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Gender Knowledge: Category, Status, Transgression, Policing, and Perception

By

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DISSERTATION

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2022

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Abstract

The now-classic essay “Doing Gender” by West and Zimmerman (1987) was published over 30 years ago. Since then, gender accomplishments and failures have been discussed at length; but what aspects of *gender knowledge* are necessary in order to *do gender*? Gender categories (men, women, nonbinary people, etc.) and statuses (cisgender or non-cisgender) structure social life and guide life chances, yet they lack significant sociological definition and analysis. To better understand gender categories and statuses, I conducted 75 interviews examining *gender transgressions* and the meaning-making of gender boundaries. My analysis of gender rule-breaking will produce a theoretical intervention explaining the construction and transmission of *gender knowledge*. What exactly do we know when we *know* that a gender boundary is transgressed? Specifically, I will focus on why, despite engaging in many of the same gendered actions, cis and non-cis people occupy such different social and material realities. While non-cis experiences have been theorized as the exemplar of *doing gender*, there remains a need to critically analyze the cisgender status as a social phenomenon. The aim of my research program is to investigate the commonly-accepted divisions between gendered actors: between binary and nonbinary people, and between those who are cisgender and non-cisgender. My inquiry primarily explores the idea of gender difference by considering the concept of gender transgressions as they occur through both gender category and gender status. By first offering a typology of gender transgressions, I will then uncover the functions they serve and ultimately examine how they are policed and perceived through social interaction. I will lay a theoretical foundation to assess everyday power dynamics among *all* gendered actors. My study of cisgender and non-cisgender people’s experiences will produce new analytical tools to

understand the gender system in which we are all immersed. In so many ways, to know one's gender is to know one's place in society. My work seeks to build on the *doing gender* literature by exposing the underlying mechanisms of what it is to "know" gender.

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Introduction

Gender, not religion, is the opiate of the masses.

Erving Goffman (1977:315)

Gender is a *primary frame* in that it is impossible to engage in social interaction without possessing gender knowledge of the self and others (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). “Gender,” as it were, is displayed and interpreted through a process West and Zimmerman call *doing gender*, which make socially-constructed differences appear natural (1987). If— as West and Zimmerman suggest, and as sociologists widely accept— we *do gender* based on culturally-available information, then it behooves us to further investigate how we come to know and use that information.

Gender knowledge is a critical component of *doing gender*. Sociologists have engaged decades-long conversations about the ways we do gender, but have paid relatively little attention to the social mechanisms that underlie *knowing gender*. *Gender knowledge* is a term I use¹ to refer to the cultural information that we rely on to identify and relate to ourselves and others through a gendered system of difference.

Gender knowledge is instructive; it provides us with social rules and allows us to anticipate interactional outcomes. The purpose of my study is to identify and analyze the central tenets of gender knowledge that inform our everyday interactions, and explain our highly gendered social hierarchy. As such, my inquiry is focused on gender category, status, transgression, policing, and perception.

¹ Ridgeway (2009) refers to this term, but does not focus on it as an object of study.

By sociological definition, *gender categories* and *statuses* are socially constructed; yet they are not treated as such in everyday life and persist as unquestioned organizing features of our social hierarchy. Gender essentialism, although problematized by social scientists, is generally accepted by most people in American society and allows us to recognize and experience others as “men,” “women,” “cisgender,” and “transgender,” etc. Indeed, society is structured explicitly around mutually-exclusive *categories* such as man or woman (or genderqueer, etc.), as well as *statuses* such as cisgender or non-cisgender.

I use the term “gender category” to refer to what may be commonly thought of as gender identity options: men, women, nonbinary etc. The concept of gender category speaks to the potential of shared characteristics and variation among gendered groups. Outcomes based on gender categories are impacted by other, intersecting, axes of identity such as race, class, and gender status. I use the term “gender status” to refer to a relative, binary, hierarchical social positioning between those who are cisgender and those who are not.

Distinguishing gender category from status is crucial to fully understand gendered experiences. For instance, two people may share the same gender category of “woman” but they may occupy different gender statuses where one woman is cis² and one woman is trans³ (non-cis). Their social experiences as *women* are not monolithic and will likely diverge, primarily as a result of their respective gender statuses (as well as their races, classes, etc.). Conceptually, gender status refers to one’s proximity to a privileged social position, which in this case, is cisness. Cisness is not diametrically opposed to transness, though, as some nonbinary

² I will use the terms “cisgender” and “cis” interchangeably throughout the entirety of this text.

³ I will use the terms “transgender” and “trans” interchangeably throughout the entirety of this text.

people do not identify as trans or cisgender; for that reason I resist a cis/ trans framing and instead focus on a cis/ non-cis dichotomy in discussing gender status.

The *doing gender* literature shows that gender is a product of social interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987). We know that gender categories allow for considerable variation within- and overlap between-groups regarding the *quality content* of gendered actors (e.g., Kazyak 2012; Schippers 2007). For instance, those in the categories “women” and “men” often display the same kinds of gendered traits (clothing, grooming, names, demeanor, etc.) as one another while still maintaining mutually-exclusive positions in their respective categories. Further, some may *primarily* display the gendered traits associated with a “different” gender without losing their categorical membership. What is it, then, that allows gender category to stick? How is it that in the face of so much within-group variation, and with so many different ways to do gender, that binaristic divisions of *women* and *men* remain relatively constant?

Although it may be tempting to understand the tenacity of gender categories through some explanation about the body, sociologists know that sex and gender are distinct social entities (e.g. Garfinkel 1967, Kessler and McKenna 1978; Rubin 1975; West and Zimmerman 1987). In fact, we know that sex is rather *inconsequential* when it comes to gender identity category and needn't presuppose it; to the contrary, rather, it is typically *gender* which presupposes (the impression of) *sex* (Kessler and McKenna 1978). The literature is clear that it isn't necessarily the quality content of gender, and it isn't necessarily sex, that keep gender categories constant.

We still have yet to flesh out gender categories and explore how one gains and keeps a mutually-exclusive membership. The current social scientific approach to gendered categories tends to accept them as-is, conducting meaningful work in examining social experiences of men, women, and nonbinary individuals, for instance. Although these lines of inquiry are key in exploring material inequality, they tend to be more applied and, so, theoretical questions remain about the persistence and division of gender categories.

If we problematize gender *categories*, we must also call into question gender *statuses*. Do cis people and non-cis people ever *do* the same kinds of things, and if so does that *doing* compromise their membership in a given gendered status? What is the actual boundary between cisgender and non-cisgender people? Gender category exists independently of sex, but does gender status?

The boundary conceptually separating cisgender and transgender (non-cisgender) has been under-theorized; Lagos and Schilt (2017) explain that sociologists have historically relied paradigms of *gender deviancy* or *gender difference* to regard the distinction between the two statuses. Whereas the gender deviancy paradigm essentially centers the mere existence of non-cis people as the object of study, the gender difference paradigm focuses on the social experiences of non-cis people from their own perspectives (Schilt and Lagos 2017). In either approach, what's lost is a robust discussion of the foundational and conceptual boundary-making between gender statuses, and this is precisely the issue I take up in my work. I ultimately argue that in order to build out gender status as *the* object of study, we must anchor the conversation on gender rules and their consequential transgressions. My focus on gender status and cisness in particular is in parallel with feminist theory and critical race scholarship which deconstructed previously

unmarked sources of power, such as masculinity and whiteness, respectively, and brought them to the center of analysis.

