

More than just hormones

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The background of the page is an abstract composition of overlapping, organic shapes in various shades of teal and pink. The colors range from light, pastel tones to more saturated, vibrant hues. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

Appendix C
Impact paragraph

APPENDIX C

A four-year PhD project requires many resources. Not only were the studies in this thesis mostly funded by tax money; they also required great time investments from my talented collaborators, supervisors, and myself. While I certainly believe there should be room for ‘unbound’ scientific research driven by curiosity and experimental drive instead of clear objectives, I executed my studies while keeping their impact clearly in mind. Over the next paragraph, I would like to reflect on the scientific and social impact of my (our) work and approach.

Transgender identities stand in the middle of society and societal discourse – unfortunately mostly in the sense that many people still struggle with where to place these in their eyes ‘new’ identities and norms. I believe it is crucial for researchers in the field of transgender health to engage in outreach activities to help shape the societal narrative in an informed and evidence based manner. I have approached this proactively, by giving many open lectures for the UM student population; by giving multiple interviews to various media outlets and podcasts; and by participating in initiatives such as the Neuroethics Café, where we discussed the outcomes from our focus group study (Chapter 6) with a diverse audience. I have also ensured an accessible online presence, sharing updates about our projects on social media websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

Meanwhile, I remained aware of the fact that as an employee at a university, my social impact went further than what was related to my research per se, and that I also could and should have a positive impact as a teacher and UM community member. In that sense, I have made time to supervise students who wanted to write their thesis on a LGBTQI+ related topic, because it is important to me that they got the chance to write about a topic close to their heart. I have listened to the concerns expressed by my trans students, and where I could, I helped them feel more included in our university. This way I signaled the need for gender inclusive bathrooms to the Diversity & Inclusivity Office, which they actually took up so students and staff can now use all-gender toilets in most university buildings. I further aimed to shape our university culture in an affirmative way by being part of UM Pride and developing the LGBTQI+ Ally Training. Finally, I served as PhD representative at the department, faculty, and central level, and added my two cents in making sure the interests of junior researchers on a temporary contract were not overlooked whenever new policies were shaped.

As every PhD candidate, I was evidently aiming for scientific and clinical impact with my studies. The main aim of this thesis was to provide some valuable and solid puzzle pieces to further unravel the multi-faceted phenomenon of sexual well-being in transgender people. Chapter 2 illustrates just how multi-faceted and complex this phenomenon is, by applying the multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept (SSC) and related actual/ideal discrepancies. We showed that not every aspect of trans individuals’ SSC is directly related to gender dysphoria. Furthermore, we hinted at how to dissolve a negative

SSC (via SSC discrepancies), which is valuable because it is crucial to find ways other than gender affirming medical treatment (GAMT) to alleviate gender dysphoria and its effects on sexual well-being. The clinical relevance of this study is illustrated by the fact that it was cited in the newest edition of the Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, thereby making the study find its way to health professionals working with transgender people.

Another phenomenon currently affecting clinical transgender health practices is the increasing number of non-binary and genderqueer (NBGQ) individuals seeking gender affirming help. Chapter 3 informs health professionals on how this group compares to the binary transgender population when it comes to mental and sexual well-being. Chapter 4 further illuminates the treatment desires and treatment motives from both groups. GAMT is currently a touchy topic leading to heated societal debates (should people be able to access GAMT without a psychological evaluation? And from what age on? What to do with the long waiting lists?), so it is very important to have solid information on the effect of withdrawing or postponing the desired treatment. Chapter 4 indicates that having an unfulfilled GAMT desire leads to negative consequences when it comes to mental health and sexual well-being. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates how NBGQ individuals desire GAMT just as much as binary transgender individuals, but that they face more obstacles when accessing such treatment. In my opinion, the results from this study should make it apparent for policy makers that more resources are needed for GAMT centers to deal with this great demand and to lower the threshold for any individual desiring such treatment.

While most studies assessing sexual well-being in transgender individuals rely on cross-sectional questionnaire designs, Chapter 5 illustrates the advantages of more complex designs such as diary studies. It provides unique insights into the daily sexual well-being of trans individuals, leading to interesting findings for clinical practice. For instance, we found that engaging in intimate activities is linked to increased sexual esteem the next day, which in turn is related to more sexual openness. Interestingly, the outcomes from this study also defy the idea that transgender clients are very different from cisgender clients for sexologists, at least when it comes to the mechanisms we explored.

Chapter 6, presenting the results from a focus groups study, has a meta-scientific character, and I hope it will have an impact on researchers planning to conduct neuroimaging studies with transgender participants. It urges researchers to reflect on which research questions are most relevant for the community itself, and on how to be sensitive to the societal context. The study also serves as an example, an exercise in self-

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reflection for scientists in any field related to humanities, whether it includes minorities or not.

Like Chapter 5, Chapter 7 further illustrates the value of including a wider range of research methods in this field. For instance, while cisgender and transgender people often show differences in sexuality on the explicit level (e.g., via questionnaires), this does not necessarily translate to behavioral differences on implicit tasks related to sexuality. In this chapter, we applied one of the findings from Chapter 6 (namely that transgender individuals are interested in neuroimaging studies assessing the relation between hormone treatment and neuronal function) and uniquely combined endocrine, neurobiological, and psychological factors in our design. Furthermore, this study has a unique scientific impact in the sense that it is the first to include NBGQ individuals in a neuroimaging study.

The outcomes from the studies presented in this dissertation were scientifically disseminated via open access peer-reviewed publications in specialized journals, and via oral and poster presentations at conferences. Importantly, I presented at conferences specifically in the field of transgender health, but also outside of that bubble to make psychology research and clinical practice in general more inclusive. For instance, I gave a presentation at the yearly conference of the Dutch Society for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies on what they should know about transgender identities in case the attendants had transgender clients. On such occasions, I always made sure to bring a member of the transgender community to join me in my presentation, and I tried my best to have them properly reimbursed for their time and efforts.

Finally, I hope that my inclusive, affirmative, and self-reflective approach as a researcher will impact how other researchers reflect on their own work and biases. This approach is not always easy and can even be confrontational, but anno 2023, the interior of the ivory tower has really become too outdated. Time to redecorate it with all colours of the rainbow!