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“It’s Loving Yourself for You”: Happiness in Trans and Nonbinary Adults

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Abstract

Expanding upon the larger body of literature that focuses on adverse mental health concerns among trans and nonbinary (TNB) populations, emerging research has recently begun to investigate positive outcomes and psychological well-being among TNB people. This study contributes to this growing area of research by investigating one subjectively experienced aspect of well-being—happiness—among TNB adults residing in the central Great Plains region of the United States. For this study, 20 TNB adults participated in semistructured interviews where they were asked to reflect on how they experienced happiness generally and in relation to being TNB, and what fostered or impeded their happiness. Data were analyzed using constructivist

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grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Four major themes emerged from the data that formed the core components of happiness: Authenticity, Connection to Others, Perspective Shift, and Agency. Two additional major themes included factors that fueled happiness and those that detracted from happiness. Subthemes and categories within each major theme are described. From these themes, a theoretical model of TNB happiness was developed. Theoretical and counseling implications are discussed, along with noted limitations and areas for future research.

Public Significance: This study documents experiences of happiness, one important aspect of well-being, among TNB adults. Through qualitative data analysis, we identified factors that foster and impede happiness, and we extracted four major core components of happiness that participants' experiences were centered on: Authenticity, Connection to Others, Perspective Shift, and Agency. Findings from the present study contribute to our knowledge of positive psychological functioning among TNB people.

Keywords: well-being, authenticity, critical consciousness, positive psychology, promotive factors

For many trans and nonbinary (TNB) individuals, moving into a place of congruence with one's gender, often through a social and/or medical transition process, is a profound experience. The ability to see and be seen by others as who one truly is, perhaps for the first time, has been described by participants in previous qualitative research studies as critical to well-being across a variety of contexts (Austin, 2016; Budge et al., 2010; Devor, 2004; Goffnett & Pacey, 2020). However, much of the extant research has aimed to identify the predictive factors driving known health disparities (see Moradi et al., 2016), such as depression, anxiety, suicidality, and HIV prevalence, which are documented at higher rates than what is typically found in cisgender populations (Budge et al., 2013; Herbst et al., 2008; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). To date, research has linked numerous contextual factors, such as experiences of antitrans stigma (e.g., internalized attitudes, experiences of prejudice and discrimination) to these adverse health outcomes (Bockting et al., 2013; Budge et al., 2013; James et al., 2016; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). Although such efforts are critical toward the development of prevention and intervention strategies aimed at addressing TNB population health disparities, they are only one part of the larger picture of TNB mental health; less is known about both general and gendered experiences of thriving, happiness, and joy that are embodied within TNB individuals and communities. Therefore, the

present study aims to fill this gap by investigating one critical aspect of well-being for TNB individuals—happiness—and the factors that foster and impede it.

Theories of Happiness and Well-Being

One major theoretical conceptualization of happiness is authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002, 2012). Although related to Seligman's (2012) more expansive theory of well-being, which he titles the PERMA+ model—positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement—Seligman's authentic happiness theory centers only three different elements: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. Positive emotion comprises pleasure, joy, warmth, comfort, etc. Engagement is considered to be about flow—for example, engaging in the mindfulness of the moment or the loss of self-consciousness during an activity that one might be absorbed in. According to Seligman, this concept is distinct from, even opposing of positive emotion, in that it is often absent of emotion. The third element, meaning, consists of belonging to and being a part of something that is considered bigger than oneself. Other theorists, such as Winston (2016) have indicated that the most basic form of happiness can be a fleeting experience, one that is momentary and rooted in pleasure and fun. As Winston (2016) describes, deeper levels of satisfaction, however, require cultivating meaning and greater emotional complexity around happiness. For example, instead of the most basic form of happiness where pleasure can be swayed by simple categorizations of good or bad, deriving meaning from connecting, belonging, and selfless ideals can lead to the formation and maintenance of deeper levels and forms of happiness.

In their systematic review of happiness research, Myers and Diener (2018) noted several facets that comprise happiness and identified the factors that lead to happiness. In their review, they focused on research that addressed the following questions: (a) if there are specific times of life that are happier than others (answer: there tends to be stability across the life span), (b) if there are gender differences in happiness (answer: women and men express similar levels of happiness globally, although studies notably adopt a binary and cisnormative lens), and (c) if money makes people happier (answer: it does, to a point). They also examined traits of happiness, noting that there

tend to be several traits that relate to happiness: pride, satisfaction with self, optimism, self-esteem, personal control, and extraversion.

In addition to the components above, Myers and Diener (2018) note that on the whole, research focusing on happiness and wellbeing demonstrates how understanding and cultivating happiness can be beneficial to individuals and communities. For example, they note that the aggregated research finds that happy people tend to be healthier and live longer, have better relationships and have more friends, and are more prosocial and engaged citizens. Taking into consideration the scholarship on happiness and its intersections with well-being, in the present study, we aim to capture the breadth of happiness as psychologically constructed, from momentary experiences of positive emotions to deeper and longer-lasting connection to meaning, belonging, and other aspects of well-being. This approach is in line with previous research and scholarship on social constructivist approaches to understanding emotion (Barrett & Russell, 2014) and their connection to identity among marginalized groups (e.g., Goffnett et al., 2022).

Notably, theories that aim to conceptualize happiness—what it is, how and why it occurs, and what its effects are to longer-term social, mental, and physical health outcomes—have largely left out social identity processes that may reveal differences in the conceptualization of happiness across populations. The larger body of literature on well-being can provide some helpful direction for understanding how and where such differences occur. Specifically, in the larger body of literature related to well-being, two major approaches to conceptualizing well-being have emerged: hedonic and eudaimonic approaches (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Hedonic approaches, or what Westerhof and Keyes (2010) refer to as emotional well-being, conceptualize well-being as the experience of pleasure versus displeasure, and as the subjective experience of happiness, satisfaction, and interest in life (Keyes, 2007; Waterman, 1993), similar conceptually in some ways to what Winston (2016) describes as momentary experiences of happiness. With its focus on pleasure or displeasure, hedonic approaches have traditionally lacked emphasis on individual growth and optimal functioning. The other major approach to conceptualizing well-being is the eudaimonic approach, which has come to be referred to as psychological well-being (PWB; see Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). PWB approaches call on individuals to live in accordance with their true selves and to realize their

full potential (Waterman, 1993). Six domains comprise PWB: self-acceptance, purpose in life, autonomy, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although less explicitly central to PWB models than hedonic approaches, positive emotions have also been theoretically and empirically associated with PWB's major domains. Finally, given that individuals exist within social contexts, a distinct but related aspect of psychological well-being, optimal social functioning, was further conceptualized as being essential to eudaimonic well-being (Keyes, 1998; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Eudaimonic approaches to conceptualizing well-being help to reveal how the larger sociopolitical context can shape how and the extent to which individuals who belong to marginalized communities experience well-being. Specifically, in the context of systemic oppression, marginalization, and stigma, and discriminatory and microaggressive interpersonal interactions, individuals' ability to express themselves authentically, to arrive to a place of self-acceptance, and to live to their full potential may be necessarily limited, and instead be associated with adverse mental health outcomes (Tebbe & Moradi, 2016; Testa et al., 2015). On the other hand, finding authenticity and developing positive connections with others in the face of that oppression can be a particularly profound experience and contribute meaningfully to well-being (e.g., Austin, 2016; Goffnett et al., 2022; Singh, 2013). To advance knowledge in this area, research and scholarship must center the role of social identity factors and processes to accurately understand the role and impact of the larger sociopolitical context in conceptualizing well-being and happiness.