If we can imagine a path from sex assignment at birth to gender identification, *gender transgressions* are often meant to refer to those actions, behaviors, embodiments, and performances that interrupt or completely reroute cisgender and/ or binary and/ or normative categorical experiences. In other words, gender transgressions in their current iteration are typically discussed as deviations from society's dichotomous biologically-based gender role prescriptions. Within this framing, transgender people *cannot help* but be gender transgressive. In fact, transgender people are, by definition, *necessarily* gender transgressive. On a very basic level *transgender* refers to “a range of gender-variant identities” (Williams 2014:232). If gender variance (i.e., transgression) is the criteria for placing a transgender person in their (non-cis) gender status, what are the implications for cisgender people who also (and equally) engage in gender variance and transgressions? What are the actual limits of gender statuses, and how do we recreate them in our everyday interactions?

The boundaries of gender categories and statuses matter because their *transgression* is often used justification for harassment, violence, and exclusion. We know this because gender policing often arises in response to either *gender category* (i.e., man, woman, nonbinary, etc.) or *gender status* (i.e., cisgender or non-cisgender) non-normativity. For example, if we look at the experiences of *gender policing* of non-cis people compared to their cisgender counterparts we see a striking pattern of violence, marginalization, and decreased life chances in *every* arena of social life (James et al. 2016). In this example about gender status transgression and policing, it's clear that there is something about the cisgender status that affords social privilege and

protection from interpersonal and institutional violence, but what is it? Do cis and non-cis people really do gender *that* differently from one another? The literature on gender *passing* suggests not (e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Dozier 2005). Further, James et al. note there is heightened vulnerability of negative interactions for those who are merely *perceived* as transgender— compared to counterparts *who may in fact be transgender* but are not necessarily read as such (2016). Taken together, these findings show that gender *status*, in particular, is regularly policed and has an undeniable impact on life chances and must be explored in greater depth.

Gender perception is a key factor that informs interaction across all social domains. Our relationship with gender is paradoxical and best understood by the general premise of the Thomas theorem, which states that *situations we define as real become real in their effects*; for something that so deeply lacks material fundamentality, gender is certainly “...real in its consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). In this way, amorphous gender categories and statuses exist in society as a sort of common knowledge and compel us into (inter)action. If we all more or less share the same *gender knowledge* about gendered groups and boundaries, what is *it* that we know and how did we learn *it*? If gender, as a master status (Hughes 1945), denotes one’s position in a hierarchy, I seek to uncover the interactional processes by which we come to *know* our place in the social world, and how we sense that others know it, too.

My project aims to identify and analyze the underlying mechanics by which gender knowledge structures social life. My work on gender categories, statuses, transgression, policing, and perception will address a crucial gap in the literature that has taken the boundaries between gendered groups such as cisgender/ transgender and man/woman/ nonbinary, etc. for granted. Gender categories and statuses clearly structure social life and alter life chances. Although

gender categories and statuses have been explored at length sociologically, they have not yet been defined as entities unto themselves. In order to better understand how gender categories and statuses are used as foundational concepts of gender knowledge, I turn my focus to the study of the meanings social actors make of gender transgressions; their experiences of gender policing; and their gendered perceptions. As such, my inquiry hinges on an in-depth exploration of gender(ed) rule breaking. What exactly do we *know* when we know that a gender category or status is being transgressed? By exploring gender rule-breaking I will be able to provide a theoretical intervention explaining the meaning making of *gender knowledge*. Specifically, I will focus on why cisgender and non-cis people— despite engaging in much of the same gendered actions— occupy such different social and material realities.

Literature

A relatively small number of analysts (e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1977; Kessler and McKenna 1978) seriously considered gender as a socially-constructed achievement before it was fully accepted as such in the discipline during the late 1980's. Since then, sociologists have made great strides in theorizing the mechanisms which underlie gender as a personal identity, social status, social institution, and unit of analysis (e.g., Scott 1986; Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987; Martin 2004; Ridgeway 2004).

It is now standard in the field to accept gender as a kind of social experience that is distinct from biological sex. Gender is something that is *done*— something that is borne out of interaction, that we all must *accomplish*— or risk *failure* and be consequently called into *account* (West and Zimmerman 1987). The theoretical framework of *doing gender* is an investment in the

literature that has generated unparalleled returns in centering gender's role in social life and laying a foundation for questioning so-called natural and essential gendered differences among social actors.

The dichotomous biological sex model of “male” and “female” that we structure social life around is just as socially constructed as gender. Davis and Preves have noted, “Sex is far more diverse than we acknowledge when we ask whether a baby is male or female” (2017:80). Indeed, biologists have noted “the frequency of deviation from the ideal male or female” (with respect to chromosomes, hormones, gonads, genital duct systems, and external genitalia) may be as high as 2% of live births (Blackless et al. 2000). Just because something is socially constructed though, doesn't mean it isn't *real in its effects* (Thomas and Thomas 1928), and as such, sex is treated as a highly compelling prescriptive gendered attribute. Goffman (1977) noted the social process of placing infants in one sex-class or another is *universal*— of course, with the social expectation that sex assignment will correspond to gender category.

Much of the social ordering power of *sex* and *gender* in our society exist in their binaristic mythology (Kessler and McKenna 1985; Butler 1999; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Butler (1999) argues that *even if* sex was binary, there is *no reason* why gender would have to be; the sex/ gender divide does not support the idea of binary gender. Despite the gender binary's logical impossibility, there remains no consistent social place for those who exist outside of it (Lorber 1994; Darwin 2020). The social relationships for those outside of the binary disturb both social order (Lorber 1994) and interaction (Lucal 1999; Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

Gender is a primary frame for social relating and *gender frames* often run in the background of all interaction (Ridgeway 2009). Sex and gender perception are necessary and

form the basis for social interaction and interpretation (Kessler and McKenna 1985; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Most “cues” used for attribution are actually understood *post hoc*. “Cultural genitals” are those we assume others to possess— they are not physical and don’t need to be (Kessler and McKenna 1985). Additionally, Kessler and McKenna (1985) claim that *gender perception* has a/historical elements: it is *ahistorical* in that it occurs moment to moment, but it is *historical* in that attribution requires a compelling degree of “naturalness” that a person has ‘always’ been the gender you think they are. Similarly, Scott (1986) highlights the critical role of general understandings of “natural” relationships upon which the gender hierarchy relies. In this way, binary sex and gender become inextricably linked in everyday interactions and promote the cisgender status as the default for all gendered actors.

Cisness is taken for granted in the *gender perception* process. The social body in Western society is always gendered (Lorber 1994) and the expectation of cisness is a crucial component of that gendering. Much of the “doing” in doing gender has to do with imposing the normative gender status (*cisgender*), rather than the normative gender category (*men*). For instance, West and Zimmerman claim in that “[i]f we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category.” (1987:146). In this way, doing gender and gender identities become sites of corroboration and contestation in and of themselves. This is apparent in considering Valentine’s (2007) claim that *transgender* is not just a label that describes some way of being— it also is a site for which that way of being is produced.

In the early scholarship on “doing gender,” *transness* (not non-cisness, but specifically binary transness) has been treated as an exemplar of what it means to “do gender.” Indeed, the very idea that *one can be transgender* is the genesis of the larger conversation. Consider

Garfinkel's (1967) foundational work on gender *passing* that centered solely on the case study of *Agnes*, a transgender woman. Similarly, West and Zimmerman's theorization of doing gender relied heavily on Garfinkel's account of *Agnes*, noting that her "case makes visible what culture has made invisible—the accomplishment of gender." (1987:131). Further, a plethora of empirical works that build on West and Zimmerman's theory specifically examine the ways in which *transgender people* do gender (i.e., Dozier 2005; Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014; Schilt 2006). Despite the relative majority of gender literature focusing on the experiences of cisgender people, the non-cis experience of being transgender has been exemplified in exploring the social construction of gender. In consequence, there are many conversations about cisgender people *doing gender category* in non-normative ways as well as non-cis people *doing gender status* in non-normative ways, but there is still much to explore when it comes to the social construction of more normative and unmarked gendered experiences, such as the cisgender status.

