness. We focus on event-specific episodes regarding gender orientation, which capture the vivid component of narratives emerging differently between gender positionings. We expand on conceptualization of gender by likening it with experiences with gender typicality, which we further define as alignment, exploration, and centrality. Based on this, we expected that individuals aligning less with their identity will produce narratives higher in vividness. Furthermore, we expected that individuals that explore their gender identity more will produce narratives higher in specificity. Finally, we expected that individuals for whom gender identity is more central to them will produce narratives higher in overall vividness, both in valence and specificity.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

A total of 85 participants falling within the age range of emerging adulthood (18-29) were recruited through a combination of online advertisements and an online experiment management system specifically targeting first-year psychology students at a Dutch university. Those who chose to participate via the system received course credits upon successful completion of the study, while other participants did not receive any form of compensation, making the majority of the participants first-year psychology students ( $N=59$ ).

## Measures

### *Demographics and identity labels*

Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information regarding their age, nationality, sex, and English language fluency. In this section participants were also asked to select applicable labels for their gender and sexual identity as well as a brief description of said identities in order to offer a more elaborative measure of both. The self-descriptions were not used for analysis, but can be found with all other demographic questions in Appendix A.

### *Alignment*

Gender alignment was measured using the entirety of the Adult Gender Typicality Scale (Tate et al., 2015) which has 6 items rated on a 1-7 Likert-type scale with higher scores indicating more alignment with gender identity. The wording of “men ” and “women” in this scale was substituted with “people with my gender identity” in order to accommodate those that identify other gender identities. Example items included: “I feel I fit in with other people with my gender identity” and “I think I am a good example of other people with my gender identity” (see Appendix B for the entire scale). Reliability was strong, with Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha=0.89$ .

### *Exploration*

Gender identity exploration was measured using the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Crocetti et al., 2010). The UMICS *in-depth exploration* measure was adapted to measure gender identity specifically and consisted of 13 questions ranked on a 1-5 Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher exploration. The scale initially contained the same 13 questions, only for different identity domains. The modification for this study consisted of switching out the word “education” or “best friend” to “gender identity”. Example items included: “I often reflect on my gender identity” and “I try to find out a lot about my gender

identity” (see Appendix C for the entire scale). The Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was good, with  $\alpha=0.79$ .

### *Centrality*

To measure centrality of gender identity, sections from the Multilayered Gender Identity Questionnaires (Eiseman, 2017) were taken. This consisted of 5 items scored on a 1-7 Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher gender identity centrality. Example items included: “My gender identity is a very important part of who I am” and “I feel that other people cannot have a thorough understanding of me without my gender identity” (see Appendix D for entire scale). However, the instrument's internal consistency was poor, with Cronbach’s alpha  $\alpha=0.18$ .

### *Narrative Prompts*

The questions asked participants to think of an important life event that influenced their identity/self-perception and another important life event that influenced their experience with gender. They were encouraged to give as much detail as they could, their feelings at the moment, and why that moment stands out to them. These prompts are in line with the common structure of narrative prompts (Adler et al., 2017). The structure of both our narrative prompts was as follows:

*“Please describe a scene, episode, or specific moment in your life that stands out as important to how you see yourself specifically in regard to your gender identity/how you see yourself as a person. Please describe this scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please also describe why you think this particular moment stands out to you now and what the scene may say about who you are in terms of your gender identity/how you see yourself as a person.”*

## **Design & Procedure**

The study was a mixed methods research design using a cross sectional survey along with qualitative narrative prompts in order to answer the research question. An online survey was used to collect data and was hosted by Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). After receiving information about the study, participants were asked to give consent to the processing of personal data, as outlined previously, with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any moment.

After actively agreeing to the study, participants were first asked to provide demographic information, as well as respond to items regarding their gender and sexual identities. The second portion of the study contained the 31 Likert-type questions on multiple scales to measure alignment, exploration, and centrality. Finally, participants were asked to answer two open-ended narrative questions that prompted them to recall episodes central to their identity and gender identity respectively. The order of questions was counterbalanced in order to account for the order impacting salience of memories. Upon completion of the study, participants were offered the opportunity to give feedback and were debriefed, summarizing the study once again. Here, they were also provided with resources in helping with gender identity issues in the situation they felt stressed or uncomfortable during the study.

### **Data Preparation & Coding**

After data collection, data were downloaded in an Excel spreadsheet where all personal identifying information was redacted from the narrative prompt responses. These redacted narrative prompts were then encoded and analyzed using the coding software atlas.ti. The data from the online survey server was deleted as well as the downloaded raw data and the raw data files were temporarily stored within the university system and pseudoanonymized. Participants were removed after having identified the same participant completing the study twice or by not providing complete narratives (e.g. “hoi”).

## **Narrative Coding**

The narrative measures the structure of narratives for a general self defining memory and for a specific self defining memory relating to gender identity. This was done in order to control for differences in narration in general, and for gender specifically. Namely, in order to provide an account of self-defining memories specific to gender identity and not and to see whether the two are different. The variables of narrative structure were later coded are valency and specificity. The research team was involved in coding the narratives; the student coded all narratives for beginning and end valence and specificity twice and the thesis supervisor independently checked the codes by coding 10% of the narratives.

