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**Revealing More Than Gender: Rigid Gender-Role Beliefs and Transphobia are Related to  
Engagement with Fetal Sex Celebrations**

Flora Oswald<sup>1</sup>, Amanda Champion<sup>2</sup>, Kailie Brown<sup>3</sup>, Kari Walton<sup>3</sup>, & Cory L. Pedersen<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pennsylvania State University – Departments of Psychology and Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies

<sup>2</sup>Simon Fraser University – Department of Criminology

<sup>3</sup>Kwantlen Polytechnic University – Department of Psychology

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### **Abstract**

“Gender reveal parties” (GRPs) - parties designed to celebrate the revelation of fetal gender – are a relatively new phenomenon which is highly visible and popular online. This phenomenon has been criticized for reinforcing rigid gender-role beliefs and stereotypes and perpetuating binary conceptualizations of two genders. The present study examines ideological and individual factors predicting involvement in GRPs. We hypothesized that endorsement of traditional gender roles, as well as endorsement of transphobia, would predict involvement in GRPs. In a sample of 217 current parents and expectant parents, we found that parents who engaged with GRPs endorsed less egalitarian gender-role beliefs and more transphobic attitudes than those who did not engage with GRPs when controlling for social media usage. These findings lend justification to criticisms of GRPs as reflecting problematic ideologies of gender.

*Keywords:* gender diversity, parents, gender reveal, fetal sex

**Public Significance Statement:** Our findings suggest that – despite the widespread perception that GRPs are harmless fun – parents who engage with GRPs, relative to parents who do not, endorse more prejudiced and essentialist views regarding gender. These findings point to the necessity of intervening upon prejudiced ideologies to prevent their leakage into cultural celebrations, and of educating parents and parents-to-be about the potential for early gendered socialization to limit their child’s gender expression later in development.

### **Revealing More Than Gender: Rigid Gender-Role Beliefs and Transphobia are Related to Engagement with Fetal Sex Celebrations**

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people – individuals whose gender identities branch from the sex they were assigned at birth (see van Anders, 2015) – experience significant and unique stigmatization and prejudice, often operationalized as transphobia (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2017; Galupo et al., 2014; Grant et al., 2011; Hill & Willoughby, 2005). Transphobia, defined as “emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society’s gender expectations” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 533) operates at an individual level; at a cultural level, prejudice toward TGD individuals has been conceptualized as genderism – the “ideology that reinforces the negative evaluation of gender non-conformity or an incongruence between sex and gender” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 534). At both levels, these prejudices are informed by binary and essentialist understandings of gender, which prohibit gender diversity (e.g., Lombardi, 2009; Nadal et al., 2010; Tebbe & Moradi, 2012). Beliefs in gender categories as innate, mutually exclusive, static, and defined by genitals are harmful to TGD individuals, as they promote perceptions of TGD identities as unnatural, unintelligible, and illegitimate (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; see also Schudson et al., 2019; van Anders, 2015). For this reason, TGD people are particularly impacted by confluences of biological sex and gender (i.e., assumptions that sex and gender are the same and that gender can be defined based on a person’s genitalia; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Galupo et al., 2014).

Though TGD people are at significant risk of explicit forms of prejudice (e.g., verbal aggression, physical violence, see Wirtz et al., 2020), subtle enactments of prejudice at the cultural and institutional level (e.g., in policy, law, community social structures) also pose a significant risk for TGD people, as they reify norms of stereotyping, prejudice, and

discrimination (Matsick et al., 2020). Indeed, even seemingly benign cultural practices may reflect and reinforce binary and essentialized gender norms which contribute to prejudice toward TGD people.

We theorize that gender reveal parties (GRPs) – social gatherings designed to celebrate and broadcast the announcement of an unborn baby’s gender (though actually celebrating fetal sex, as we delineate below) – represent one purportedly innocuous cultural practice through which essentialist notions of gender – and relatedly, transphobic attitudes – are embodied and transmitted.