If the non-cis experience can help us better understand gender, what might we learn from the cisgender experience? The term *cisgender* came into use in the discipline as recently as the 2000s (e.g., Schilt and Westbrook 2009). The term was incorporated and in many ways, continues to be, used less as a focus of inquiry and more as a diametric opposition to *transgender*, the true object of study. While many key works have looked specifically at displays of cisgender people performing within or outside of their gender categories (i.e., Kane 2006; Gamson and Grindstaff 2010; Pascoe 2012; Craig 2013), there is a general dearth of research outlining the theoretical mechanisms by which cis people specifically do *cis-gender* and experience their cisgender status.

Both gender category and gender status are foundational conceptual building blocks necessary for understanding, inquiring, and analyzing interactions and outcomes among *all* gendered actors. Conceptually, gender category and status are useful in technically defining socially constructed gendered groups (i.e., cisgender women, trans men, nonbinary individuals, etc.). There has been relatively little inquiry, however, into the ways that gendered groups are socially constructed, or the lines between various categories or statuses— especially those unmarked, such as the cisgender status.

One of the most clarifying ways to determine boundaries between categories and statuses is by examining the transgressions that confirm or deny one’s membership in a given group. *Gender transgressions* are described as *doing gender* in “contravening” or “wrong” ways (Ansara and Quick 2016:1167). The concept of *gender transgression*⁴ has been studied since the sex/ gender distinction was widely accepted in the second half of the twentieth century (Rubin 1975; Stoller 1964); however, analysts lacked a definitive framework for explaining what gender transgressions *actually are*. Foundational work exploring *gender transgression* has exemplified the experiences of non-cis people without fully considering how the *cisgender status itself* might be further teased out as rich site in the exploration of gender rule-breaking. The concept of *gender transgression* must be clarified, consolidated, and explored simultaneously with cis and non-cis populations to improve its theoretical and analytical purchase.

⁴ This concept is also referred to in various literatures as “cross-gender behavior” (e.g., Fagot 1977; Sandnabba and Ahlberg 1999) and “gender deviance” (e.g., Nelson and Robinson 1994; Schneider 2012).

Although cisgender people can be seen as transgressive in everyday situations, such as at work or in sports, their transgressions are often framed through implications to their *categorical* membership rather than their gender *status* (i.e., strong, assertive cisgender women may have their femininity questioned but not their actual status as cisgender). The relative invisibility of cisgendered experiences and *gender transgression*, as it relates to gender status, speaks to the ideological primacy of the cisgender status (Cava 2016).

As I will show, the concept of *gender transgression* plays a key role in *gender policing* which, in turn, plays a key role in maintaining social our hierarchy. *Gender categories* are policed for normative adherence. For instance, Pascoe (2012) found that cis men and boys police each others' masculinity through what she calls *fag discourse*, and Rubin (2003) and Rogers (2019) have separately found that transgender men self-police for normative masculinity. *Gender statuses* are also policed for normative adherence, which often takes form in structural transphobia and *enbyphobia*⁵ (see: James et al. 2016). Although its been established that both gender category and gender status are policed for normative adherence, there has not yet been an inquiry that typifies the kinds of policing that occurs or looks into the ideological underpinnings of gender policing.

Gender policing is only made possible through the process of gender attribution, of which all gendered actors participate (Speer 2005). The sociological study of the process of *gender perception* has largely focused on the concept of *passing*. The relationship between sex and gender can not be understated in terms of passing. Masculinity and femininity are read through the lens of fe/maleness (Dozier 2005; Messerschmidt 2009). Dozier (2005) found that there is a

⁵ I.e., hostility towards anyone with a gender identity that is not binary.

sort of negative correlation with passing and ‘traditional’ gender category adherence; in other words, some feel more comfortable with fluid gendered behavior when *sex* characteristics are more stereotypic of one’s gender identity. Consider also Jenness and Fenstermaker’s (2014) work that shows one’s orientation to sex category is crucial in understanding gendered practices as “natural” or “real”. They specifically evaluate the way ‘sex’ segregated institutions like prisons foreclose upon the prospect of transgender people passing as cisgender. Their work is best understood in conversation with Westbrook and Schilt’s (2014), which shows that while cis people keep the same gender classification across varied locations, trans people do not necessarily have the same experiences. The sociology of *gender perception* is inextricably linked to *gender passing*. Gender passing is tempered by attributions made about sex as well as place. A major gap in the literature thus far has been an inquiry into the ways that people know they are passing. In other words, we lack sociological knowledge about *reflected gender*⁶— or *how we perceive others’ gender perceptions of us*.

Because gender is necessary in structuring all micro- and macro-interactions, it is readily understood as a primary field by which power is articulated (Scott 1986). Gender is inextricably bound up in everyday and historical power relations and, for that reason, significant sociological inquiry is devoted to exploring the (re)production of the gender structure. Social structures should be seen not as pre-given entities, but as objects of social practice, made and remade through interaction (Connell 1987). My inquiry and analysis are squarely rooted in examining the *gender knowledge* (comprising of cultural information about category, status, transgression, policing, and perception) that frames our everyday, mundane interactions.

⁶ Similar to Roth’s conception of reflected race which refers to the “individual’s belief of how others classify them.” (2016:1316).

Of course, “gender” is not the only factor by which social actors form the basis of their interactions. One’s interactive experiences can only ever adequately be explained by acknowledging the multiple intersections of their particular social location. Intersectionality theory was developed in order to challenge monolithic white notions of womanhood (and advocacy thereof) that invalidated and invisibilized the experiences of women of color and those of varying class positions (Crenshaw 1990). Axes of identity such as gender, race, and class are all mutually informative and constituted. This becomes clear in works that show the masculinization of Black women deemed incapable of modeling “appropriate gender behavior” (Collins 2009:84), the “wide-spread perception of Asian men [of all sexual orientations] as feminine and foreign” (Han 2006), or the undue social privilege of white men (Connell 1987). Consider also work that explores the intersections of class and gender, such as Skeggs’ claim in discussing white cisgender working class women “who, against the frailty of middle-class women, were coded as inherently healthy, hardy, and robust—often masculinised...” (2001:297). These contributions are just a few examples in a much larger body of literature that highlights the ways multiple categories of power are articulated within and alongside gender knowledge. If intersectionality can help us understand the convergence of white supremacy and misogyny, for example, my inquiry seeks to highlight what might happen when we also consider additional oppressive systems such as transphobia, enbyphobia, and cissexism in understanding everyday social interactions.

My review of the literature shows that there is a need to clarify the relationship between gender *categories and statuses* and *gender transgression, policing, and perception*. All of these concepts structure our society and guide life chances; analyzing them will allow us to answer questions such as: *what are the ideological lines between gender boundaries? Why is the gender*

category/ status distinction critical in sociological gender scholarship? What is gender transgression? Who does gender transgressions? Are gender transgressions functional? How are gender transgressions policed? And, what is the role of gender perception in everyday power dynamics?

Finally, the literature shows that although there is substantial information about cisgender people doing gender category, there is a lack of examination of *the cisgender status experience*. A driving force of my inquiry is understanding the process by which cisness is invisibilized and unmarked in the face of non-cisness— even though they both must equally be *done*. As I will demonstrate, cisgender people continue to make up the ideological and numerical majority of gendered actors in our society, and we should learn from their experiences of *doing* and *knowing* gender.

Contribution

Since the *doing gender* literature changed the course of the conversation over 30 years ago, gender accomplishments and failures have been explored at length; but what aspects of *gender knowledge* must be challenged to ensure that one will be held gender-accountable? What are the microinteractions, displays, and perceptions that must occur to increase our risk of gender assessment? We talk about *doing gender*, but what kinds of things must we *know* about gender to *do* it successfully? In order for gender to be perceived, transgressed, and subsequently policed we must have some shared conception of the gender boundaries that structure social life. What's been missing in the literature is a theoretical scaffolding for which we make sense of gender *categories* and *statuses* in everyday interactions.