### ***Valence***

The start and the end segments of the narrative were coded for valence. Determining the segments of the narratives was based on the narrative arc, following the implications outlined by a pre-existing study (McLean et al., 2016). The start segment, referred to as the ‘exposition’, was identified as the initial section of the narrative and the end segment, or the ‘resolution’, was identified as the concluding section of the narrative. For narratives that were too short and did not exhibit a narrative arc, the start segment was determined as the first coherent or meaningful sentence or few words, and the end segment was determined as the last coherent or meaningful sentence or few words. In the case of narratives consisting of only one sentence, the start and end segments were the same unless there was a stark difference in content.

A 5-point scale (-2 to +2) was used to classify the start and end valence of the narratives; the scale classified valence as highly negative, negative, neutral, positive, and highly positive respectively. The difference between “highly positive/negative” or “positive/negative” was determined by the dimensional Arousal-Valence model where pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral

emotions as well whether they were high or low in arousal were attributed to each of the categories (Wiem & Lachiri, 2017). Additionally, for those segments that contained vague language, coding was context dependent and a personal estimate of the coder. The coding manual as well as specific examples for this construct can be found in Appendix E.

### ***Specificity***

The coding scheme for narrative specificity used a 5-category classification from most to least specific for differing narratives. The coding scheme included three types of specific narratives (Type 1 “pure specific”, Type 2 “episodic”, and Type 3 “generalized”) and two types of non-specific narratives (Type 4 “episodic non-specific” and Type 5 “generalized non-specific”) (Bagov & Singer, 2004). The differentiation from least to most specific was made based on how close to a single-event narrative was provided, the more generalization or abstraction, the less specific the narrative code was assigned. The coding manual as well as specific examples for this construct can be found in Appendix E.

### **Analysis Plan**

The independent variables were alignment, exploration, and centrality of gender identity while the dependent variables were valence and specificity of narratives about gender identity. Prior to beginning analysis, the variable valence was calculated through the absolute value of the sum of start and the end valence in order to determine the overall score of the narratives. Since the intensity of valence rather than the direction is the focus of this paper, this variable was used for all further analysis. However, the individual start and end valence were used separately in post-hoc exploratory analysis. Prior to testing the hypotheses, data were tested for normality and linearity assumptions, as well as descriptive statistics for both independent and dependent variables. In the situation where data showed non-normal distribution, this violation did not pose

major problems to results due to the large enough sample size ( $N > 30$ ), therefore, we assume normality (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012).

After an preliminary analysis and visual inspection of the data, Hypothesis 1 which was that lower alignment with gender leads to higher narrative valence was investigated using linear regression. Hypothesis 2, which was that higher exploration of gender identity leads to higher narrative specificity, was investigated using ordinal regression due to the nature of specificity categorization. Finally, Hypothesis 3, which was that higher centrality leads to higher narrative valence and specificity, was tested using both linear and ordinal regression, for each part of the hypothesis separately. Along with descriptives, box-plots and frequency graphs were created in order to further demonstrate the distribution of both the questionnaire data and the narratives. Correlations were also computed to test for the strength and direction of the relationship between alignment and valence, exploration and specificity, and centrality with both valence and specificity. Finally, post-hoc exploratory analysis correlated incorporated demographic information such as gender, sexual identity, and age to see other potential relationships between the measured variables. The analysis used a 95% confidence interval to determine the significance of the results.

## **Results**

### **Participants & Preliminary Analysis**

Out of the 91 participants that were initially recruited for the study, 6 were removed during this stage; the final sample consisted of 85 participants. Participants were on average 21 years old ( $SD = 1.952$ , range: 18-26). In regard to gender identity, 60% of participants indicated their gender label as “woman”, 34.1% labeled themselves as “man”, while 2.4% participants

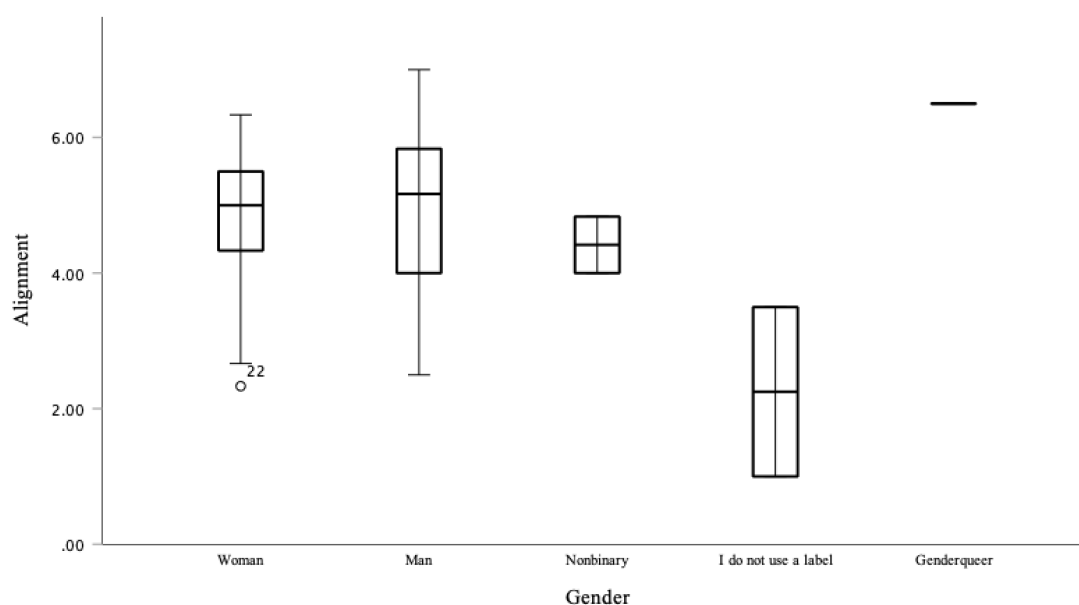


identified as “nonbinary”, 2.4% also “preferred not to use a label”, and the least prevalent label was “genderqueer” with only 1.2%.