Happiness and Well-Being in TNB People

In research on well-being in TNB populations, happiness has not typically been the focus, though a few notable exceptions exist. In a study of the positive emotions trans men experienced as it related to their gender identity, participants described a wide range of positive emotions, including confidence, comfort, connection, feeling alive, amazement, pride, and happiness (Budge et al., 2015). Although happiness was labeled in their study as a discrete emotion, Budge and colleagues also noted that participants described happiness as an internal, overall emotional experience that was the positive consequence

to living authentically. These findings were echoed in a recent qualitative study with TNB youth across the gender spectrum, where participants described a range of positive as well as more challenging emotions (Budge et al., 2021). In that study, the most frequently discussed positive emotion that participants reflected on was labeled happiness, with Budge et al. (2021) noting that this activated emotion occurred in response to numerous situations where TNB identity was central and salient for participants, such as experiences related to coming out, being correctly gendered, and becoming more engaged and knowledgeable about activism to promote transgender rights.

Where research on happiness specifically is more limited within the broader literature on TNB well-being, a more robust body of literature has focused on various aspects of positive and affirming identity development and processes among TNB people with important implications for understanding and conceptualizing subjective well-being and the ways in which these processes are critical to TNB mental health. Research in this area has tended to focus more specifically on the range of emotions TNB people experience (Budge et al., 2015, 2021), how TNB people positively view their identity (Austin, 2016; Riggle et al., 2011), and how emotions and identity in turn relate to well-being (e.g., Austin, 2016; Budge et al., 2015, 2021; Clements et al., 2021; Goffnett et al., 2022).

In addition to the emotions surrounding TNB identity, research has also explored different roles and functions of TNB identity as it relates to mental health, which has in turn revealed varying ways for understanding the intersection of positive and affirming TNB identity with well-being. For example, at times, positive TNB identity has been situated in research design as a resilience factor in mitigating adverse health outcomes, while at other times, it has been positioned as the outcome of interest itself. For example, in a qualitative study with TNB individuals exploring suicide protective factors, participants described transition-related processes and experiences, identity development and acceptance, and meaningful support from others particularly as it related to gender identity affirmation, as being essential to protecting against either considering or attempting suicide and toward promoting well-being (Moody & Smith, 2013). Another study used an innovative qualitative approach where TNB youth were asked what advice they would offer their peers; results demonstrated that

although participants noted the challenges associated with being TNB, participants centered their advice around focusing on aspects of viewing one's identity in positive ways and experiencing connection (Goffnett & Pacey, 2020). Specifically, participants stated the importance of encouraging others to find the positive aspects of being trans, having pride and self-assurance in one's gender, being authentic, trusting the process, and recognizing that one is not alone. These findings echo other scholarship on trans identity development, where developmental processes often involve moving from uncertainty to knowing and from shame and confusion to pride and self-acceptance (Austin, 2016; Devor, 2004); notably, these studies also hold as integral the role of being seen by others for who one is (a concept referred to as "witnessing") and seeing oneself in similar others ("mirroring"; Austin, 2016; Devor, 2004).

Present Study

This study aims to build on the extant literature with two overarching research questions that center the conceptualization of happiness. Adopting a social constructivist approach to exploring happiness as a subjective experience, in our development of interview questions and in the subsequent data coding process, we drew from the prior literature to adopt a broad definition of happiness, aiming to capture experiences ranging from momentary and discrete affect to a more diffuse internal experience (e.g., Budge et al., 2015). With no research to date specifically focusing on happiness in TNB people, we are interested in how TNB individuals experienced happiness generally as well as specifically in relation to their gender. As TNB people experience numerous societal barriers to optimal health and functioning as a result of systemic prejudice and bias, we also focused on what TNB individuals identified as factors that promoted or detracted from happiness in their lives. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do TNB adults describe and experience happiness?

Research Question 2: What fosters or impedes happiness?

Method

Participants

Participants in the present study were 20 trans and/or nonbinary adults who lived in the communities local to the university at which this study was conducted. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 72 ($M = 33.35$, $SD = 12.97$). Participants reported their gender identity by writing an open response to the question "What is your current gender identity?" Participants used a variety of terms to describe their gender, and many used more than one term. Participants self-reported their sexual identity by writing an open response and reported race by selecting from a list as many options as were applicable to them. Full sample demographics are reported in **Table 1**.

Study Materials and Procedures

Approval for this study was provided by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a large Midwestern university. Following Levitt et al. (2018) guidelines for reporting qualitative research, we outline our study procedures and process. This study was not preregistered. The research team posted flyers in queer and transfriendly businesses and gathering places in local community businesses and organizations and sent recruitment invitation emails via listservs. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants were required to be the age of majority, and to be or have identified with a trans or nonbinary identity for at least 1 year. This last criterion was included because we were interested in capturing participants' retrospective reflections on happiness experienced while a TNB person. After contacting a member of the research team, interviews were scheduled at the time and place of the participant's convenience and what was most accessible for them (e.g., private university office, a private room in a local public library).

After completing the informed consent process and the demographic questionnaire, which included questions related to race, gender, pronouns, age, income, employment, education, and relationship status, the audio-taped interview began with two brief introductory questions to help the participant become comfortable with the interviewer and the interview format, and to help prime the participant to

Table 1 Participant Demographics (N = 20)

<i>Demographic measure</i> <i>n</i>	
Age: $M = 33.35$, $SD = 12.97$	
Sexual orientation	
Queer	5
Straight	4
Pansexual	2
Bisexual	2
Lesbian	2
Demi-sexual lesbian	1
Somewhat femme leaning	1
Gay	1
Middle of spectrum	1
Asexual panromantic	1
Race and ethnicity	
White	17
American Indian or Alaska Native and Hispanic or Latinx	2
Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and White	1
Income	
\$0_19,999	7
\$20,000_29,999	4
\$30,001_49,999	7
\$50,000_90,000	2
Employment	
Full-time	10
Full-time, student	3
Self-employed, contract worker	3
Part-time	2
Part-time, student	1
Other	1
Gender identity	
Male	3
Genderfluid	2
Nonbinary	2
Both female and male	1
Female	1
Genderfluid female	1
Male (Two-Spirit)	1
Nonbinary/gender-fluid	1
Nonbinary woman	1
Nonbinary/Two-Spirit	1
Nonbinary presenting female	1
Transmasculine	1
Transgender/genderqueer	1
Transmasculine/nonbinary	1
Transgender, specifically nonbinary	1
Queer	1
Education	
Some college	8
College degree	7
Professional degree	3
Trade/vocational school	2
Relationship status	
Dating long term	4
Married (legally recognized)	4
Partnered, in a committed relationship, or married (not legally recognized)	4
Single	4
Polyamorous or open	3
Other	1

consider their TNB identity. Participants were then asked to reflect on nine main questions relating to happiness (the interview protocol is available in online supplemental materials). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The length of interviews ranged from 17 min to 93 min, with an average length of 43 min across participants. Participants were compensated in \$50 cash for their time and participation.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Analysis

We used constructivist grounded theory (CGT; Charmaz, 2014) to analyze the qualitative data collected in this study. As a methodology of qualitative inquiry, CGT places at the center a focus on how participants construct meaning related to the topic at hand (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Through inductive analysis, conceptual frameworks or theories are developed and constructed. The analytic process in CGT involves three sequential steps: initial, focused, and theoretical coding. To prepare the data for analysis, transcriptions for each audio recording were created by members of the research team using transcription software and equipment (i.e., transcription foot pedal). Identifying information (e.g., names, specific locations) were removed at this step to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Before beginning data analysis, members of the research team met as a group to discuss our positionalities as individual team members and as a group in this study, and to identify our biases and expectations for what this study might reveal. Demographically, all team members were White with varying genders and sexual orientations. The first author, a White queer trans man and faculty member at a large Midwestern public university, had prior experience conducting and analyzing qualitative research with TNB populations. The remaining team members were students at the time of the study and had not previously had experience conducting qualitative research with TNB individuals or communities.