I use the term *gender category* to refer broadly to gender identity (i.e., man, woman, genderqueer, etc.), whereas I use the term *gender status* (see: Speer 2005:69) to refer to the state of being cisgender or not. Gender categories and statuses are essential in clarifying the social processes through which we understand ourselves and others in what Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (2006) define as *a system of difference and inequality*.

The aim of my research program is to investigate the commonly-accepted divisions between gendered actors: between binary and nonbinary people, and between those who are cisgender and non-cisgender. My inquiry primarily explores the idea of gender difference by considering the concept of *gender transgressions* as they occur through both gender category and gender status. By first offering a typology of gender transgressions, I will then uncover the functions they serve and ultimately examine how they are policed and perceived through social interaction.

It's clear that there are differences in social experiences among people who occupy different gendered categories and statuses (e.g., Ridgeway 2009; James et al. 2016; Flores et al. 2021), but where is the actual point of departure from one social grouping to the next? If the literature clearly shows us that gender is *not essential*, we must look beyond materiality to explain the boundaries between groups. Ridgeway and Correll have laid significant groundwork for this task with their work on *social relational contexts*, which are "...widely shared, hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender" (2004:510). I will build on the conversation by asking: what is the *ideological* difference between cis and non-cis; and what is the *ideological* difference between binary and nonbinary individuals? My research aims to discuss the everyday knowledge that scaffolds our gendered experiences; the knowledge that ultimately makes it possible for us to

do— and *transgress*, and *perceive*, and then *police*— gender in the first place. I conducted qualitative interviews with gendered actors of various categories and statuses to outline what is necessary in *knowing gender*— delineating the kinds of distinctions that guide what we ultimately *do* when we are *doing gender*.

This work is necessary to further build out the *doing gender* literature. The contributions of my research are threefold. As such, I will: (i) establish the foundational building blocks of gender boundaries and typify gender transgression; (ii) explore the underlying interactional mechanics of gender perception, and (iii) distinguish various forms and implications of gender policing. I will begin by establishing the import of distinguishing between gender category and gender status. I will then outline a typology of *gender transgression*, exploring who enacts them and how they function in society. I also answer questions about gender boundaries: where is the line drawn between cis and non-cis people? What is the meaningful difference between cis and non-cis people; between binary and nonbinary individuals? How do other social categories such as race and sexual orientation intersect with gender to influence the perception of *knowable* gender categories and statuses? How do we experience the gender of others, and how do we sense they experience our gender? Finally, I will answer questions related to the maintenance of gender boundaries: how is gender policed in everyday life? How are identities policed? How are masculinity and femininity regulated in microinteractions?

Extant scholarship on gender has largely left the cisgender status (and boundaries thereof) unmarked and theoretically understudied. I endeavor to produce a work that provides a foundation to theorize “gender” in a novel way that allows us to analyze power dynamics in everyday interactions among *all* gendered actors. My study of *cisgender and non-cisgender*

people will produce new analytical tools to critically examine the gender system, in which we are all immersed and implicated. In so many ways, *knowing* one's gender is really just a shorthand for *knowing one's place in society*. My work seeks to build on the "doing" gender literature by exposing the underlying mechanisms and power dynamics of what it is to "know" gender.

Methods

A qualitative design best suited my inquiry because the goal of my research program is to identify and analyze the meaning-making of everyday gendered interactions. Other than age and timing requirements, I left participant criteria open in order to allow for a broad range of definitions. I conducted 75 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants 18 years of age and older and of various racial, gender, and sexual orientation identities to elicit their complex and subjective perceptions of their gender experiences. Because gender is an organizing status and always experienced (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987) yet rarely explicitly engaged as such (e.g., Lorber 1994), an open-ended qualitative approach was essential in better understanding gender as a background phenomenon (Garfinkel 1967).

This dissertation builds upon my previous work on gender transgressions where I analyzed data I collected from 28 interviews that took place between 2015-2016. Although my previous analysis focused solely on the concept of *gender transgression*, I intentionally built my original interview guide to accommodate the scope of the current study. As I did in my first round of recruitment, I used quota- and purposive-based non-probability approaches to recruit my remaining participants. Although my current analysis focuses primarily on distinctions of gender *status* (cisgender and non-cisgender), I purposively recruited from distinct gendered

groups and set quotas of at least 15 participants per group to ensure variability: cisgender men, cisgender women, transgender men, transgender women, gender nonbinary individuals, and people who are questioning their gender or identify as a gender not previously listed. I developed sampling categories to approximate as much representation as possible, and these should not necessarily be taken as self-ascribed identities.

My sample is comprised primarily of white (62.7%) participants. Participants were both cis (40%) and non-cis (60%), and held gender categories such as “man” (38.7%); “woman” (40%); “nonbinary” (17.3%); “no gender identity” (1.3%); or “questioning” (2.7%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 years old and were grouped for analysis in the following cohorts: 18-25 (38.7%); 26-34 (25.3%); 35-43 (13.3%); 44-52 (8%); 53+ (14.7%). Participant pseudonyms, gender category and statuses, and self-identified races⁷ and ages are referenced throughout the manuscript. To better understand a given participant’s gender identity see Appendix A, which breaks down participant demographics using participants’ identity descriptors in their own terms.

Because I secured research funding after my first round of recruitment and data collection, I was able to compensate all second round participants for their time and stories. As such, all participants recruited between 2019-2020 were compensated \$20 via Google Pay or Venmo. In the instance when a participant declined compensation, I donated the \$20 reserved for them to an organization of their choosing.

⁷ The study presurvey had a write-in question for racial identity, of which some participants entered in their ethnicity.

I set up and dispersed an online pre-survey to collect demographic and contact information from potential participants and determine eligibility. I distributed my pre-survey to teaching and research colleagues at three public universities and colleges in Northern California to pass on to their students and networks. I also recruited participants via a non-random variation of the snowball method proposed by Goodman (1961), as some of my participants eventually passed along the link to my pre-survey within their social circles. Finally, I recruited participants online through gender-specific forums on websites like Reddit and Facebook.

I asked all participants the same general open-ended questions from the same interview guide. The structured and open-ended interview guide was divided into six sequential sections: general background, personal definitions of relevant concepts, gender identity, impression management, social context, and other-perception. Although I used my interview guide for each interview, the guide was flexible and enabled participants to share relevant experiences beyond my initial scope of inquiry. Interviews ranged anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours, depending on participants' answers and my follow-up questions. Interviews were audio-recorded and took place either in-person at the University of California, Davis; San Francisco State University's Center for Research and Education on Gender and Sexuality; City College of San Francisco; or by telephone.

I developed the interview guide to elicit the meanings participants make as gendered social actors and assess the *gender knowledge* they use to navigate the social world. Questions were posed through four primary frames: *general background*; *personal identity*; *memories*; and *hypotheticals*. The general background questions were designed to get a sense of the various social institutions and social actors participants encountered on a daily basis. Personal identity

questions prompted participants to explain the mechanics of their *doing gender*. Memory questions were developed to get a sense of participants' mundane and salient gender interactions. Finally, the hypothetical questions helped me understand how participants experience their gender as an interactive phenomenon, specifically in regards to gender perception and policing. Appendix B contains the complete interview guide.