The mean rating for alignment with gender was 4.82 ( $SD=1.0998$ ); as Graphs 1-3 show participants who identified as “woman” and “man” appeared to differ only slightly in terms of their alignment with men scoring higher in alignment and with more variation, while participants who “preferred not to use a label” appeared to score lower on the measure overall. For exploration of gender, the mean rating was 2.43 ( $SD=0.557$ ), where participants who identified as “men” noticeably scored lower than “women” and with less variation. Those identifying as other labels also showed a noticeably higher score than with alignment, and with less variation. Finally, the mean rating for centrality was 3.81 ( $SD=0.874$ ). Here, those identifying as “men” scored lower than every other identification.

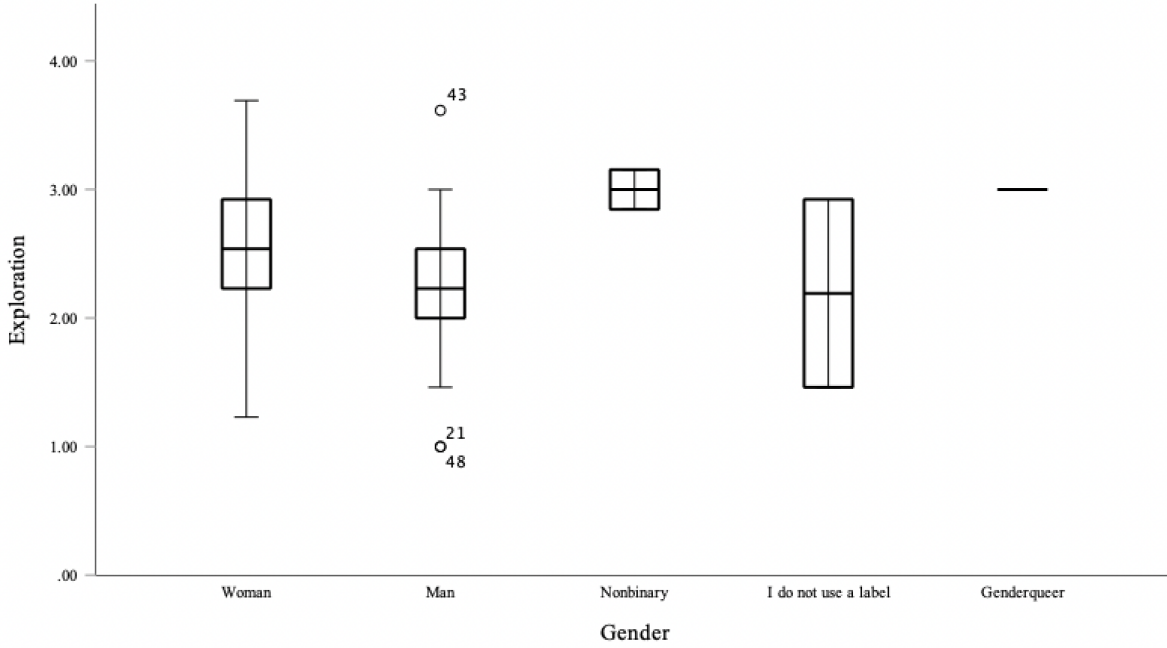
### Graph 1

*Box-plot showing distribution of alignment score for each gender label*



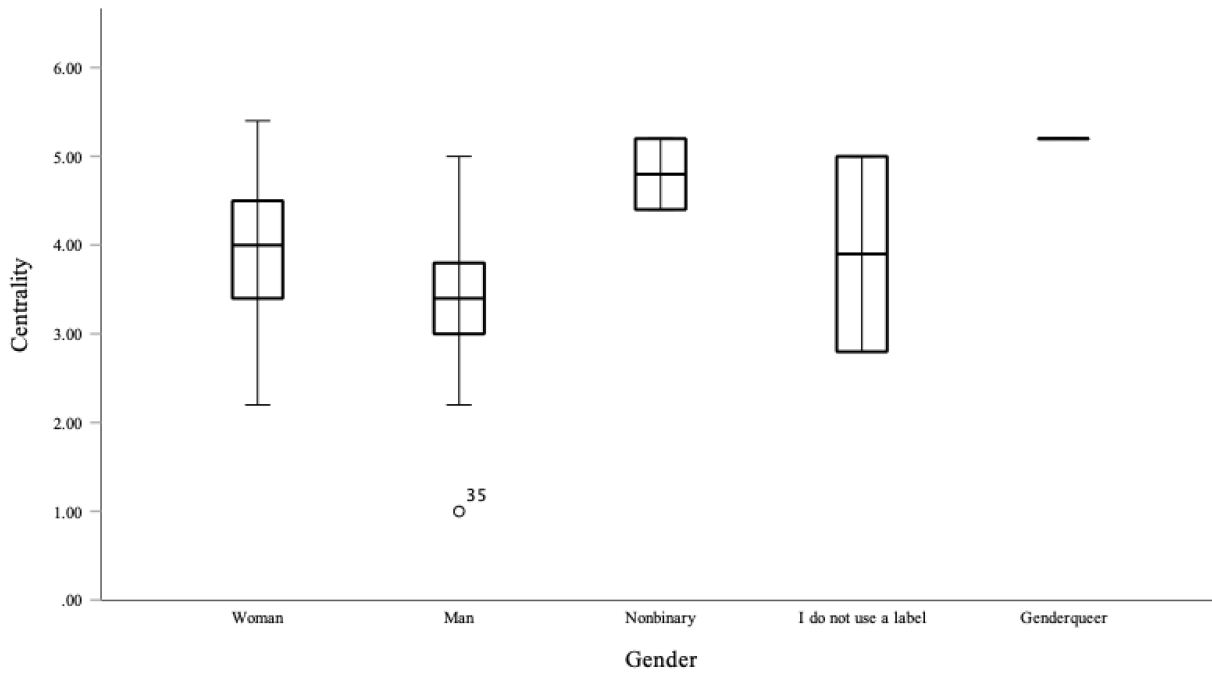
**Graph 2**

*Box-plot showing distribution of exploration score for each gender label*



**Graph 3**

*Box-plot showing distribution of centrality score for each gender label*



Notably, as indicated by both Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality tests - variables exploration and centrality were normally distributed while variable alignment, gender narrative valence and specificity were non-normal ( $p > 0.001$ ). This is further supported by the value of skewness shown in Table 1 and in the histogram graphs in Appendix F-G. It appears that participants' scores are slightly more skewed to the right and have more frequent responses towards the “agree” direction of the scale for the variable alignment than for exploration and centrality where there is a normal distribution. Additionally, the outliers identified from those graphs were not removed from the data due to the qualitative nature of the study (Phoenix & Orr, 2017).