### **Contextualizing the Gender Reveal Party**

GRPs are a relatively new phenomenon, having gained prominence only in recent years (Gieseler, 2018). GRPs are highly visible and popular online, especially across social media platforms such as Pinterest, Facebook, and Instagram, where individuals share information related to their GRPs to an online community (Gieseler, 2018; Nahata, 2017; Pasche Guignard, 2015). GRPs revolve around traditional, binary notions of gender, often observed in the decorations and thematic elements of the celebration. The themes are near-universally binary – pink and blue are perhaps the most common elements (Applequist, 2014; Gieseler, 2018; Jack, 2020; Nahata, 2017). GRP guests often engage in guessing games whereby they “vote” for the gender they believe the baby will be, usually by dressing in the appropriate “team” colors (i.e., pink or blue; Applequist, 2014). Though many perceive these celebrations as exciting and (harmless) fun, a growing rift has formed as the GRP has become the subject of criticism by popular and academic voices alike.

### **The Elephant in the Womb: Conflations of Fetal Sex and Gender**

While scholars are often careful to distinguish between sex (biological) and gender

(socially constructed; Barnes, 2015), the terminology of the “gender-reveal party” (and indeed, much of popular discourse) is less careful. This term is a misnomer – as these parties actually proclaim the probable sex of a fetus, determined through sonogram and/or through maternal blood testing to identify the chromosomes of the fetus (Jack, 2020). We refer to these tests as determining the *probable* sex of the fetus given that they are not without error. Sex at birth may be discordant with the sex assessed in utero, and some babies assessed as phenotypically male or female are born intersex (Preves, 2013).

### **Binary Reinforcement in the Gender Reveal Trend**

Scholars posit that informing parents about the sex of the fetus is but the first step in reinforcing misinformed sex and gender binaries (e.g., Browne, 2017; Kane, 2017); Kane (2017) suggests that this “gender trap” creates a set of expectations and structures which inhibit social change pertaining to the loosening of rigid gender constraints. Thus, GRPs – which further reinforce these binaries – are critiqued for their link to rigid gender-role beliefs and gender essentialism (e.g., Akre, 2016; Applequist, 2014; Gieseler, 2018).

For example, Gieseler (2018) offers that assumptions and static expectations of gender identity are promoted by the ritualized celebration of fetal gender (sex), stating that GRPs “create gendered expectations and eliminate choices while the child is still a fetus” (p. 6). GRPs reinforce rigid ideas about gender, highlighted through these visual thematic representations – girls are pink, boys are blue, and these two categories are firmly distinct (e.g., Applequist, 2014). GRPs often go beyond mere visual representation, invoking themes such as “Guns or Glitter?” and “Badges or Bows?” (Gieseler, 2018). The invocation of gendered stereotypes, including those related to occupation in the case of “badges” (e.g., police badges, which belong to an occupational domain traditionally considered masculine), demonstrates how GRPs go beyond

celebrations of fetal sex and assign gendered roles and expectations to the unborn child.

The GRP thus publicly commits a fetus to a particular set of (harmful) stereotypes and expectations (Kane, 2017; Nahata, 2017), reaffirming and laying the groundwork for what Browne (2017) calls “sexism via gender essentialism” (p. 1). Applequist (2014) asserts that, through the choice to have a GRP, parents actively choose to include the gender binary in their child’s future. In these rigid categories into which the fetus is born, there is no choice in the matter, nor is there space for a human who does not fit neatly into the pink or blue boxes selected for them in utero.

### **Genderism, Transphobia, and the Gender Reveal**

Nahata (2017), discussing the gendered expectations GRPs create for the fetus, asks succinctly: “What are the implications if and when those expectations are unfulfilled?” (p. 1). Theorizing a response to this question, she suggests that GRPs and related cultural practices contribute to potential future distress among children (particularly TGD children) and their families (Nahata, 2017). This theorizing is rooted in the notion that, by perpetuating binary and essentialist notions of gender, GRPs limit opportunities for gender diversity (Gieseler, 2018; Jack, 2020; Nahata, 2017; Pasche Guignard, 2015).

That GRPs conflate gender with sex demonstrates their roots in genderism, which reinforces gender essentialist ideologies that locate gender in the genitals (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). The institutionalization of this cultural prejudice in a new tradition (see Pasche Guignard, 2015) – the GRP – suggests the ubiquity of the prejudice and the ongoing endorsement of genderist ideologies at individual and cultural levels. Additionally, that conflation of gender and sex is so inherent in the GRP is suggestive of prejudice toward TGD individuals. Nadal and colleagues (2012) delineate how endorsement of gender essentialist and binary-reinforcing

cultures and behaviors represents a form of microaggression, or commonplace expression of prejudice, against transgender individuals (see Nadal, 2008); the reinforcement of gender essentialist beliefs inherent in the GRP can thus be understood as a cultural expression of prejudice toward TGD individuals. Furthermore, Pasche Guignard (2015) posits that GRPs may serve to ward off threat of gender uncertainty by placing gender at the center of public celebration, suggesting GRPs may also be manifestations of more explicit forms of transphobia.