Throughout the analytic process, we met weekly as a research team to discuss the data analysis, clarify decision-making, and ensure consistency in the process. During these meetings, we also engaged in conversations about how our positionalities shaped our perspectives

and biases in analysis and interpretation of study findings. For example, team members named when they wondered if they were over-identifying with participant data or when findings emerged that team members found surprising or unexpected, and together we explored how our positionalities informed our relationships to the data. Therefore, when these dynamics emerged for team members, we engaged in discussion as a larger group to come to consensus on how to address questions related to the analysis and interpretation of data.

Interview transcripts were divided between two pairs. In the first step of initial coding, line-by-line codes were generated from the data using gerunds to capture the constructed meaning of participants' responses to the interview questions. For each transcript, both members generated line-by-line codes independently, then met together to discuss and reach consensus on final line-by-line codes. In the second step (focused coding), line-by-line codes were placed into conceptual categories to begin to organize data across participants, following the same procedures as in the first step, with each member of the coding pair first assigning categories independently, then coming together to compare and reach consensus. Following Charmaz's (2014) described iterative process, as data analysis progressed in the focused coding stage through the initial codes for each transcript, categories were iteratively added, changed, or removed with line-by-line codes being moved as needed to increase conceptual clarity in the coding process. As needed, additional higher order categories (subthemes, themes) were generated to further organize existing categories. In the final step, theoretical coding, focused codes were further organized conceptually through the development of a theoretical model that delineated the processes and relationships among constructed categories and themes. Each member of the research team generated their own individual theoretical model before meeting together as a large group to discuss and arrive at the final theoretical model, which is presented in the results section below.

Results

We identified seven overarching themes from the data, each with between six and 34 categories and between zero and nine subthemes

(see **Table 2**). Four themes comprised core components of happiness: *Authenticity* (three subthemes, 13 categories), *Connection with Others* (five subthemes, 30 categories), *Perspective Shift* (six categories), and *Agency* (two subthemes, seven categories). We identified two additional themes related to factors that promoted happiness, *Fuelers of Happiness* (five subthemes, 29 categories), and those that lessened happiness, *Detractors of Happiness* (nine subthemes, 34 categories). Each is described below with illustrative quotations. Participants' demographics (age, race/ ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation identity) are listed after their pseudonym in the first appearance.

Core Component: Authenticity

Authenticity, or the ability to be oneself in the world, was described by our participants as a powerful core component of happiness. Participants described a general need for authenticity, as well as a need for authenticity specifically as it related to their gender and in their relationships with others. This core component comprised three subthemes and 13 categories.

General Authenticity

Included in this subtheme were the categories *self-awareness*, *self-acceptance*, *personal growth*, and *authenticity leading to a sense of freedom*. We coded excerpts under this subtheme when participants described experiences that related generally to feeling authentic connection to self; at times, though not always, participants connected these more general experiences to their gender specifically. When this occurred, these general descriptions were double-coded with the subtheme of authenticity related to gender. For many participants in our study, exploring and coming to know oneself, or labeled here as *self-awareness*, led to *self-acceptance*, or the experience of being comfortable and accepting of self. For example, one participant, Charlie (34, White, nonbinary, queer), explained to the interviewer how their self-awareness has grown over time, "I feel like I know myself pretty darn well and that's very helpful. Even the parts of myself I may not love." In turn, being able to be oneself contributed to a sense of freedom, which was in turn tied to happiness, "Being unencumbered and

Table 2 Summary of Study Themes, Subthemes, and Categories**Core component: Authenticity**

- General authenticity
 - Self-awareness*
 - Self-acceptance*
 - Personal growth*
 - Authenticity leading to a sense of freeness*
- Authenticity related to gender
 - Understanding and acceptance of self as trans*
 - Trans authenticity in expression and body fosters happiness*
 - Trans authenticity fosters pride*
- Authenticity in relation to others
 - Being authentic regardless of what others thought*
 - Authenticity to show common humanity*
 - Pride in others living authentically*
 - Authenticity fostered connection with others*

Core component: Connection with others

- Community connections
 - Community participation fosters happiness*
 - Ease of connecting with other queer and trans people*
 - Connecting with others who share similar values*
 - Positive experiences with trans and queer groups*
 - Support from online communities*
 - Gender transition fosters happiness*
- Social belonging
 - Realizing that they are not alone in their gender*
 - Social belonging fostered happiness*
- Social support in coming out
 - Experiences of support within relationships*
 - Other people having to accept their gender*
- Importance of support
 - Support fosters general happiness*
 - Support specific to gender fosters happiness*
 - Other sources of nondyadic support*
 - Support fosters authenticity*

Core component: Perspective shift

- Challenging cultural definitions of gender
 - Seeing gender as a social construct*
 - Expanding conceptualizations of gender*
 - Finding happiness through not fitting into societal gender standards*
- Perspective shifts leading to empathy and advocacy
- Advocacy fosters happiness

Core component: Agency

- Perceived agency generally
- Agency and autonomy in gender transition
- Intentionality as agency
 - Being intentional in fostering happiness*
 - Happiness as a choice*
- Mindfulness as agency
 - Mindful connection in one's body*
 - Happiness through mindful presence*
- Additional component: Fuelers to happiness
- Self-care
- Healthy relationships
- Meaning in life
- Hope
- Work

Additional component: Detractors of happiness

- Antitrans stigma
- Barriers to transitioning
- Negative relationships and interpersonal experiences
- Life stressors
- Psychological distress

Bolded text indicates main themes, plain text indicates subthemes, and italicized text indicates categories.

allowed to pursue life and be myself is where that happiness comes from” (Morgan, 33, White, nonbinary woman, demisexual lesbian). *Personal growth*, described by participants as persistence through challenges, also corresponded with participants’ experiences of authenticity. Participants described how the work of personal growth brought them contentment, a sense of accomplishment, and a greater sense of pride in who they are. For example, Morgan described how being “able to connect to things and grow, and engage the world as I want to, that allows me to improve and address those goals and have a sense of improvement.” Ethan (52, Indigenous and Latinx, male [Two-Spirit], queer) connected his experience in the work he was doing for recovery as necessary for him to be able to experience happiness:

One of the things in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, they talk about trudging the road to happy destiny. It’s work sometimes to get there, like trudging through something, but getting through it actually gets you there. Like they used to say, the only way out is through ... if you’re not willing to do the work of trudging, then you’re not going to get to the happiness.

Authenticity Related to Gender

We identified a number of categories that were included in this sub-theme, which captured how participants described the connection of happiness to authenticity that specifically and explicitly related to their gender: *Understanding and acceptance of self as trans, trans authenticity in expression and body fosters happiness, trans authenticity fosters pride*. With gender at the center of their reflection in these categories, participants described how authentically knowing and expressing their gender was vital to well-being as a TNB person. Regarding *understanding and acceptance of self as trans*, participants described the self-understanding and happiness that followed from learning about noncisgender identities and others like themselves. Of particular importance in this category was the power of language in helping to shape and understand shared experience. For example, Avery (37, White, Asian, and Indigenous, queer, queer) stated of their nonbinary identity, “this is an identity that encompasses who I am,

like I can locate myself in the spectrum in a more accurate way than I could before.” Reflecting on his trans identity, Leo (22, White, male, straight) explained how self-determination leads to happiness:

I am happy that I know that this is how I identify. ‘Cause that’s a lot better than feeling terrible and not knowing. So, having the knowledge and freedom to be able to identify this way, that makes me really happy.

Trans authenticity in expression and body fosters happiness captured participants’ descriptions of how accessing the ability to express gender in a manner that felt authentic and congruent fostered happiness. James (34, White, male, straight) succinctly stated, “When I look in the mirror, and see me for who I am, that makes me happy.” Similarly, Sophia (25, White, female, straight) described the joy she experienced when holding her hormone prescription for the first time.

After I got home, I just remember opening up the bottles and staring at the two pills for a while, just [feeling] so happy. ‘Oh my god, like, I finally have this now.’ After I think it was a year in therapy, I finally got it and ... It can’t be taken away from me now.