Overall valence was low, the mean score was 1.718 ( $SD=1.297$ ); the histogram for overall valence can be found in Appendix I. Furthermore, frequency calculations show that narrative valence was low with the most frequent score of 1 with 28.2%, indicating low valence. Looking at separate start and end valence scores, the start valence was primarily neutral 50.6% of narratives starting neutral, then 32.9% started negative, and 16.5% started positive. For end valence, there was a more positive leaning, where narratives ended primarily positive with 43.5%, then 28.2% being neutral, and negative valence was found in 28.2%. For narrative specificity the most frequent score was 5 with 38.8%, indicating the most frequent narrative was the Type 5 generalized non-specific narrative. Specific narratives (Type 1-3) made up 44.7% of narratives and non-specific narratives (Type 4 and 5) made up 55.3%.

Finally, Pearson's  $r$  were calculated for survey results and narrative variables as can be found in Table 2. Here, the two predictors exploration and centrality were strongly positively correlated. While not related to the hypothesis, this provides more insight into the measures.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics*

	M	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
			Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Alignment	4.82	1.10	-.75	.26	.73	.52
Centrality	3.81	.87	-.30	.26	.17	.52
Exploration	2.43	.56	-.41	.26	.22	.52
Valence	2.72	2.64	.86	.26	-.49	.52
Specificity	3.24	1.60	-0.92	.26	-1.62	.52

**Table 2***Correlations Table*

	Alignment	Centrality	Exploration	Valence	Specificity
Alignment	1				
Centrality	.00	1			
Exploration	.18	.63**	1		
Valence Gender	-.05	.12	-.06	1	
Specificity Gender	-.17	.00	-.07	-.17	1

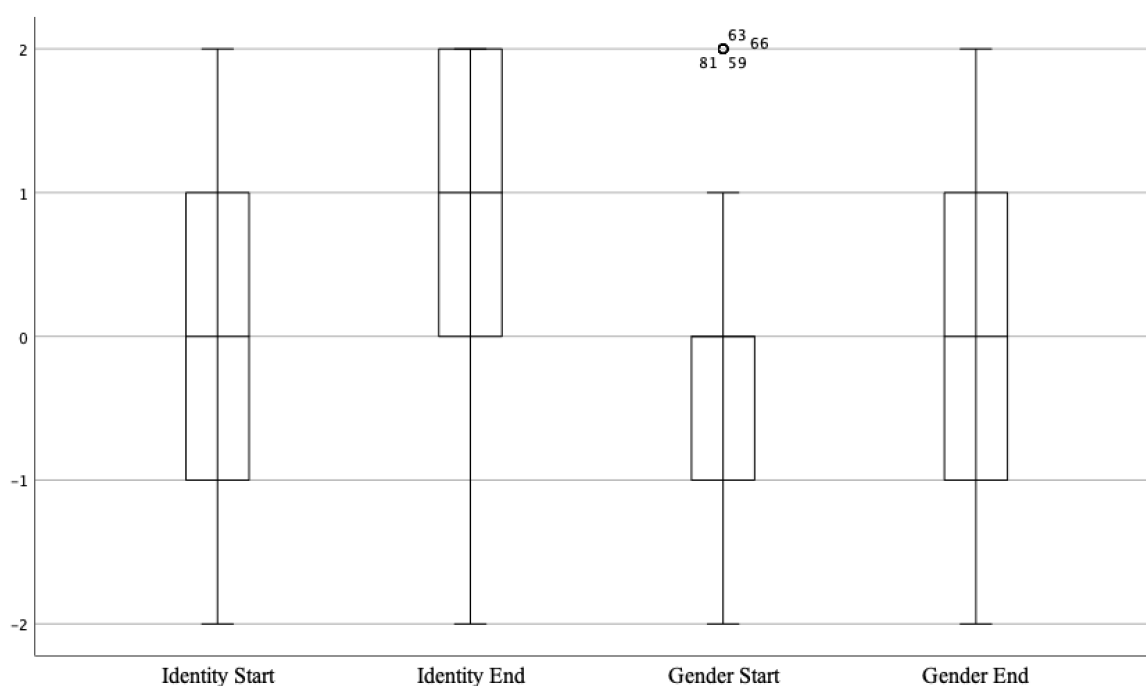
*Note.* \*\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.01$