### **The Current Study**

We conducted an empirical study to examine ideological and individual differences between parents and expectant parents who engage with (i.e., have hosted or are planning to host) GRPs and those who do not engage with GRPs. Given the theorized connections between GRPs, gender essentialist ideologies, and binary beliefs about gender, we hypothesized (H1) that participants who engage with GRPs would endorse less egalitarian gender-role beliefs than those who do not engage with GRPs. Additionally, given GRPs can be understood as expressions of prejudice toward TGD individuals, we hypothesized (H2) that participants who engage with GRPs would endorse more transphobic attitudes than those who do not engage with GRPs.

### **Method**

#### **Design & Procedure**

After receiving institutional ethical approval, participants were recruited from a variety of social media sites including Facebook and Reddit, in addition to recruitment sites for psychology research (e.g., Lehmiller.com, Social Psychology Network). Participants were also recruited from the research participant pool of a Western Canadian university and through adverts placed in local businesses and universities, and at hospitals, family medical clinics, fertility clinics, and



midwifery clinics<sup>1</sup>. Participating university students were offered course credit to specified psychology classes. Participating members of the public were not offered any incentive for participation. We recruited participants with children aged 6 years and under as well as participants who were currently pregnant. The age cutoff of 6 years was determined given that the GRP trend was popularized around 2012 (Gieseler, 2018), thus we expected individuals *only* having children older than 6 years of age to be less familiar with the concept.

After completion of an informed consent form, participants who met our recruitment criteria completed a basic multiple choice demographic questionnaire (see Table 1) and then responded to several measures pertaining to their beliefs about gender, social media embeddedness, and childbearing/pregnancy history, as well as their participation in GRPs.

### **Participants**

Our initial sample consisted of 247 participants. Surveys with insufficient completion rate (< 75%) were excluded ( $n = 25$ ). Furthermore, TGD individuals ( $n = 5$ ) were excluded from analyses<sup>2</sup>, resulting in a final sample of 217 (assumed) cisgender participants (see limitations section for further details); 35% ( $n = 76$ ) were currently pregnant and did not have additional

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was required by our research ethics board to be anonymous, with geo-data collection information disabled. Thus, it is unknown where most of the successful participant acquisition took place.

<sup>2</sup> We excluded TGD participants from analyses for two reasons: (1) due to sample size concerns and failure to meet statistical assumptions; and (2) the inappropriateness of the current theoretical framework for approaching TGD participants' prejudice toward their own group. Pertaining to (1), we did not specifically recruit nor exclude TGD participants from our sample. If we had obtained a large enough sample size of TGD participants to conduct reliable analyses, we would have reported descriptives for this group with regard to GRP engagement, as this may prove of interest given the findings reported here. However, pertaining to (2), even if our sample of TGD individuals was appropriate with regard to statistical assumptions, the theoretical frameworks underlying the main outcomes reported here (particularly, genderism and transphobia) were not developed, nor were these measures validated, with TGD people. Thus, even if our sample of TGD people was large enough to conduct analyses with these outcomes, we believe it would be inappropriate to do so.

children under the age of 6 years, 13.8% ( $n = 30$ ) were currently pregnant and had additional children under the age of 6 years, and 51.2% ( $n = 111$ ) were not currently pregnant but had a child (or children) under the age of 6 years. Twenty-nine percent ( $n = 63$ ) of participants reported engagement with (i.e., having hosted or planning to host) GRPs. Table 1 displays a detailed breakdown of participant demographics by GRP engagement.