With an increased sense of congruence in gender identity and expression, participants identified a deeper resonance with and connection to their body. For example, Ethan said, “So it’s only been a few years that I’ve been out as transgender, but I finally feel as though I’m completely in my body.” Similarly, Leo described how he felt after top surgery, “I felt like myself. Which was really weird and something that I’d never felt before ... For the first time I felt like I was actually who I was supposed to be, you know?” This feeling of connection in turn opened the door for participants to experience happiness in a different way:

I’ve recognized that I can be really happy when I’m feeling that sense of contentedness in my body ... these things for me, running, climbing, biking have all taken on different meanings for me over time in my transition ... so, when I’m

feeling most connected to my body and at peace with it is often when those feelings of joy and elation come. (Oliver, 25, White, transgender/genderqueer, queer)

For many participants, *trans authenticity fostered pride* and connection to the larger trans community. Corey (23, White, nonbinary, lesbian) described, “So being able to accept that I’m a part of [the trans] community and be okay with that. And feel proud of it, especially right now.” Others also felt a sense of pride in representing the community, especially for those who could be struggling with their identity and finding acceptance from others. Jude (23, White, nonbinary presenting female, lesbian) discussed being visible at work to help other trans people feel comfortable, especially trans kids.

Just knowing that I’m a part of a bigger community of people ... Knowing that I can help further the trans cause ... that’s a big part of it. It’s important that other people like me feel comfortable. Like I didn’t when I was a kid. You know? I want people to be able to figure out they’re trans as soon as possible.

Authenticity in Relation to Others

Finally, participants related the importance of authenticity in their relationships with other people as integral to their well-being. Within this subtheme, we extracted several categories: *being authentic regardless of what others thought*, *authenticity to show common humanity*, *pride in others living authentically*, and *authenticity fostered connection with others*. Many participants described *being authentic regardless of what others thought* and living true to themselves despite others’ judgements. Ethan described the pressure he experienced early on to appease societal norms of “passing” and his process of understanding what it meant to live authentically both within himself and in relation to others:

I don’t feel like I pass today, cause I don’t know if I’ll ever pass as a, truly a man. And I don’t know if I ever want to. I know that I’m a man, I don’t have to convince you of it just

by the way I dress and act. And, I still always want to push people to think outside of the boxes... . But for me, happiness isn't even about getting anything or going anywhere. It's just this feeling that you have in your heart. It's loving yourself for you.

Some participants used *authenticity to show common humanity*, describing their strength in the vulnerability they experienced sharing their authentic selves with others, and how this vulnerability in turn helped build connections with others. For example, Sam described intentionality in being vulnerable and open to sharing their struggles to show others that making mistakes is core to being a person.

I'm also an alcoholic in recovery and have dealt with a lot of emotional and psychological issues. This is about me being authentic and honest with people about who I am. I try to be honest about all of my struggles. I try to be an open book even through my work in public policy. I just want people to know that they don't have to hide who they are. We all have struggles as humans.

Additionally, some participants felt a sense of *pride in helping others live authentically*. Participants described feeling fulfilled when helping other people connect with their authentic selves. Avery described enjoying helping others connect with themselves and finding liberation from the societal confines of gender.

I like helping other people feel comfortable about their identity too. I think when people talk to me, they get a better sense that they don't have to be stuck in a box or have to be somebody else or sacrifice things about their identity to be trans or genderqueer.

Finally, *authenticity fostered connection with others*. Participants described how living true to themselves in turn led to a sense of openness and connection with other people. For example, Ethan said, "[If] I'm telling you really who I am, and being fully self-expressed, more than likely you're going to be drawn to that, and not repelled away from it. Because deep down inside that's what we all want."

Core Component: Connection With Others

Another core component of happiness that emerged in the data was connection with others. The ability to be authentic with oneself and with others further fueled participants' connection with others, which in this study captured participants' sense of belonging, support from others, and relationships with other people and with communities. This core component comprised six subthemes and 30 categories, which are described below.

Community Connections

Participants described diverse experiences of connections with community groups. Categories captured within this subtheme were *community participation fosters happiness, ease of connecting with other queer and trans people, connecting with others who share similar values, positive experiences with trans/queer groups, support from online communities, and gender transition fosters connection with others*. When noting that *community participation fosters happiness*, participants described the different types of communities they were connected to and the general benefits they brought, such as helping to coordinate and serve meals in large communal groups or joining LGBT groups and religious communities. For example, Jordan described connecting with a religious congregation that welcomed LGBT community members, "A couple weeks ago I joined the church and it's been a wonderful positive experience, just a lot of really great things. I have a community for the first time in my life."

In addition to the ties many participants made between being part of communities generally, many participants also described how the *ease of connecting with other queer and trans people* is an important aspect of well-being. For example, Quinn (23, White, transgender specifically nonbinary/gender fluid, pansexual) described:

I feel a lot more comfortable in certain spaces when I am allowed to be my trans identity ... I can go places with my other LGBT friends. And I feel valid there. So that's one aspect of my trans identity that makes me super happy, is I feel closer to the people who I want to be close with.

Although many participants tied shared identity to ease of connection with others, some participants described the importance of *connecting with others who shared similar values* beyond shared identity. For example, Liam (28, White, transmasculine, queer) reflected:

The only people that I was hanging out with were young queer and trans and gay people. But we had nothing in common. [laughs] ... we don't wanna just be hanging out with people because we have that one thing in common. We need people who are thinking about their other ethics and identities and these other things.

With in-person support at times being limited, participants reported seeking out *support from online communities*. Jude described filtering out negativity on a social media site to find support from others who were going through similar challenges when they described seeing, "people asking questions and saying, 'Am I valid? Is this normal?' And it's good to see that in other people other than just me, 'cause I know that they're going through the same thing."

Finally, many participants described how their *gender transitions fostered connection with others*. Specifically, many participants described how transitioning led to opportunities to strengthen or create new, meaningful relationships with other people. Noting his apprehension about how his transition might impact his relationships, James reported, "It was scary. Really, really scary. I thought I was gonna lose a lot of friends and family. But, in reality I gained more friends. My family got closer to me." Alex (21, White, transmasculine/nonbinary, bisexual) also described how their trans identity allowed them to make meaningful connections with other trans people:

I like that [my trans identity] is something that connects you to other people from all walks of life, you know. Like getting together with other trans people and being able to talk about the similarities and the differences and being able to vent, I guess, having that community means a lot.

Social Belonging

Within this subtheme, participants described categories of *realizing that they are not alone in their gender* and *social belonging fosters happiness*. Many participants described a process of building social belonging and connections with others where they once felt alone and misunderstood, then *realizing that they were not alone in their gender*. Participants described meeting others like themselves as core to this realization. For example, Quinn described,

I guess it took going to college and realizing that there were people like me at college and that I was not alone and that it wasn't just a thing that I felt invalidated about. It was a thing that everybody kind of experienced at least once about gender identity.

Overall, *social belonging fostered happiness* for participants. Many participants described how feeling needed or wanted by other people contributed to their happiness. Sophia described enjoying feeling included with her friends, "It makes me happy when my friends text me, like, 'Hey Sophia, like, you should come here, we're doing this you should come.' And just knowing that I'm being thought of and included."