Gender and general identity narrative specificity had a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.357$ ) while valence showed only a slight, nonsignificant correlation ( $r = 0.186$ ). Moreover, valence and specificity for the gender narrative and the general identity narrative showed no

difference between the two, while some differences between start and end valence for gender and general identity narratives can be seen in Graph 4. Gender narratives start with lower valence than they end and gender narrative valence both starts and ends more negatively than identity narratives. Furthermore, T-test shows significant difference between gender identity start and end ( $p < 0.001$ ) while there is no such significant difference for the start and end valence for general identity narratives.

#### Graph 4

*Box-plot depicting distribution of both start and end valence for both narratives*



#### Primary Analysis

*Hypothesis 1.* To test the hypothesis that individuals lower in alignment with gender identity produce narratives higher in valence, we examined alignment scores and valence scores to determine whether changes in changes in alignment are associated with changes in narrative valence. Opposing our expectations, Pearson's  $r$  calculation showed alignment was not correlated

with valence with very slightly negative, insignificant correlation ( $r=-.0.5$ , see Table 1). Moreover, there was no significant increase in narrative valence associated with a decrease in alignment with gender identity ( $B = -0.027$ ,  $t(83) = -0.250$ ,  $p = 0.803$ ). This also did not explain the significant proportion of the variance in valence score ( $R^2 = .001$ ,  $F(1, 83) = 0.062$ ,  $p = 0.803$ ). This leads us to reject our hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2.* To test the hypothesis that greater exploration of gender identity produces narratives that are more specific, we examined the associated change between both variables. Exploration was insignificantly negatively correlated with specificity ( $r=-0.07$ , see Table 1). Increase in exploration with gender identity did not significantly lead to an increase in the specificity of narratives, where the proportional odds model showed no significant effects ( $B=0.045$ ,  $W(1) = 0.040$ ,  $p=0.841$ ). Additionally, it also did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in specificity of narratives ( $R^2 = 0.003$ ) as seen through the Cox and Snell Pseudo R-Square. These results also are not in support of our hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3.* To test our hypothesis that individuals scoring higher in centrality will produce more valent and specific narratives, we separately examined the association between centrality and valence and centrality and specificity. Similar to the previous hypotheses, centrality had no significant correlation with valence ( $r=0.12$ ) or specificity ( $r=0.00$ , see Table 1) of narratives. For the relationship between centrality and narrative specificity, the results strongly suggested there is no significant increase in specificity from an increase in centrality ( $p=0.841$ ) while there was no proportion of variance explained by the variable ( $R^2=0.000$ ). Similarly, relationship between centrality and valence showed no significant relationship between the two variables ( $B = 0.177$ ,  $t(83) = 1.653$ ,  $p=0.106$ ) and the proportion of explained

variance was low ( $R^2 = .031$ ,  $F(1, 83) = 2.674$ ,  $p = 0.106$ ). Finally, these results lead us to reject this hypothesis as well.

### **Exploratory Analysis**

Post hoc linear regression between exploration centrality revealed a strongly significant relationship ( $B = 0.633$ ,  $t(83) = 7.449$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As exploratory analysis, demographic data was correlated with both the gender identity survey data and the narrative valence and specificity. There was also a slight, significant positive correlation between sexual identity with both exploration ( $r = 0.270$ ) and centrality ( $r = 0.303$ ) and a slight negative correlation with alignment ( $r = -0.221$ ), while gender identity did not. Moreover, gender identity and sexuality identity were significantly, negatively correlated ( $r = -0.804$ ). However, further analysis found that it was only gender that was significantly correlated with alignment ( $F(1, 4) = 4.019$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), while sexuality showed no correlation between either predictor or outcome variables. Moreover, comparison probabilistic changes between gender or sexuality and specificity indicated no significant association between either variables, the same applied for differences in narrative valence means for each label.

### **Discussion**

Our aim was to investigate differences in engagement with gender identity and how they relate to differences in narrative vividness. Gender identity is undergoing a change in conceptualization through emerging adults' nuanced and elaborative ways of engaging with gender. Similar to other studies examining gender identity development, we used the narrative approach to investigate the way these new perspectives on gender identity influence the construction of narratives (Boals, 2010; Compère et al., 2018; Fivush et al., 2012). Therefore, we examined the ways in which individuals position themselves in terms of their gender, and

consequently, the ways this is emoted in narratives. By investigating the extent to which individuals identify with their gender in terms of alignment, exploration, and centrality, we measured the subsequent vividness, or valence and specificity of their constructed personal narratives.