## **Measures**

### ***Gender Role Beliefs – Short Version***

The GRBS-SV (Brown & Gladstone, 2012) contains 10 items assessing participants' beliefs about the role of women in the household and workplace, in addition to perceptions of chivalry and protection (e.g., “women should have as much sexual freedom as men.”). Scores range on 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*) to provide a total score, where higher scores indicate more egalitarian gender role beliefs ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### ***Genderism and Transphobia Scale – Short Version***

The GTS-SV (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2014), adapted from Hill and Willoughby's (2005) Genderism and Transphobia Scale, is comprised of 12-item statements regarding various dimensions of genderism, transphobia, and gender-bashing (e.g., “children should play with toys appropriate to their own sex”). Participants rate their agreement with each statement on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). A mean composite score was calculated, with higher scores indicating higher attitudes of genderism and/or transphobia ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### ***Media and Technology Usage and Attitudes Scale***

We utilized the 9-item general social media usage subscale of the MTUAS (Rosen et al., 2013) to examine participants' social media embeddedness (e.g., “how often do you post social

media photos?”). Response options range from 1 (*never*) to 10 (*all the time*). Item scores are averaged to create a composite score, with higher scores indicating greater social media usage ( $\alpha = .90$ )<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Children, Pregnancy, and GRP History Questionnaire***

Developed for the current study, this measure consists of 5-12 questions, depending on how applicable some questions were to each participant. Participants indicated the number of children they have, whether they found out the sex of their children prior to birth, and whether they held (or plan to hold) GRPs; additional items inquired about the specific details of those GRPs. The full questionnaire is available in supplementary materials.

## **Results**

### **Analyses of Between-Group Differences**

We conducted chi-square tests of independence between those who do and do not engage with GRPs on categorical demographic variables. Sexual orientation, relationship status, education, and ethnicity variables were recoded to meet chi-square analysis assumptions, as these as originally coded led to expected values less than 5 per cell (Field, 2013; see Table 1 note). No significant differences were found between groups on gender,  $\chi^2(1, 217) = 0.91, p = .342$ , sexual orientation,  $\chi^2(1, 217) = 1.40, p = .237$ , relationship status,  $\chi^2(1, 217) = 0.04, p = .848$ , education,  $\chi^2(1, 217) = 0.14, p = .714$  or ethnicity,  $\chi^2(1, 217) = 0.42, p = .517$  (Table 1). Additionally, an independent-samples t-test revealed no significant differences in age between groups,  $t(215) = -0.201, p = .841, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.20, 1.79]$ . The groups did differ significantly on social media usage,

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<sup>3</sup> Additional analyses were run using a measure adapted for the current study, The Attitudes and Social Norms of Gender Reveal Parties. We did not retain this measure given validation concerns. Please see supplementary materials for the measure details.

$t(215) = 3.05$ , 95% CI [.27, 1.28]; those who engaged with GRPs were more avid social media users ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than their counterparts ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ). Thus, we included social media usage as a covariate in our primary analyses.

### **Between-Group Differences on Traditional Gender-Role Beliefs and Transphobic Attitudes**

We used two separate one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) to test H1 and H2 after controlling for social media usage<sup>4</sup>. We found significant group differences in gender-role beliefs,  $F(1, 214) = 24.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ ; those who engaged with GRPs held more traditional gender-role beliefs ( $M = 31.23$ ,  $SE = 1.03$ ) than those who did not ( $M = 25.07$ ,  $SE = .65$ ; see Figure 1). Further, we found significant differences in transphobia,  $F(1, 214) = 13.17$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .058$ ; those who engaged with GRPs held more transphobic attitudes ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ) than those who did not engage with GRPs ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SE = .07$ ). These results are presented in Figure 2<sup>5</sup>.

## **Discussion**

We conducted an empirical study to examine ideological and individual differences between parents and expectant parents who engage with (i.e., have hosted or are planning to host) GRPs and those who do not engage with GRPs.

### **Traditional Gender-Role Beliefs and Transphobic Attitudes**

Supporting our hypotheses, we found that participants involved with GRPs held more traditional gender-role beliefs and more transphobic/genderist attitudes than their counterparts

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<sup>4</sup> Less than 1% of data were mean replaced on dependent variables including the GRBS-SV and GTS-SV.

<sup>5</sup> Social media as a covariate was not significant in the gender role belief ANCOVA model ( $p = .093$ ). Social media was a marginally significant covariate in the transphobia ANCOVA model ( $p = 0.06$ ). However, the inclusion of social media as a covariate slightly improved the f-value and effect size in both models.

who did not engage in celebrations of fetal sex, although mean scores on these measures were quite low overall. These findings support the notion outlined in prior literature – and thus justify criticisms – that GRPs reflect problematic ideologies of gender; GRPs have been charged with upholding harmful gender stereotypes and the gender binary, as well as conflating the concept of gender with biological sex (Applequist, 2014; Gieseler, 2018; Jack, 2020; Kane, 2017).