I drew upon constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2000) to analyze the meanings participants made of their everyday gendered experiences. I used open and axial coding in identifying primary and secondary themes to be explored in analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). I then read through transcripts and took notes on emergent themes. I generated codes based on emergent themes from a random subset of interviews. Once I established codes and reached theme saturation from my subset of interviews, I coded all interview transcripts using the qualitative data analysis software, Max QDA.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 details key features of the ideological frame through which we largely understand gender in the US. My main objectives in this chapter is to forefront gender category and gender status as the basic elements of the binary, mutually exclusive cis-gender classification system that structures our society. In doing so, I will answer the following questions: *Why do gender category and gender status need to be defined? Should gender be considered through a unidimensional framing? Is gender self-evident?*

Chapter 2 offers a typology of gender transgressions. I identify distinct types and subtypes of gender transgressions. Next, I discuss the prevalence of gender transgressions— we

all do gender, but who does gender transgressions? Finally, I will outline the function of gender transgressions. Although they may carry a negative connotation, I've found that gender transgressions are not only highly functional in interaction they also often serve as an important part of one's identity— as such, I discuss the ways that gender transgressions are crucial to everyday interactions.

Chapter 3 investigates the ways that gender category and status are policed and enforced by gendered actors. I will present an analysis on the *logic* of gender policing— what line is being crossed when someone “breaks” a gender rule? And what are the consequences? We *all* break gender rules, but we don't all ‘pay’ for our transgressions equally; Why is that? In this chapter I will outline the conceptual basis for gender policing, typify the various forms of gender policing, and finally discuss patterns among those who enforce gender rules.

Chapter 4 is all about gender perception, presentation, and privilege. Our gender presentations aren't just for us, they are the basis of interaction. This chapter seeks to discuss the ways in which our presentations are bound up in inescapable power dynamics. I explore the key perceptual elements that uphold the gender structure. I will also explore the way that intersections between gender and race shape perception.

Chapter 1: Gender Category and Gender Status

For efficient subordination, what's wanted is that the structure not appear to be a cultural artifact kept in place by human decision or custom, but that it appear natural—that it appear to be quite a direct consequence of facts about the beast which are beyond the scope of human manipulation or revision. It must seem natural that individuals of one category are dominated by individuals of the other, and that as groups, the one dominates the other.

Marilyn Frye (1983:34)

Facts about the Beast

Gender *category* and *status* structure every aspect of social life, yet remain contested and only loosely defined in the literature. Gender scholars study the experiences of people who identify as *men*, *women*, *nonbinary*, *cisgender*, and *transgender*, etc. but what do those terms actually mean in relation to one another? Power operates within and between these groups, but what are the limits to justify the social dominance of one and concretize the oppression of another?

Given the socially constructed nature of gender, one cannot help but to wonder where a given group ends and another begins. If we truly seek to map out the gender structure as a system of power, then we must carefully attend to these considerations. As Marilyn Frye (1983) suggests, treating descriptors of social difference as though they were *just so* is a crucial aspect of narratives that justify inequality. When it comes to gender, however, social scientists are keenly aware that we are not dealing with natural, immutable, or essential divisions— but instead

with a socially constructed arrangement that places *all* people in a system of power and difference (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 2006). Nonetheless, our gendered boundaries are often unquestioned by the general public— as well as institutions like law, education, and religion— and ultimately treated as a natural aspect of social life.

In order to clarify the key elements of the gender structure, I turn my attention to the social construction of gender difference— not just between so-thought binaries such as *men and women*, or *cisgender and transgender people*⁸. Instead, I am interested in the differences that confer power to one *type* of gendered person over others. If we take for truth that there is in fact a gender hierarchy, then I seek to understand the mechanics that situate and maintain one group in the highest position of that social ordering. In the same way that Connell asserts hegemonic masculinity “is always constructed in relation” to all other gendered versions of masculinity and femininity (1987:183), I am particularly focused on isolating the foundational building block of the gender structure that affords seemingly boundless protections and privileges to those thought to possess it: cisness. In doing so, I will ultimately call for explicit delineation between what I call *gender category* and *gender status*.

Gender category and status are terms I offer⁹ that are meant to help us understand gender at an intersection with itself. “Gender category” is a reference to one’s gender identity (i.e., man, woman, genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, etc.). Gender category is distinct from “gender status,”

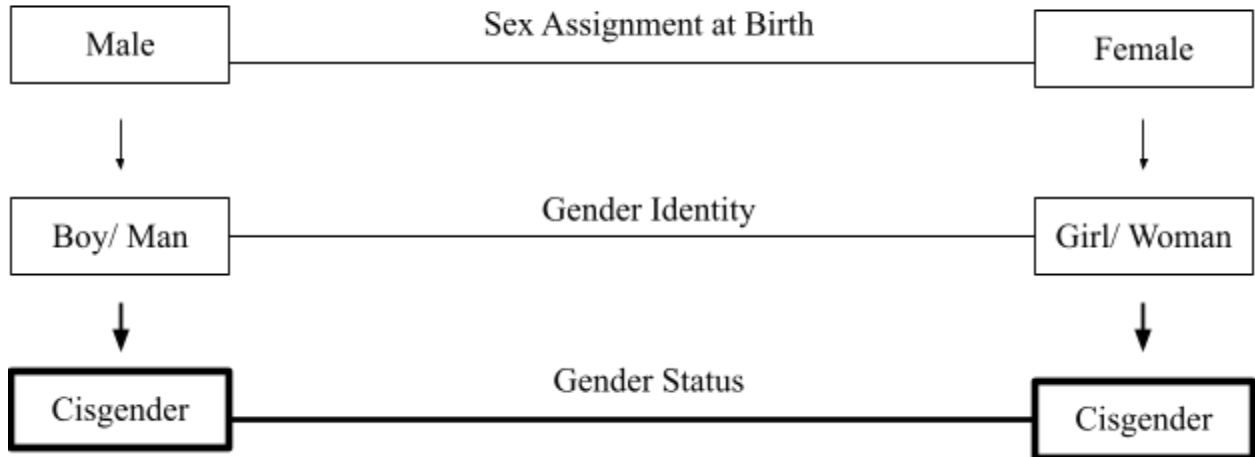
⁸ These binaries are listed as an example of the ways gender has been treated socially in this society and not to claim that these binaries are actually accurate/exhaustive in describing all gendered actors.

⁹ These terms have been used previously— but not pervasively— elsewhere; for example see Speer 2005 (69).

which is simply the position of being cisgender *or not*. Gender status is reflective of one's acceptance or rejection of an expected social role and identity based on their sex assignment at birth (Aultman 2014) and similar to what Ashley (2021) calls *gender modality*.