Social Support in Coming Out

We identified two distinct categories in this subtheme: *experiences of support within relationships* and *other people having to accept their gender*. Consistent with prior literature, participants described *experiences of support within their relationships* with friends, family, and partners as being crucial to happiness—or when support was lacking, most negatively impactful to their happiness. When important others were unsupportive, many participants described being persistent in expressing their gender in ways that were authentic as a way of holding an important boundary in their relationship: you can choose to accept me or not, but I will continue to be who I am. For example, Corey described how they had initially been rejected by their father for being trans, but by persistently being themselves in their gender expression, Corey's father eventually began to support them in some ways:

We were hanging out in Old Navy. And my brother and I were buying new pants in the same section. And by this point, I had also decided I didn't really, it's terrible, but I didn't really care what they thought. I was going to do what I was going to do.... And I think he's had to come around to it, because, again, he was there helping me find [pants] size, you know? [laughs]

Importance of Support

Within this subtheme, we extracted the categories of *support fosters general happiness*, *support specific to gender fosters happiness*, *other sources of nondyadic support*, and *support fosters authenticity*. Many participants emphasized how *support fosters general happiness*. For example, Leo stated, "Being around people that I love, being around people that support me, being around people that I care about—that's a huge thing for me." Many participants noted how *support that was specific to their gender* was particularly impactful. This type of support was described by many participants as the experience of being seen and accepted by others, which in turn contributed to a sense of belonging and happiness. Leo elaborated, "Specifically in terms of my [gender] identity, when people are super validating of that, that makes me feel awesome." When James was asked about his happiest moment in life, James shared the following story:

I think one of the happiest moments for me, when I came out to my kids. I separated them, and did it alone with them, to tell them what was going on and explained everything. I said, 'You can start calling me dad whenever you feel comfortable doing that.' So, for probably two weeks, my son, he's gonna be 13, so he would have been, 11 and half, 12, when I came out to him. He came up with the word 'momdad,' at first. And then, probably two weeks after that, they just started calling me dad. I think them calling me dad for the first time was one of the happiest moments for me.... My daughter, when she started school she, had to write about cool facts about her. And she had wrote, on one of the facts, 'my dad is transgender.'... Yeah, definitely the happiest moment is the kids embracing who I am.

Participants described *other sources of nondyadic support* in their lives, which included support resources and structures related to their communities, work environments, and cultural heritage. Sam, who is gender-fluid, described drawing on their Native American heritage and cultural conceptions of gender as a vital aspect of support:

My Native American heritage, which I don't really know a lot about, talks about two-souled or different concepts. And just to know that while some social groups and people groups may not understand it, they may not ever try to understand it, there are those who do and have since time immemorial.

Furthermore, participants described how receiving *support fostered authenticity*. Participants detailed that feeling connected and supported from other people allowed them to explore and express their authentic selves. For example, Quinn described the nonjudgmental and safe environment of their campus LGBTQA resource center as essential to their growth:

I got more involved on campus with [campus LGBTQA resource centers]. As I got more involved there, volunteering and being a club member, I think it became easier. They have a very strict "no outing" policy. So I felt very safe there. I felt like I could go there and just talk about this kinda stuff without being judged. So through them, I think I became more comfortable with myself and then now, four years later, I feel much better with my [gender] identity.

Morgan also described how being "meaningfully supported" and accepted by others allowed them to be vulnerable in authentically expressing who they are.

After a little bit of that I was like, 'Oh, okay, you know, I can open up a bit,' so I just started being more expressive and less closed down. And wearing what I wanted to wear and more authentically expressing my interests and who I am.

Core Component: Perspective Shift

Although fewer codes were generated for Perspective Shift than the other core components of Authenticity, Connection to Others, and Agency, this theme represented a critical core component of happiness for participants. Perspective Shift comprised three subthemes and three categories. As a theme, Perspective Shift captured unique ways participants experienced shifts in how they perceived and understood gender and other social constructs. These perspective shifts were critical to creating happiness in their lives as a TNB person. Subthemes included in this core component were *challenging cultural conceptions of gender*, *perspective shifts leading to empathy and advocacy*, and *advocacy leads to happiness*.

Challenging Cultural Definitions of Gender

Integral to many participants' gender identity development process was a shift in perspective regarding cultural conceptions of gender. Often overlapping, categories included in this subtheme were *seeing gender as a social construct*, *expanding conceptualizations of gender*, and *finding happiness through not fitting into societal gender standards*. Data captured in this subtheme revealed how participants identified an important process of critically questioning, analyzing, and expanding upon dominant cultural definitions and conceptions, reflecting a shift to *seeing gender as a social construct*. In this process, participants expressed *expanding conceptualizations of gender* and noted how they were able to better understand and communicate about their gender. For example, Oliver stated:

One thing isn't inherently male and another thing isn't inherently female. That they can be both/and. I don't necessarily believe in a spectrum. I believe in a giant bubble [laughs] or like, you know, plant roots that are all existing at the same time.

In addition to participants wrestling with and shifting in their expanding conceptualizations of gender, some participants also identified a similar process within themselves as it related to their own

gender. For example, Alex described searching their memories for some defining indicators of their gender in their childhood, finding that this process challenged their internalized notions of what gender is and how it appeared for them in their life:

... it's not my mannerisms, it's not the way I dress, it's not the way I act, that makes me a guy, you know ... so that's not the defining factor, there's some sort of innate thing.

Many participants also identified how important it was to their happiness to critically question strict societal definitions of gender and sexual orientation and to identify their roots in cis- and heteronormativity. Critiquing social definitions of gender and sexuality allowed participants an opportunity to self-define their gender and to grow their autonomy in a world that often restricts the authentic expression of nondominant genders and sexualities. Morgan described how the language of “identity” can be used to delegitimize nondominant genders:

I think it's interesting the way people conceptualize 'identity,' and people consider their identity natural. But people who are different are not natural... . So in some way, people consider 'identity' constructed or artificial, which is definitely to me a very strange theory of mind thing, because they would never think of themselves that way.

Perspective Shifts Leading to Empathy and Advocacy

Participants also discussed how a deeper understanding of gender and other aspects of social identity created greater capacity for empathy for others. Along with this empathy, some participants noted, came a commitment to advocate for other marginalized people and groups. Charlie's own experiences of being marginalized led them to be more thoughtful in their understanding of what others experience:

I think this dovetails with my gender identity in terms of sexuality as well, but there's no way to prove it but I'd like to think that I'm a more empathic person because of it... . And

because of that, I like to think that I'm more thoughtful, in my interactions with other people... . in trying to consider where other people might be coming from.

Liam also discussed having more empathy for others who have been marginalized and the importance of advocacy when he said, "I can see how other groups who are also in the minority, I can relate in some ways and sort of advocate based on my experiences."

Advocacy Fosters Happiness

Advocacy, although challenging, fostered meaning in life and happiness for participants. Ethan stated, "Advocacy, although it can be difficult, also makes me happy." Corey felt energized by community advocacy and described how "[Activism] fuels you, make you really sense your community. I mean, the Women's March here in [local town] was energizing." Mia (25, White, woman, "somewhat femme leaning") described gaining meaning from the advocacy work that she does:

I'm doing fundraising for political causes and progressive causes and things like that. And while I might not be the one out there actually changing minds, I'm allowing the work to happen. And, that's a nice feeling, I want to have some sort of purpose for the work that I do.

Core Component: Agency

Finally, the last core component that emerged from the data was agency, or the ability to have autonomous control over one's mental, emotional, and physical well-being, and individual decisions and actions without infringement or restriction from others. Participants further described how a lack of agency was a detriment to their happiness, while having agency fostered happiness. Although participants noted the importance of agency generally, participants also noted that agency and autonomy related to gender transition was of specific and essential importance to well-being. This core component comprised four subthemes and four categories.

Perceived Agency Generally

Codes included in this subtheme captured participants' reflections of how critically important agency, as perceived generally, was to their happiness. Notably, this was true in both directions. That is, participants tied having greater perceived agency to happiness and also described how limited or restricted agency was significantly detrimental to their happiness. For example, Jordan emphasized, "[Happiness] feels like freedom. It feels like choice... . If I am trapped or cornered or my physical or situational choices are limited then to that extent, I am not happy." Charlie added having resources as vital to agency when they said, "I think of happiness as being seen for who you are and for being able to speak and have people listen to you. Having access to resources and having choice."