The associations between essentialist notions of gender, transphobia, and GRPs are a cause for concern. Parents who endorse these beliefs may hold their children to more traditional gendered expectations (e.g., Eccles et al., 1990; Meyer & Gelman, 2016) and have decreased acceptance of gender diversity (see Davidson & Czopp, 2014; Skewes et al., 2018). Parents viewing their children (and fetuses) in terms of solidified gender roles (Applequist, 2014) contribute to backlash against children who are TGD (and/or who are born intersex) and who thus violate the expectations placed on them from the moment they achieved personhood (Gieseler, 2018; Riley et al., 2013; see also Nahata, 2017).

The nature of the GRP – in making gender the most relevant category – may therefore pose a particular threat to children for whom the gender ascribed to them in utero is inaccurate; parents who have publicly celebrated their child's fetal sex may be particularly unsupportive of deviations from that ascribed gender. Parental support is significantly associated with better health outcomes for transgender youth, including higher life satisfaction, lower perceived burden of being transgender, and fewer depressive symptoms (e.g., Katz-Wise et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Simons et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015); conversely, parental rejection and abuse are associated with an increased risk of suicide and other detrimental outcomes for transgender youth (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020; Travers et al., 2012). Thus, the embodiment of gender-binary, genderist, and transphobic ideologies through the trend of the

GRP could have significant negative consequences for the children upon whom gender is ascribed, particularly when those children are TGD.

Additionally, at a broader level, the popularity of GRPs communicate a social norm of acceptance of gender-binary, genderist, and transphobic ideologies. Encountering acceptance of these ideologies, many of which characterize transgender microaggressions as offered by Nadal et al. (2012) may in and of itself act as a stressor for TGD individuals. Such commonplace prejudices, particularly when institutionalized (e.g., as cultural traditions), reinforce stigmatization and thus contribute to the health disparities experienced by TGD individuals (e.g., Nadal et al., 2010, 2012; see also Matsick et al., 2020).

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

The preliminary and non-experimental nature of the present work renders causal inference nonviable; the results of the present work can be interpreted only as associations. Future work should aim to establish causal and directional claims regarding the influence of gender role beliefs, transphobic/gender essentialist attitudes, social media use, and prior pregnancy complication on likelihood of engaging with GRPs. Further, work should aim to explore developmental outcomes for children – particularly those with gender identities which do not align with their sex assigned at birth – in relation to their parents' engagement with GRPs. Such work could inform interventions aiming to improve outcomes for TGD children.

Additionally, our sample was primarily White and heterosexual. Given that both Jack (2020) and Pasche Guignard (2015) assert the Whiteness and heterosexuality of the GRP, we believe the present sample likely approximates those who engage with GRPs, however, we note that this sample precludes the ability to generalize our findings to racial/ethnic and sexual minority individuals. Further, our lack of information on geographic location of participants

precludes questions specific to culture or national identity; future studies should aim to assess these variables in relation to GRPs. Moreover, though we excluded self-identified TGD participants from analyses due to the small sample size and the nature of our current research questions, it is possible that individuals who are TGD but identified themselves as women or men (i.e., without the transgender label) may be included in analyses. The framing of our demographic questionnaire introduced gendered assumptions into our data which may have impacted the present findings; it is reasonable to expect that TGD individuals might respond differently to the study measures – particularly the Transphobia and Genderism Scale– than those who are cisgender. Thus, results may have been impacted due to our failure to ascertain the true number of TGD participants in our final sample.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study begin to provide insight into the attitudes and beliefs of those who host and/or participate in GRPs in a predominantly White, heterosexual sample. Parents in our study who engaged with GRPs reported more traditional gender role beliefs and more transphobic/gender essentialist beliefs relative to parents who did not engage with these parties. These findings lend justification to criticisms of GRPs as reflecting problematic ideologies of gender and suggest that the notion of these celebrations as simply good fun should be taken with caution. We thus suggest that the gender reveal trend should be viewed critically as a result of its connection to these problematic attitudes and beliefs about gender.

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