## **Findings**

We examined identification with gender, or gender-typicality, through the processes involved in the construction of a personal narrative (Gryzman, Fivush, et al., 2016). Based on this, we expected that individuals higher in alignment will produce more valent narratives due to their emotional nature, that higher exploration will produce more specific narratives due to repetition, and that higher centrality produces both higher valence and specificity due to salience of identity. We found no significant results for any of our three hypotheses, suggesting that there is no association between gender identity positioning and narrative vividness. Interestingly, this opposes previous studies examining this topic. Namely, gender-typicality rather than categorical gender identity did not seem to be a predictor of narrative vividness (Gryzman et al., 2016).

However, more in-line with typical research on gender differences and narrative vividness, we also did not find gender labels to predict narrative vividness. Previous research into gender differences in narrative vividness has found mixed results. In those finding gender differences, typically men have less vivid narratives than women (Fivush & Haden, 2003; McLean, 2005; Schlagman et al., 2009). Such findings suggest that culture, age, or other contextual factors may play a greater role in narration (Rubin et al., 2018). Potentially, that being gender-typical provides better conceptualization of gender and its effects on narrative production (McLean et al., 2017). Alternatively, as argued in a study finding no differences, it could be that gender differences within such psychological variables simply do not exist and and, as such,



show no differences in narrative valence (Stelzer et al., 2019). However, this is not possible to confirm here, especially since differences in start and end valence were found for gendered narratives, indicating a more discernable pattern in narration of gender, similar previous research taking a more content-based approach (Fivush & Gryzman, 2021; McLean et al., 2017; Singer, 2004)

Findings from our exploratory analysis suggest that there might be gender differences in gender-typicality, or positioning within the normative experience. First, alignment was related to gender and, within our sample, it appeared that individuals were more aligned with their gender identity and engaged less in exploration and centrality behaviors, especially for individuals identifying as men. While not statistically significant, this is in-line with existing literature on the topic, postulating that alignment with the master narrative requires a more unconscious process, thus limiting the extent to which an individual explores it or finds it central to their identity as it is not a positioning one is often aware of (McLean & Syed, 2015) Furthermore, this is also supported by the gender identity labels of the sample, with the majority identifying as normative identities. While this does not mean that strong alignment occurs only within the binary view of gender, in fact some studies suggest otherwise, it shows that there may be a possible link between these two variables (Bradford & Syed, 2019; McLean, 2017).

### **Implications**

Based on previous studies highlighting the importance of context and alignment of gender identity, these results indicate that gender-typicality might not be a predictor of the vividness of narratives, but it could be of the content of narratives. The difference between start and end valence found could imply further investigation between changes within narratives, explaining more about narratives both in terms of direction and extent. Such changes between

the ‘exposition’ and ‘resolution’ of gendered narratives may indicate a change in content, or the meaning conveyed with such changes (Fivush & Grysman, 2021). Therefore, meaning-based analysis of narratives could indicate a possible direction for further research.

While insignificant, these results may have an impact on how we conceptualize gender identity in a novel way only recently researched. To an extent, this was in-line with previous conceptions of gender within the Master Narrative Framework. Being ones in a position of power within the current normative narrative, those identifying as men were most aligned with their gender, explored less, and found it less central to their identity when compared to other identification with gender. Those not using a label had lowest alignment scores, further supporting the conceptualization proposed by the model (McLean & Syed, 2015). While this was not the focus of this paper, this provides a possible direction for future research, focusing more specifically on such positionings and challenging our current understanding of gender in research.

### **Limitations & Strengths**

This study provides interesting perspectives of gender and the construction of self-defining narratives. In focusing on gender-typicality, we found possible inclusive and telling ways of understanding gender identity and relating its effects on narrative construction. Moreover, the use of mixed methods provides a more comprehensive way to approach the topic. However, it is important to note the limitations inherent in the design of this study and suggest improvements for future research. In regards to the sample, it was small and WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic); mainly composed of heterosexual females. This poses issues to the representativeness and the power of the present study, with minority groups being too few to have a representative sample. To provide richer information to the study,

investigating a more diverse sample, primarily of people with gender identification outside the normative identity, would be beneficial in order to get a better understanding of individuals both within and outside of traditional gender identification.

Additionally, administration of the study as an online survey could have potentially hindered the extensiveness of participants' answers. Being both questionnaire and open-question format, the survey was received as lengthy by participants, thus limiting the amount of detail provided when answering the narrative prompts. With it being online, moreover, many participants provided less than what we expected to be the minimum amount of narrative, possibly due to survey fatigue (Backgor et al., 2007). On the other hand however, the online administration of the narrative prompt gave participants the opportunity to answer within their own time and comfort, thus putting less pressure on their answer. A possible solution to this would be to allow participants to answer the survey in a controlled setting, rather than allowing the study to be done online or through an interview. In terms of the content of the survey itself, there could have been potentially issues with the scales used. Adapting existing scales with modifications could have interfered with the constructs measured. This was further demonstrated by the low internal consistency on the centrality scale. Future research could focus on a specific scale and expand on it further to insure its appropriateness.

Finally the process of coding could be improved. Some narratives were vague and difficult to code. Moreover, with only one primary coder, there was a lack of confirmation with another person to resolve such conflicting narratives. This is especially influential in the situations where the coder had to use personal judgment in coding for valence, leading to potential biases in evaluating the narratives. For example, personal relevance of some narratives could have changed how coding was approached. Furthermore, the second evaluator checking

10% of the codes who was also not blind to the aims of the study, there was no reliability scoring conducted. In order to account for this in future research, it would benefit to implement multiple coders.