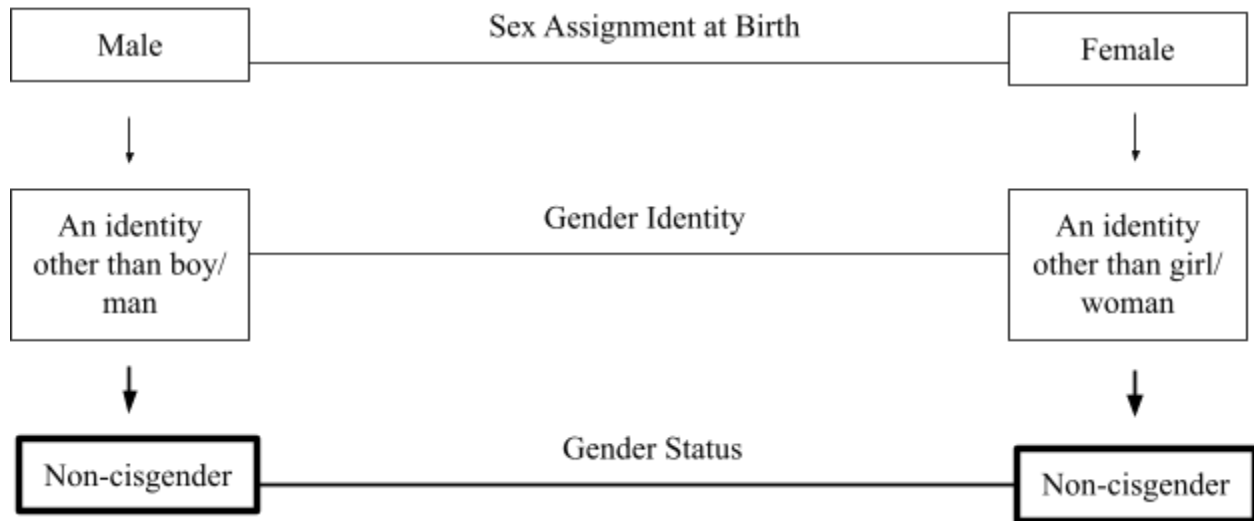
It is important to understand that gender category and gender status arise out of the relationship between dichotomous biological sex assignment and gender identity. The foundation of gender status relies on the social practice of assigning all new members of society into one of two biological sex categories: male or female. That intersex people exist and cross-disciplinary scientific inquiry has shown us a binary approach to sex is wholly inaccurate (i.e., Fausto-Sterling 1993; Blackless et al. 2000; Preves 2003; Davis and Preves 2017; Intersex Society of North America 2021) makes no difference; as a society, we are deeply committed to and invested in the fantasy that there are only two ways a body can be. As such, we institutionally and interpersonally place one of the two sex labels on individuals or, if labeling within the binary options proves too “challenging,” pathologize them as having a “disorder of sex development” (Davis 2015). Below is a model of the cisgender status. Note the key position of dichotomous biological sex in this dynamic:

Figure 1.1 Model of Cisgender Status



Similarly, the non-cisgender status uses dichotomous biological sex as a starting point. Non-cis status is conferred when one's gender identity is not that which is "socially expected" given their sex assignment at birth. See the model of non-cisgender status below, again, noting the critical position of sex assignment at birth:

Figure 1.2 Model of Non-Cisgender Status



My models of gender status call upon us to reflect upon the ways in which sex and gender are inextricably linked while also recognizing that they are each their own entities. The distinction between sex and gender is well-documented in the literature; however, a robust conversation about their intersection with one another has yet to emerge. My hope is that the conceptualization of gender category and gender status will begin to move us in that direction.

The teachings of intersectionality theory (i.e., Crenshaw 1990) clarify that we cannot simply understand a given aspect of identity as though it exists in singularity. Indeed, we cannot just frame gender as if it can be separated from the context of other salient attributes such as race, class, sexuality, religion, ability, etc. Intersectionality theory calls for the analysis of gender simultaneously with the analyses of other axes of identity. To understand gender through an intersectional lens is not to simply add gender to a running list of other salient social identities,

but instead to understand gender as *mutually constituted* with other categories of identity. As Stephanie Shields explains, mutual constitution occurs when a given category of identity “takes its meaning as a category in relation to another category” (2008:304).

Historically, “gender” itself has been theorized as a one-dimensional attribute that conflates sex assignment at birth with gender identity— even in intersectional theory. Unfortunately this framing centered the cisgender status to the exclusion of all others. But is “gender” really best understood through a singular framing? When we consider the intersectional experiences of those in the gender category *women*, intersectionality theory tells us we must understand women through race and class, but are there any further aspects of gender beyond womanhood that help explain the particulars of one’s social location? Indeed, the gender category of *woman* encapsulates those with varying gender statuses. In other words some women are cisgender, and some women are transgender and/or nonbinary. Although each of these women have a legitimate claim to the gender category of “woman,” we know their stories of womanhood are undeniably shaped by their gender status as cisgender/ transgender/ nonbinary/ etc. If we take intersectionality theory to its logical conclusion, then, we must not treat gender as though it is comprehensively described by *gender category* alone; we must allow for more nuance to understand the unique ways that cisgender privilege, cisnormativity, sexism, non-cisgender oppression, and transphobia are potentially relevant to a given gendered experience.

In this way, gender category and status are each necessary in understanding a fuller picture of the gendered experience. If we are interested in the life chances of those in the gender category *woman*, we must consider the ways in which a given woman’s experience will be

largely impacted by whether she is cisgender or not. For example, although violence against women is no doubt a pandemic-level issue, cisgender and transgender women face disparate instances of violence and institutional exclusion (i.e., James et al. 2016; Krell 2017). Similarly, while it's true the gender category *man* holds the identities of cis, trans, and nonbinary men, it is clear that when we look along the lines of gender status, cis and non-cis men have notably different social and institutional experiences and outcomes (i.e., Schilt 2006).

Consider also Julia Serano's theorization on the intersection of gender category and status, which ultimately produced her work on *transmisogyny* (2016:15). For Serano, the term "transphobia" is an oversimplification that fails to account for the marginalization of trans women as people who experience both transness and womanhood simultaneously. Just as Serano makes clear we should not understand gender status without considering gender category, I similarly contend we should not understand gender category without also considering gender status. In Serano's conception of *status without category* we make the mistake of assuming a monolithic transgender experience where there isn't one; and in my conception of *category without status* we make the mistake of assuming a monolithic womanhood, manhood, nonbinaryhood, etc. where there isn't one.

I am calling for the careful attention of social scientists to address the ways gender status structures social life. In particular, I am suggesting that the *cisgender status* be brought forth as a compelling object of study in gender scholarship. I say this well-knowing that the great majority of sociological gender research has actually relied on cisgender participants; however, instead of gleaning more knowledge about cisness and gender status from those works, we tended to learn more about the gender categories of *men* and *women* while their cisgender status faded into the

background. Bringing the cisgender status to the center of analysis will allow gender theorists to critically explore the structures that produce cisgender privilege and perpetuate non-cis oppression, cisnormativity, and transphobia.

Since I am calling for a distinction between cis and non-cis statuses, it is important to acknowledge that some social scientists and community members alike take issue with creating *yet another gender binary*, I conceptualize the cis/ not-cis binary as a necessary theoretical tool to understand systems of privilege and oppression within the gender structure.

As discussed in the literature, a cis/ trans binary is problematic in that it doesn't encapsulate the full range of gendered experiences (See: Schilt and Lagos 2017). For instance, some non-binary people identify as trans and some do not, and multiple gender theorists have noted that the so-called "trans umbrella" is inappropriate for the ever-expansive assemblage of non-cis identities (Garrison 2018; Risman et al. 2018; Garrison 2019; Risman, et al. 2019; Darwin 2020). Imposing a cis/ trans binary would needlessly invisibilize those who *are* nonbinary and *not* trans.

Of course, you can't know what something is without also knowing what it is not, but in the case of 'knowing' cisness, a cis/ trans binary mistakenly suggests that any gender status that is not cis is necessarily trans, and we know this to be untrue (i.e., Darwin 2020). Although transgender and cisgender are mutually exclusive groupings, they do not comprehensively account for all possible gender configurations in the way a cis/ trans binary might suggest. Further, the cis/ trans binary places transness in diametric opposition of cisness, which it is not.

Cisness is, however, in diametric opposition to *non-cisness*, which does include trans identities *as well as* other non-cis + non-trans identities.

Non-cis gender identities are ever-expansive. This is a fact made evident by examining the historic usage and evolution of terms used for non-cis gender identities. Take for instance the term *transgender* which only came to prominence as recently as the 1990's (Williams 2014). The idea of a "transgender umbrella" is often invoked in everyday practice but it is problematic in its inability to hold the full range of non-cis + non-trans gender identities. A multitude of non-cis gender identities are often placed under the transgender umbrella whether those who claim them are actually trans or not; and while it's true that not all non-cis identities are not necessarily trans, *they are all necessarily not-cis*.