Agency and Autonomy in Gender Transition

In addition to agency generally, participants also described how important perceived agency specific to their gender was to their happiness. Many participants noted how gender transition allowed them to have more agency in their lives and to be happy. At the same time, participants described it as vital to their happiness to not be restricted in their gender transition by following a prescribed path—for example, one determined by medical professionals—and instead feel and maintain control of their transition process. As one example of this, Oliver described their positive experiences with a health care setting which used the informed consent model to transition-related services. Oliver walked through the steps that were taken at the clinic, which included initial lab work, a conversation with the health provider about what support they needed as they started hormones, and a demonstration of how to administer the hormones. Oliver noted their response to their experience, "So it's very simple. It's just allowing people, like, 'I've made this decision for myself. Here is what I need.'"

Intentionality as Agency

Participants described two categories within this subtheme: *being intentional in fostering happiness* and viewing *happiness as a choice to*

make for themselves. Participants described *being intentional in fostering happiness* in their daily lives by doing activities that made them happy and cared for themselves. Jude described how they actively foster their happiness, “I try to do something, like play a video game or go out to a restaurant I like or something that makes me happy every day.” Ethan also described self-care activities, “I love taking care of myself. Like, take a shower and fix up my hair, and putting on a shirt and tie, and just taking that time to be good to myself makes me happy.” Some participants described *happiness as a choice* that they make despite the stressors that they face in daily life. These participants emphasized the importance of actively building their own well-being despite the social and environmental structures trying to destroy and prevent their happiness. Thomas (60, White, male, straight) described the importance of choosing to be happy, no matter the life circumstances he is in.

I will be this person until I die. No matter what. You know what I mean? I can choose to be like, ‘oh I’m gonna die [pause] soon.’ You know? I mean, that shit happens to everybody. It’s not like I’m special. You know, in that way, it’s like well, so if I choose to live the way I am now and be happy and love my life or I could be miserable and then die when I’m 60 and just have wasted all that time being miserable. It just doesn’t make any sense to me.

Mindfulness as Agency

Many participants experienced a greater sense of agency through mindfulness, which in turn increased their happiness. Two categories emerged in this subtheme: *mindful connection in one’s body* and *happiness through mindful presence*. Many participants described mindfulness as an activity they engaged in intentionally to foster well-being. Of particular importance to some participants’ happiness was a *mindful connection in their body* or physical selves. For instance, Avery described, “So, I like physical activities that are challenging and hard and just to keep my brain like really engaged. So, stuff keeps me 100% in the physical moment feels really good.”

Participants also discussed experiencing *happiness through mindful presence* in the here and now. Quinn described, “Just kind of being, rather than worrying. I guess that’s comfort for me.... Being inside of my body as opposed to worrying about the people outside of my body.” Charlie connected being in the present rather than always thinking about the future as important to their happiness.

I’ve realized that I joke a lot about, ‘Oh, well, it’s really the weekend when I get to take off my watch.’ Or it’s really, ‘I’m really on vacation when I don’t have to look at my phone.’ Not being aware of mechanical time, but living in body time... . That is very definitive for me. But being very present, not having to think about where I have to be, what I need to plan for, when’s something due, you know?

Additional Component: Fuelers to Happiness

In addition to the core components of happiness described above, participants described other aspects of their lives that also contributed to or fueled their well-being and happiness. Often these *fuelers* contributed to happiness by increasing one or more core components. For example, participants described engaging in *self-care* activities that keep them happy and healthy (increasing *Agency*), developing *healthy relationships* with others (increasing *Connection to Others*, *Authenticity*), feeling a sense of *meaning in life* and *hope* (increasing *Perspective Shift*, *Authenticity*, and *Agency*), and their *work* experiences (increasing *Agency*, *Authenticity*, *Connection to Others*, and *Perspective Shift*) as all fuelers to their happiness. Some fuelers to happiness were identified by participants as being specific to their gender and lived experiences as a TNB person, while many were identified as being essential to wellbeing of their whole selves. A robust theme, fuelers to happiness comprised five subthemes and 29 categories. Notably, most if not all fuelers described by participants are well-documented in the broader literature as important contributors to happiness across populations. As such, these themes are presented in online supplemental materials.

Additional Component: Detractors From Happiness

While there were numerous factors that helped fuel happiness, many participants described several aspects of their lives that detracted, or served as barriers, to their happiness and well-being. In parallel fashion to the fuelers described above, the detractors that participants identified acted to decrease well-being, often times by diminishing one or more core components. For example, structural and interpersonal forms of *antitrans stigma* (decreasing *Agency*, *Authenticity*, and *Connection to Others*), *barriers to transitioning* (decreasing *Agency*, *Authenticity*, and *Connection to Others*), *negative relationships and interpersonal experiences* (decreasing *Connection to Others*, *Authenticity*, and *Agency*), and *life stressors and psychological distress* (decreasing *Agency*, *Connection to Others*, and *Perspective Shift*) significantly detracted from happiness for many participants. This theme was similarly large, comprising five subthemes and 33 categories. Similar to the *fuelers* described above, the *detractors* that participants identified in this study are robustly documented in the previous literature, and as such are presented in online supplemental materials.

A Model of Happiness for TNB Individuals

In the final stage of coding, we generated a visual model from our data that depicts the relationships among the emergent themes (see **Figure 1**). Interrelated and at times overlapping, centered in the model are the four core components of *Authenticity*, *Connection with Others*, *Perspective Shift*, and *Agency*, which comprised critical aspects of well-being for TNB individuals in our study. Although distinct conceptually, these components often operated in concert with each other; as capacity in one core area of wellbeing increased, so too did capacity in others. For example, some participants described how having agency in their gender transition increased their ability to live, be, and express themselves in an authentic manner. This authenticity in turn increased participants' capacity to connect to others and to also see and understand their own gender against the backdrop of societal constructions of gender. In connecting with others and receiving support, participants were able to experience