### **Conclusion**

The current study suggests no difference between the way one experiences gender identity and narrative vividness construction. While we expected to see influences of gender alignment, exploration, and centrality on narrative valence or specificity based on positionings within the master narrative of gender identity, we found no conclusive evidence supporting these claims. These results may indicate a lack of relationship between such a conceptualization of gender identity and narrative constructions or they may point to improper measurements that need to be explored further. However, possible new directions in understanding gender identity construction through gender-typicality were identified. Future research is necessary in order to expand on the presented results and to address the current limitations.

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## Appendix A

### Demographic Questions

1. What is your age? [Text response]
2. What is your nationality? [Text response]
3. What is your proficiency level in speaking, reading, and writing English?
  - a. Fluent
  - b. Intermediate
  - c. Beginner
  - d. Not proficient
4. What sex were you assigned at birth?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Intersex
  - d. Prefer not to answer
5. What is your sexual orientation?
  - a. Straight (heterosexual)
  - b. Lesbian
  - c. Gay
  - d. Bisexual
  - e. Queer
  - f. Pansexual
  - g. Asexual
  - h. I am not sure
  - i. Prefer not to answer
  - j. Other (Please specify: \_\_)
6. There are many unique experiences people have with sexual identity that cannot rely solely on categories. How would you describe yourself in terms of your sexual identity? Feel free to provide as short or long of an answer as necessary. [Text response]
7. How would you label your current gender identity? Please select all that apply:
  - a. Woman
  - b. Transwoman
  - c. Man
  - d. Transman
  - e. Genderqueer
  - f. Transgender
  - g. Nonbinary
  - h. I do not use any label for my gender identity
  - i. I do not identify as gendered
  - j. Other (please specify: \_\_)

8. How would you describe yourself in terms of your gender? For some people, gender labels are an adequate reflection of their gender identity, while others might feel the need to elaborate on their experience of gender identity. Feel free to provide as short or long of an answer as necessary. [Text response]

### Appendix B

#### Alignment Scale (Tate et al., 2015)

People of any gender identity have a range of feelings about how typical they are in comparison to other people of the same gender identity. Please read each statement and indicate your agreement with it.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel just like people with my gender identity my age.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I fit in with other people with my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think I am a good example of other people with my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that what I like to do in my spare time is similar to what most people with my gender identity like to do in their spare time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that the things I am good at are similar to what most people with my gender identity are good at.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my personality is similar to most people with my gender identity's personalities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Appendix C

#### Exploration Scale (Crocetti et al., 2010)

Please indicate to which degree you agree with statements:

	Completely untrue	Untrue	Sometimes true/sometimes not	True	Completely True
My gender identity gives me security in life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My gender identity gives me self-confidence.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My gender identity makes me feel sure of myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My gender identity gives me security for the future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My gender identity allows me to face the future with optimism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I try to find out a lot about my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often reflect on my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I make a lot of effort to keep finding out new things about my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often try to find out what other people think about my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often talk with other people about my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often think it would be better to try to find a different gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often think that a different gender identity would make my life more interesting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In fact, I'm looking for a different gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix D

### Centrality Scale (Eiseman, 2017)

Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
When I think of who I am as a person, my identity as is among the first things that comes to mind.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My gender identity has very little to do with how I see myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My gender identity is a very important part of who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that other people cannot have a thorough understanding of me without my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I spend a lot of time thinking about my gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix E

### Coding Scheme for Narrative Valence and Specificity

Category	Sub-type	Definition	Example
Valence	Highly Positive	Represents highly positive emotions, such as joy or euphoria. High arousal.	“A main moment in my childhood was being taught to sew by my grandmother and in my adulthood realizing how badly I want to be a mother.”
	Positive	Represents moderately positive emotions, such as contentment	“My identity is more tied into my faith and trying to be a better

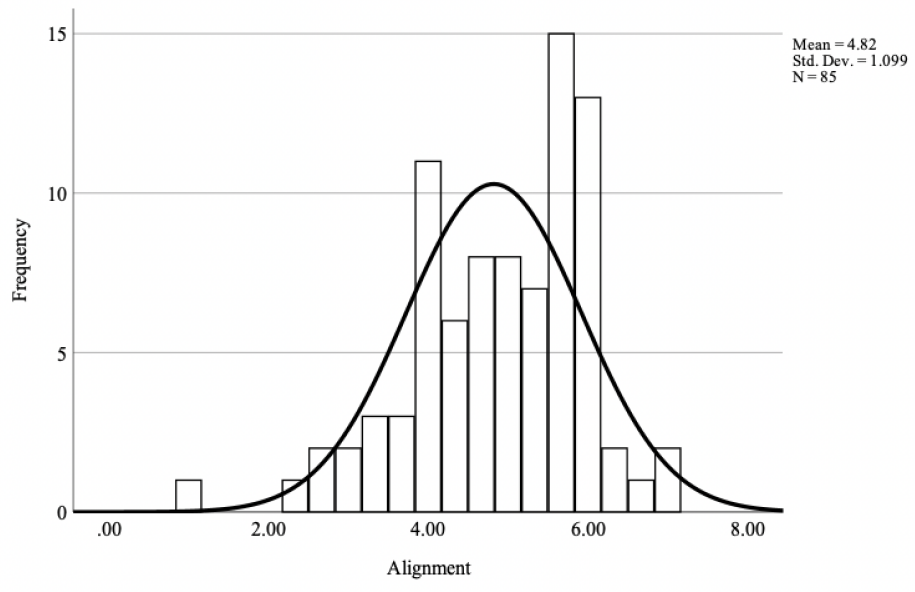
	or satisfaction. Low arousal.	person than in being a woman.”
Neutral	Represents emotions that are neither positive nor negative, such as neutrality or indifference. No emotion can be attributed to the other categories of the model.	“ I’m still figuring out how I see myself.”
Negative	Represents moderately negative emotions, such as annoyance or frustration. Low arousal.	“When I was in fifth or sixth grade a boy made fun of me for stuttering while waiting for class to start.”
Highly Negative	Represents highly negative emotions, such as sadness or despair. High arousal.	“Not letting people walk all over you and sticking up for yourself can so quickly be equated with being a bitch.”