Kate Bornstein alluded to this idea when she wrote about *gender outlaws*, who "find a common ground in that they each break one or more of the rules of gender," and warned "to attempt to divide us into rigid categories... is like trying to apply the laws of solids to the state of fluids: it is our fluidity that keeps us in touch with each other." (2016:69). When Bornstein writes about the transgressions of gender outlaws, she is writing about breaking rules associated with the cisgender status. The terminology, language, and even *meaning* of that which is considered gender non-normative has and will continue to change over time— but what endures is the hegemonic position of that which is considered normative. In the case of gender, what occupies that hegemonic position is cisness. It is in this way that a cis/ non-cis binary is able to capture the *fluidity* of which Bornstein refers without inaccurately placing the trans label on all gendered actors who are not cis. I am not interested in who is cis and who is trans nearly as much as I am interested in *who is cis and who is not*.

My call for a cis/ non-cis binary is not meant to suggest that all cis people are somehow the same and all non-cis people are somehow the same. No, my intention is not to monolithize cis or non-cis experiences at an individual level. Instead, I am interested in the enduring pattern of cisgender privilege across our social institutions, norms, and interactions *despite* (as I will show) the vast gender variant practices of cis people. The cisgender status, then, provides a unique and critical opportunity to better understand gender privilege and oppression. If we are to critically engage the gender power structure in the social sciences, it is essential that we must first delineate between *gender category* and *gender status* so that we may disentangle cisness from its normative position as a worthwhile object of study.

Is Gender Self-Evident?

Sex and gender are each socially constructed, non-dichotomous, and distinct concepts from one another, but they are not typically treated as such in this society. To the contrary—gender is frequently conflated with sex and purported to be *self-evident* by many of its possessors. For a great deal of gendered actors, what makes their gender “obvious” is whatever gendered physical attributes they believe to be equally “obvious” about their bodies. In other words, however scientifically inaccurate, bodies are generally treated as the basis through which gender identity is confirmed or denied. I generally found this to be the case for man- and woman-identified participants, and it made no difference whether one was cis or not cis.

Many of my cis and non-cis binary participants agreed that their gender categories as men or women were corroborated by their *perceived cisgender status*. In fact, if binary participants

got the sense that others perceived their gender status as cis, they felt there was little if anything they needed to do to account for their gender category. This dynamic is best understood by considering the fundamental idea behind the notion of *gender passing*. The whole idea of passing is not simply in reference to being taken for one's binary gender category as a man or a woman— but instead, passing is about being taken as a *cis* man or woman (Billard 2019). Indeed, passing takes place precisely at the point where one is considered to hold a cisgender status.

When asked what participants needed to *do* in order to be perceived as their given gender category, men and women who pass as having cisgender status seemed to think their genders were self-evident. Nathan's (24, white, cisgender man) experience was not unique when he shared, "I don't need to do anything for people to see me as a [cisgender man]. Like, I think most people assume upon seeing me that I am a [cisgender man]." Like Nathan, another 24 year old man Gus, who is transgender, said, "I don't really do much anymore. I'm gonna be honest, like after I started taking testosterone for a few months, it was pretty much, like, that was it. People just started to [perceive me as a cisgender man] all the time." Similarly, Dylan a 23 year old white transgender man echoed both Nathan and Gus,

I mean, at this point, it's not so much of an active decision because I fairly regularly just pass [as a cisgender man]... I can't really remember the last time someone [thought I *wasn't* a cis man], it must have been years ago. And so at this point, it's pretty much just living and breathing, you know?

Other men spoke more explicitly about their bodily features— namely their facial hair. For instance, Leon, a 38 year old white transgender man, said, "I have a beard— there isn't anything about my appearance that would indicate anything other than [me being a cisgender

man].” Elliot, a 23 year old white cisgender man, said “The fact that I often have facial hair [makes it more likely for people to see me as a cis man].” These participants all understood that being perceived as having a *cisgender status*— whether they were actually cisgender or not— leaves their *gender category* as a man largely unquestioned.

This phenomenon was not unique to those in the gender category “man;” it was equally true for those in the gender category “women.” Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman) said once she was perceived as having “The right parts” such as breasts, she “[Doesn’t] have to do anything out of the ordinary...” for others to take her as a cisgender woman. Like Chloe, Lucy, a 36 year old Latina cisgender woman, understood that her gender category was ultimately perceived through her physical attributes and said she is taken to be a cisgender woman “as soon as [others] see [her] breasts.”

It makes no difference that physical attributes like body hair and chest size vary to the point of overlap between men and women; for these binary participants, it was their *body*— not their identity— that justified their gender through the lens and logic of cisness. Edward, a 36 year old African American cisgender man, put it rather frankly when asked how he knows other people see him as a cisgender man, “I don’t even think they think about it. *It’s obvious.*”

Some binary participants took the “obviousness” of their identities a step further and said if they wanted to be understood as belonging to a different gender category, they would face difficulty in stopping the process of their gender being interpreted primarily through the lens of their body. For instance Billy, a 36 year old white cisgender man, said, “I feel I would have to work very hard for people to not see me as [a cisgender man]. If I wear a dress to a party, I’m

[seen as] a [cisgender man] wearing a dress to a party. And that's how people perceive it.”

Similarly Anna, a 29 year old cisgender woman explained:

I mean for me, I don't really know what I could do to *not* look [like a cisgender woman] other than to be really explicit. Because I have, you know, like, really feminine features and I have curves and... when I talk I have a high voice, and I have two kids, and people have seen me pregnant so they know I have a uterus.

Even while many binary participants also noted that they *do* their manhood or womanhood through their personal grooming efforts, fashion styling, and behaviors, they still reported that the most compelling evidence of their gender was their body, often to the point that the perception of their gender felt out of their control. For instance Sadie, a 25 year old white cisgender woman, explained, “Like, without the clothes, without doing my hair, without doing my makeup, people would still read me as [a cisgender woman]... *me walking out the door* makes me look [like a cisgender woman]. Similarly Lane, a 30 year old Pilipino cisgender man said, “I guess I don't really have to do anything... I think I would step out the door and the world would see me as [a cisgender man].”

That gender category is thought to be made apparent simply by the state of the body is a belief that comes straight out of the playbook of *cisnormativity*. Collier and Daniel define cisnormativity as “a hierarchical system of power that... simultaneously produces both the ‘hypervisibility’ of gender variance and the erasure of [non-cis]¹⁰ identities” (2019:2). My