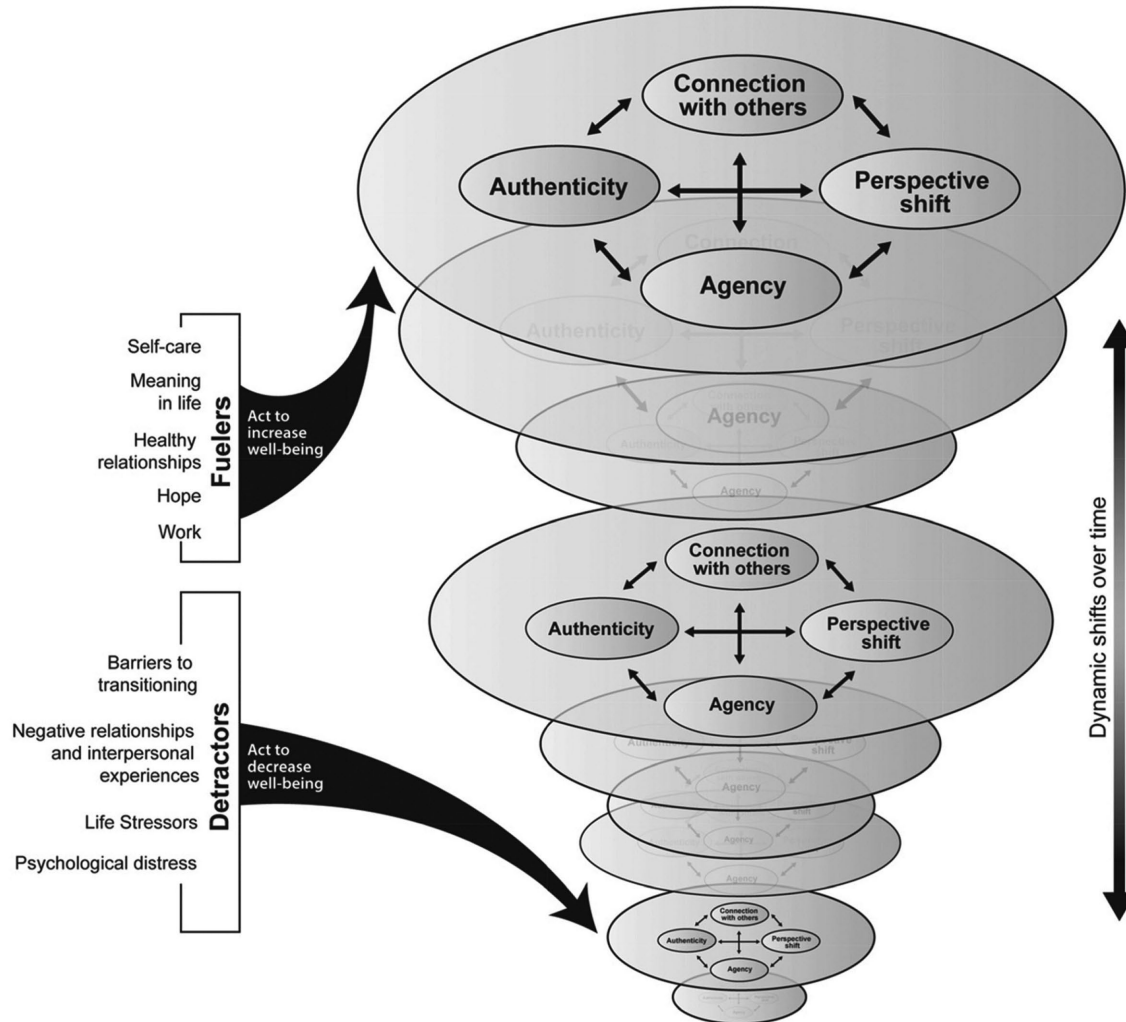


Figure 1 A Model of Happiness in TNB Adults (TNB = trans and nonbinary)

vulnerability in being present with and in expressing their authentic selves. In turn, participants identified having greater cognitive capacity to explicitly challenge societal constraints of gender. Depicted on the left in the model, numerous external factors fueled core aspects of wellbeing for participants. Similarly, when participants encountered barriers to happiness and other detractors to their wellbeing, one or more core components were constrained to negative effect on individuals' wellbeing.

Discussion

We identified a number of distinct themes from the present study's data that comprised core aspects of happiness among TNB participants: *Authenticity*, *Connection to Others*, *Perspective Shift*, and *Agency*. Each theme was composed of subthemes and categories. Connections among the core themes also existed, such that as happiness in one area grew or diminished, other aspects were also described as being similarly affected. Participants noted how external factors often helped to fuel or detract from these different aspects of happiness. However, participants also described internally derived processes (e.g., happiness as a choice, being intentional in fostering happiness) that helped them seek out opportunities for further happiness. Together, data from the present study paint a clear picture of how TNB participants experienced happiness, what participants identified as important to their happiness, and what types of factors contributed to or constrained happiness.

Findings from the present study hold important implications for theoretical contribution to the larger bodies of literature on positive psychology and TNB mental health. First, results echo previous descriptions of happiness as discrete, fleeting moments, to happiness that exists at the deepest level of satisfaction in the form of derived meaning and in context of greater emotional complexity (Winston, 2016). When participants described what they believed happiness to be and how they experienced it, the themes that emerged from our analysis aligned with existing conceptualizations of authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002, 2012), which centers positive emotions, engagement, and positive relationships as core components of happiness, and PWB, which position authentic living as most important to realizing one's full potential (Waterman, 1993; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Notably, the six domains of PWB—self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995)—can all be found among the themes and subthemes that emerged in this study. Findings from the present study add rich detail to the specific ways in which those various aspects appeared for our TNB participants and what they meant to each person. Although less emphasized in the initial articulation of PWB where well-being domains are largely described as internally

derived, results from this study also make clear how critically important social relationships and dynamics were to TNB individuals' experiences of happiness, and in fact, position the social and psychological as inextricably connected.

In considering the dynamics among the themes that emerged in this study, results bore a marked resemblance to the three core psychological needs and their function articulated in the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT; Ryan & Deci, 2008, 2017; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). That is, the satisfaction of the three core psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence acts independently and directly to increase an individual's psychological well-being. In much the same way, the core constructs identified from data in the present study act independently and directly to affect the degree to which individuals experience happiness, and indeed, were described in various ways by participants as essential.

The core theme in the present study that held the closest resemblance to one of the three BPNT needs, relatedness, was *connection to others*. Participants described experiencing social belonging, connection to community, and being connected to systems of support that were both general and specific to various aspects of identity as being essential to their well-being. In this study, the theme of *Connection to Others* captured the importance of individual relationships and social support, as well as the importance of a larger sense of belonging and connection to community. This extends existing theory on BPNT and PWB to underscore the importance of conceptualizing and measuring social connection across levels, from interpersonal to community to societal domains. Future research could also explore the degree of interconnection in social connection among these domains and determine any differential effects on happiness and other aspects of well-being.

This study's main themes of *Authenticity* and *Agency* also resembled BPNT's core needs of competence and autonomy, which are defined as a sense of self-efficacy with an internal perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to BPNT, competence and autonomy are positioned as context or domain-specific and are behaviorally operationalized. Similarly, in the present study, participants expressed the importance of being able to be themselves across contexts and to have agency in everyday activities, particularly as it related to

their gender. Authenticity and agency as important to meaningful relationships with others and in response to the external environment. Diverging from BPNT, however, participants also described authenticity and agency as a deeply internal process and experience. In this way, findings from the present study help strengthen the theoretical bridge from PWB domains of self-acceptance, purpose in life, autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth to the theoretical tenets of BPNT to consider core needs not just between domains or contexts, but also in relation to social identity. This is particularly likely to be true for individuals who experience identity-based marginalization where needs related to identity authenticity and agency are readily apparent in the face of stigma and social and economic barriers within societal institutions.

Diverging from extant theories of happiness and well-being, this study identified an additional core component of *Perspective Shift* as being central to well-being. This component is unique among the others in two important ways. First, it is conceptually distinct from the other components identified in the present study and from PWB domains and the three core needs articulated by BPNT. Participants described shifts in perspective, or an emerging reorientation and understanding of gender and themselves in society as critical to well-being. As such, *Perspective Shift* reflects internal and largely cognitive processes. As a result, the second way in which it is unique among other components is in its function and as a more stable contributor to participants' well-being over time. For example, with *Authenticity*, *Agency*, and *Connection to Others* more likely to fluctuate affectively in response to internal and external cues, *Shifts in Perspective* are more likely to endure across contexts, reflecting a critical aspect of resilience and resistance in response to societal stigma.

In many ways, although the emergence of *Perspective Shift* is novel in the central role it occupies in a model of well-being, within the larger literature on social identity, resilience, and resistance to marginalization (see Robinson & Schmitz, 2021 for an excellent overview), *Perspective Shift* as an important contributor to well-being is not surprising. Indeed, *Perspective Shift* as described by participants in the present study resembles a form of critical consciousness, a process by which oppressed or marginalized individuals critically analyze social conditions and enact social change (Freire, 2018). Research on critical

consciousness among marginalized populations has supported its important function as a resistance strategy for mitigating the harmful effects of social stigma and oppression (Diemer et al., 2016; Heberle et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2020; Yip & Chan, 2021). Although conceptually broader than critical consciousness, per se, research and scholarship with queer and TNB communities has consistently found identity-related processes to be critical to resisting systemic oppression, such as identity integration (Cerezo et al., 2020), resisting oppressive narratives, affirming one's own gender, and maintaining authenticity (Paceley et al., 2021).

