

COMMENTARY

Nuance and specificity always matter—Especially for all the meanings of ‘gender’: A reply to Jackson and Bussey (2024)

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Abstract

Jackson and Bussey (*The British Journal of Psychology*, 2024, **115**, 723) present the provocative argument that the concept of a “true gender” is not a useful conceptual object for psychology. While the article does make 2 valid and worthwhile points, the remainder of that article lacks necessary nuance in developing its general conclusion.

KEYWORDS

individual differences, methodology, gender, theory

Jackson and Bussey (2024) present the provocative argument that the concept of a ‘true gender’ is not a useful conceptual object for psychology. While the article does make two valid and worthwhile points, the remainder of that article lacks necessary nuance in developing its general conclusion. First valid point: The authors correctly argue that the concept of ‘true gender’ for gender roles and adherence to them is incoherent and not supported by any data or any useful scientific perspectives. Second valid point: The authors correctly argue that real harms have happened (and continue to happen) to trans persons in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (at least) when seeking gender affirming services, all based on narrow psychiatric/psychological diagnostic criteria that perpetuate and restrict individual behavioural expressions and social presentations of one's gender to heteronormative and cisnormative standards for gender role participation and for attire and accouterment displays. In fact, most trans scholars agree and have already made these points (e.g. Tate et al., 2020; Vipond, 2015), including critiquing the past and present World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) guidelines (Coleman et al., 2022). Jackson and Bussey do not restrict their statements to gender roles and behavioural displays only; instead, they argue that the very idea of ‘true gender’ might itself be problematic. However, a *true gender* supposition is neither inherently problematic nor advisable to abandon at present when understanding any transgender (or cisgender) experiences. Instead, *only the specific deployment of ‘true gender’* by Stoller and other clinical psychologists and psychiatrists has been problematic.

To make the readers aware, one ‘true gender’ concept or supposition was first presented by a trans woman, Virginia Prince, to Stoller in describing her experience as being in the wrong body for the internal

experience of her gender identity (cf., Stryker, 2008). The additional viewpoints of Prince and the language of that time notwithstanding, a modern update of those terms would describe Prince's experience as referring to the *self-categorization* meaning of gender identity (Hyde et al., 2019; Tate et al., 2014). Egan & Perry (2001) and Tate et al. (2014) have noted that the use of 'gender' in psychology specifically has always been confusing (and lacking nuance) because that single term refers to, at minimum, five different conceptual objects—collected into a either multidimensional (Egan & Perry, 2001) or bundle understanding (Tate et al., 2014). This 5-part understanding can be represented pithily as the acronym BIRDS: Biology (all relevant, modifiable and non-modifiable aspects), and chiefly birth-assigned category; Identity (chiefly as self-assigned category labels [e.g. woman, man]); Roles (namely, gender roles and ideologies); Displays (all cultural displays used interpersonally, such as clothing and mannerisms); and, Sentiments (all intergroup and intragroup attitudes and evaluations) (cf. Tate et al., 2014). BIRDS serves to simultaneously provide nuance and minimize confusion about what 'gender' means in any scholarly discussion. Accordingly, one 'true gender' understanding is compatible with the I (identity) in BIRDS. As Tate et al. (2014) note, many trans persons in the United States have relied on the I-element of BIRDS in qualitative reports (as autobiographical statements) to express their own sense of being trans women, trans men, and all meanings of non-binary (for the latter, see Galupo et al., 2017). Consequently, eschewing the usefulness of 'true gender' as referring to the I in BIRDS lacks an evidentiary basis (and is counter to the available evidence), and, at worse, disallows scholars or policymakers from being able to rely on a knowable sense of self-categorization that has reality for all trans persons. Moreover, the existence of some non-binary persons who experience the *absence of any core gender identity* presents no logical difficulty to the existence of any trans persons who do experience a core gender identity. Instead, both sets of experiences (presence and absence of a true gender identity) showcase that scholars need to represent the I-element in BIRDS using a BOTH-AND reasoning. One reading of Jackson and Bussey (2024) is that they imply (or actually believe in) a zero-sum (i.e. EITHER-OR) understanding of the I-element in BIRDS based on the presence and absence dynamics of it when the construal could be otherwise.

Finally, the Jackson and Bussey article, while undoubtedly well-intentioned, seems to be part of a modern *gender-blind* perspective (with apologies for the ableist language) that mimics the US' understanding of *colour-blind* perspectives regarding race/ethnicity. The US colour-blind ideology involves people who deny that race/colour exists in an attempt to stop or ameliorate racism and colourism—by claiming to 'not see color' or otherwise claiming that 'race does not exist'. However, the irony is that by not 'seeing colour', they also do not allow others to identify how racism operates at a fundamental level—in part because they have denied the existence of race itself (socially constructed or otherwise) (cf., Neville et al., 2013). The connection with gender is directly statable: Those who refuse to acknowledge nuanced ideas of true gender (on the I-element of BIRDS only) attempting to stop or ameliorate gender bias may in fact be eroding the ability for scholars to understand the origins of gender bias itself, on the one side, and, on the other side, they ironically disallow trans experience to be self-determined by removing one basis for its (self-) determination (namely, the I in BIRDS). In the extreme, this gender-blind move leaves only cisnormative understandings as tacit starting points. Adopting a nuanced BIRDS understanding of gender, and placing the idea of 'true gender' as one possibility for the I-element will avoid these gender-blind pitfalls. Jackson and Bussey are correct in stating there is no 'true gender' for the R- or D-elements of BIRDS, and their statements should be restricted to those two elements at present. In sum, this commentary helps scholars avoid false understandings and zero-sum thinking regarding the multiple elements of gender (encapsulated by BIRDS), while also highlighting the possible damages—intellectually and in policy—that could ensue if non-nuanced understandings in scholarship gain traction.

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How to cite this article: Tate, C. C. (2025). Nuance and specificity always matter—Especially for all the meanings of ‘gender’: A reply to Jackson and Bussey (2024). *British Journal of Psychology*, 116, 506–508. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12771>