Specificity	Type 1	Specific narrative only	“I think a more recent example was during class...”
	Type 2	Specific narrative with some generalization	“It’s an onward struggle, but that was definitely a defining moment for me and my femininity.”
	Type 3	Specific narrative about one or more events	“When I came to [City], in my first week... This was the first time I considered using she/they,...”
	Episodic	Narrative develops over the course of days	“When I was on exchange, I felt most like myself.”
	Generic	A mix of repeated similar events	“I cannot think of a specific moment.”

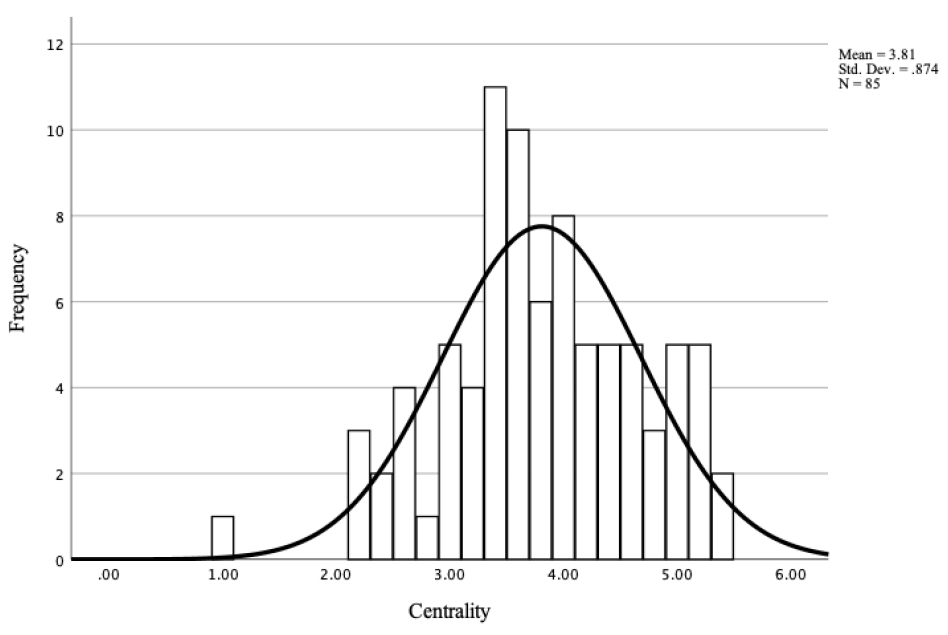
### Appendix F

*Histograms Depicting Frequencies of Alignment*



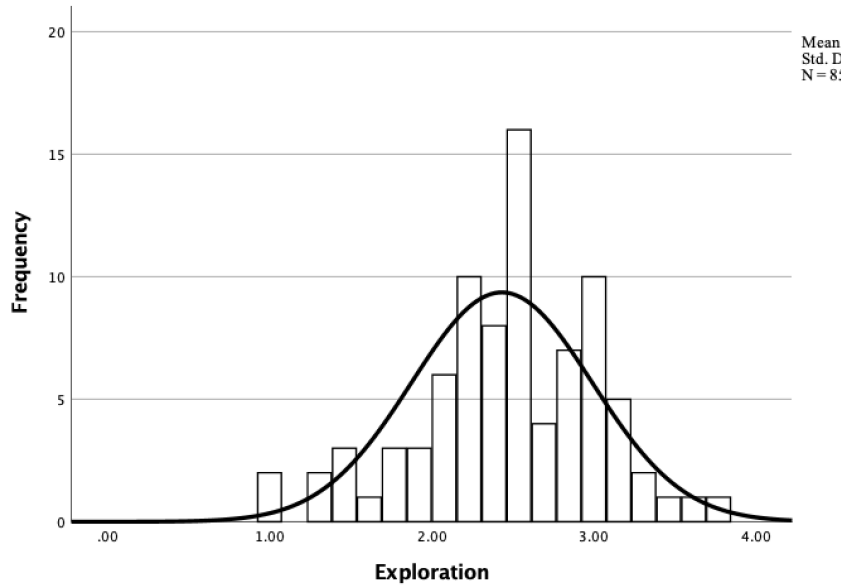
### Appendix G

*Histograms Depicting Frequencies of Exploration*



### Appendix H

*Histograms Depicting Frequencies of Centrality*



### Appendix I

**Histogram showing distribution of valence of gender narratives**