In the present study, gains in *Perspective Shift* were described as relatively enduring. Placing this core aspect of happiness in the model alongside *Authenticity*, *Agency*, and *Connection to Others* may provide a foundation from which to promote and address fluctuations in the other core components. Future research could test these hypothetical relations and functions, such as investigating the degree to which *Perspective Shift* may buffer the deleterious impact of external detractors of well-being on *Authenticity*, *Agency*, and *Connection to Others*. Causal and temporal effects of changes in the four main components to explore opportunities for prevention and intervention strategies may be particularly fruitful for understanding how to promote well-being across time and context.

This study also underscores important implications for its contribution to the larger literature on TNB mental health more generally. Specifically, findings from the present study build on existing work that has documented positive emotions and experiences among TNB communities related to TNB identity (Budge et al., 2015; Riggle et al., 2011), while adding a rich level of detail to how TNB individuals experience positive mental health, in this case their subjective experience and definition of happiness, and the factors that promoted as well as impeded it. Although none of our participants used the specific term *gender euphoria*, which is defined as the feeling of joy and rightness in one's gender and increased subjective well-being that comes from external, internal, and social gender affirmation experiences (Beischel et al., 2022; Bradford et al., 2021), related to their experience, much of what participants described as happiness that intersected with being TNB was conceptually consistent with this term. Thus, echoing broader themes found in the extant literature related to

the importance of authenticity and agency in one's gender (e.g., Clements et al., 2021), findings from the present study capture further detail on the impact these constructs have on positive mental health and well-being, and underscore the importance of continuing to focus on positive mental health outcomes in research. Consistent with Westerhof and Keyes (2010), two continua model of mental illness (psychological distress) and mental health (positive mental health), when presented with the opportunity to discuss happiness, participants did so in ways that clearly placed happiness alongside distress, rather than as one versus the other.

Counseling Implications

Study findings support the need for mental health practitioners to frame happiness and well-being as critical aspects of mental health, distinct from suffering, to be attended to in therapy. However, conversations about happiness should supplement, rather than supplant, therapeutic work aimed at addressing internalized stigma, psychological distress, and other mental health symptomatology. We argue that centering a happiness and well-being frame (as one of several frames that might be used by a therapist) has the potential to accomplish unique therapeutic dynamics and outcomes. This is consistent with prior research that has found positive psychology interventions (PPIs) have been found to have small to medium effects on a host of mental health outcomes, including well-being, stress, depression, and anxiety (Carr et al., 2021; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). First, at its most basic, it is affirming to its core by communicating that one is deserving of happiness. Indeed, many of our participants shared with us outside of the study interviews that no one had ever asked them about happiness, particularly as it related to being trans and/or nonbinary; that to be posed such a question with the opportunity to deeply consider what happiness meant to that individual was a profoundly healing experience that some described after the interview.

Relatedly, centering a well-being frame in work with clients has the potential to move the therapeutic goal posts beyond the alleviation of suffering to situate thriving and happiness as not only attainable but also desirable and worthy of therapeutic work. This premise is at the core of recent scholarship that has called for overtly affirming

approaches to therapy with TNB clients (Matsuno, 2019; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; Spencer et al., 2021). Similarly, recent research has documented the beneficial impact microaffirmations and positive approaches have had on TNB clients in therapy (Anzani et al., 2019; Matsuno, 2019; Matsuno & Israel, 2018). For a population whose interactions with psychologists have historically necessitated overt pathologization of trans identity and experience via diagnostic assessment (i.e., being assigned a diagnosis of gender identity disorder [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder–Fourth Edition–Text Revised, DSM–IV–TR*] or Gender Dysphoria [*DSM–5*]) in accordance with the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care (Coleman et al., 2022), working with clients toward explicit goals of well-being, happiness, and thriving can also help to shift the relationship of TNB community members with mental health professionals over time.

Study findings also point to more specific strategies clinicians can adopt in their work with their TNB clients. First, clinicians can consider ways to help support clients in growing capacity for and increasing experiences of the core components described in this study: *Authenticity, Connection to Others, Perspective Shift, and Agency*. Clinicians can work with clients to identify instances, even momentary ones, where clients were able to experience meaningful connection with self and others, greater sense of control and agency, and deepening understanding of self and identity in larger societal context. Notably, this intervention can be readily adapted and integrated into a therapist's existing theoretical approach. For example, a therapist who pulls heavily on emotion-focused therapy can work with clients to deepen their emotional experience of these moments, tying that back to other therapeutic goals the therapist and client might be addressing. A therapist who works from a cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approach can help the client to also identify thoughts and behaviors that follow from these positive instances and integrate them into cognitive restructuring and reframing techniques. An additional avenue that may be particularly helpful to integrate into therapists' practice is mindfulness. Results from the present study echo the well-established literature on the benefits of mindfulness for cultivating well-being (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; McClintock et al., 2019; Shapiro et al., 2008). As a result, clinicians can teach clients basic mindfulness

skills, build mindfulness practices into the therapy hour, and help the client explore how engaging intentionally in mindfulness can contribute to overall well-being and to happiness. In addition to the specific strategies that could be adapted to and integrated within a therapist's individual therapeutic approach, recent research and scholarship have also synthesized a host of other PPIs that could be adapted to working with TNB clients to further elicit positive psychological growth and support. For example, a recent systematic review recommended interventions targeting self-compassion, optimism, love, forgiveness, and spirituality as being potentially particularly fruitful to enhance well-being and reduce health disparities among queer and TNB communities (Job & Williams, 2020).

Finally, with results suggesting that shifts in perspective represent a more stable and enduring core component to well-being for TNB individuals, clinicians can work with clients to deepen their understanding of their gender within the client's various contexts. To start, clinicians can help clients identify the various contexts in which they live and work and the ways culture intersects with each. Clinicians can then help clients to explore, unpack, and begin to challenge cultural conceptions of gender and to identify the impact those have had on the client over time and within the client's various contexts. This approach is consistent with the gender-affirmative life span approach articulated by Spencer et al. (2021), where developing gender literacy and moving beyond the binary are two central therapeutic goals for working with TNB children, adolescents, and adults. Over the course of therapy, clinicians can look for opportunities to check in with clients about how shifting perspectives on gender deepen understanding and meaning for the client and the ways in which clients may begin to interact differently in various contexts and with others.

Study Limitations and Conclusion

Findings from the present study should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. First, as with all qualitative research, findings cannot be generalized to the population as a whole. Furthermore, participants in this sample were predominantly White, and all resided in a less populated area of the central Great Plains region. As such, participants' geographic and cultural contexts must be taken into account

in the interpretation of results, with participants identifying a strong salience of gender to their experiences and with a few exceptions, far less explicit acknowledgment of the ways in which race, ability, and class also intersect to shape experience. The predominance of participants who benefited from White privilege in our study likely contributed to our study findings, where happiness was described as being individually derived and experienced, rather than grounded and shaped within community and in response to systemic dynamics. Methodologically, analytic rigor was established through the robust consensus coding process that carefully followed constructivist grounded theory steps outlined by Charmaz (2014) and supplemented by regular team meetings to clarify analytic processes and procedures, decision-making, and iterative refinement of emerging categories and themes. The first author also completed an audit of the data, highlighting individual codes to be cross-coded or moved to reinforce category distinction, and suggesting changes to category and theme names to enhance conceptual clarity. However, an additional step some qualitative researchers take to enhance methodological rigor and mitigate risk of bias in qualitative analysis is member checking (Levitt et al., 2017, 2018), an additional limitation in this study is that we did not employ this step in the absence of obtaining IRB consent to contact participants following the study.

In conclusion, this study contributes significantly to the literature on TNB well-being by exploring one subjectively experienced aspect of well-being, happiness. Findings clearly support the rich, overlapping, and recursive ways happiness is experienced by TNB individuals within and across core aspects of self and point to a need for continued research into promoting well-being. Specifically, researchers can test the hypotheses contained within the developed model to assess the degree to which findings can be generalized to the larger population, as well as identify areas for further development and differentiation within TNB populations.

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Supplemental materials The interview protocol and an additional table and narrative of findings are included in supplemental materials attached to the archive record for this article.

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