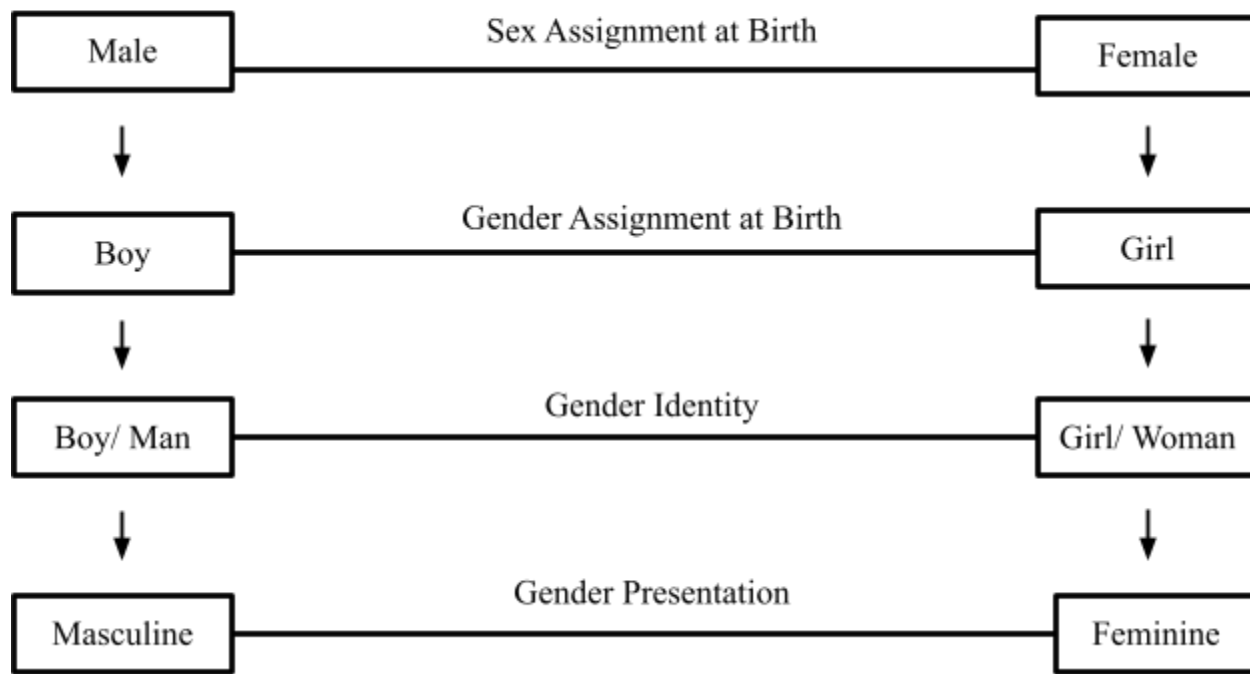
¹⁰ Here Collier and Daniel use the word “trans” where I instead insist on the term “non-cis” because it is more accurate, as there are some non-cis + non-trans people (i.e., some nonbinary individuals) whose non-cis identities are most definitely also erased by cisnormativity.

participants' passing experiences highlighted the way that cisness is imposed and assumed whenever possible.

In some ways, the imposition of cisness gave participants the sense their genders could never be perceived outside of their sex assigned at birth, as was the case for Billy, Anna, and Maya, who all held a cisgender status. In another sense, the mechanics of cisnormativity actually validated the gender identities of binary non-cis participants like Dylan, Gus, Leon, and Chloe—so long as their physical attributes suggested they were cis.

It is essential to understand the mechanics as well as the pervasion of cisnormativity if we really seek to make clear sense of the gender order. Below I offer a model of cisnormative development to demonstrate the sex/ gender cisgendering process that helps to explain some of the passing experiences reported by my binary participants:

Figure 1.3 Model of Cisnormative Development



Note that the idea of dichotomous biological sex is foundational to cisnormativity. Cisnormativity starts from the point that there exist only “males” or “females,” and in doing so renders completely invisible the existence of those who live outside of the binary, including intersex and nonbinary people. Because dichotomous biological sex is socially constructed (i.e., Davis and Preves 2017), we don’t actually have a non-negotiable definition of what constitutes being “male” or “female.” In practice, however, most people take their own male or female assignment, as well as what they believe to be the male and female assignments of others, without question.

The vast majority of people have no empirical proof or understanding of the attributes (such as hormone levels, chromosomal makeup, and internal genitalia or gonads) believed to justify sex classification. Despite our lack of evidence, we remain socially beholden to cisnormativity as an interpersonal and institutional guide for our interactions. As Leon, a 38 year old white transgender man, said of being perceived as holding a cisgender status: “It’s not like people are checking chromosomes at the door.”

The actuality of the cisgender status is not as important as its perception. Without being able to truly define maleness or femaleness, a definitionally-true *cisgender status* is technically unattainable. It makes no difference, however, if we can actualize the cisgender status or not because it has become hegemonic to the point that cisnormativity guides the majority of our interpersonal and institutional interactions.

Collier and Daniel are not exaggerating when they cite Spade (2011) and Davis (2017) in claiming that, non-cis people “become administratively impossible” as they attempt to move through institutions (2019:2). Cisnormativity informs our institutional experiences at every level. We see this as evidenced by findings that show structural non-cis oppression and invisibilization in health (i.e., Safer et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2020), law (i.e., Collier and Daniel 2019), family (Pyne et al. 2015; Capous-Desyllas and Barron 2017), religion (i.e., Sumerau et al 2016), and education (i.e., Kosciw et al. 2011; Siegel 2019).

Non-cis people are not just “administratively impossible” in institutions but often *interpersonally impossible* as well. In order for their gender categories to be treated as valid, binary participants explained that they must supply the ‘evidence’ of their bodies as proof. As we

have seen above, sometimes this works out for binary participants and they pass, but how do the expectations of cisnormativity interact with the “self-evident” nature of gender for nonbinary individuals?

No normative framework exists for nonbinary gender categories (as in non-“man” and non-“woman” identified people); although it does for the binary gender categories of *man* and *woman*. Those who identify as men rely heavily on the cisnormative belief that “manhood” arises out of the male sex assignment and those who identify as women rely heavily on the cisnormative belief that “womanhood” arises out of the female sex assignment. There is no non-binary sex assignment widely accepted¹¹ to “verify” a consequential nonbinary gender identity. As I have shown above, perception of gender category is largely informed by perceived sex assignment at birth, which is normatively understood as binary. The question arises, then, how is the perception of gender categories for non-men and non-women informed by perceived sex assignment?

It turns out that when it comes to *passing*, non-man and non-woman individuals are unable to use cisnormative assumptions to validate their nonbinary¹² identities. In the absence of a sex assignment to ‘legitimize’ their gender identities, nonbinary people are typically perceived through a binary (“male” or “female”) lens. Because there is no appropriate sex assignment to corroborate *nonbinaryhood*, many nonbinary individuals reported having very little expectation

¹¹ There are a limited number of jurisdictions in the U.S. and globally which have recently started offering a third legal sex option, but this practice is not common, socially normative, or in many cases available through the same medical and legal processes as “male” and “female” sex assignments.

¹² Here I am using the term nonbinary as an adjective referring to people who do not identify as men or women, instead of a noun that refers to a given individual’s self-ascribed gender identity.

of passing for their gender category at all. For instance when asked if strangers perceived 28 year old Mickey's nonbinary gender identity, they explained,

I would say no because I don't think a lot of people think that way. Generally speaking, I think a lot of people don't even have that as an option in their mind. I think a lot of people would perceive me as androgynous, but— actually, no— I think most people in the world just perceive me as a [cisgender] woman.

Similarly Aaron, who is a 31 year old white nonbinary individual, said, "Very few people would peg [me as] nonbinary because it's just not a thing that people understand."

Nonbinary individuals seemed well-aware of the lack of understanding Mickey and Aaron described and made decisions on how to interact with others accordingly. As such, some nonbinary participants like Morgan, a 23 year old white trans-masculine nonbinary person, reported that disclosing her identity or correcting others who misgendered her was often just "Too much of a hassle." As Morgan further explained, although others may perceive her as non-cis she is still are seen through a binary lens and has very little expectation to be taken for her actual nonbinary gender identity:

It's kind of like, how would they even know, you know? Because most people kind of understand the concept of a 'one-to-one' female-to-male transition. And so sometimes people *do* clock me as trans, but they clock me as a failed trans man, not a trans-masculine nonbinary person who's at the end of their transition.

Some nonbinary participants also stated their reluctance to assert their personhood was a measured choice intended to mitigate interpersonal conflict. As Lazarus, a 31 year old white and Latino nonbinary person shared, "I guess it's not worth the energy to explain or expose that part of myself. And I'm not sure how much of a risk it would be depending on who [the audience] is,

so I just save that for people who I think are more worth my time.” Additionally, others like Amoxтли, a 20 year old Xicanx femme/masc person, explained they experience frequent pressure to appease others’ cisnormative binary expectations:

Sometimes I freeze because I'm like, “I just met this person... I don't know if I should say something [about my gender identity].” And something that I do on my own and I’m like, “Fuck, why do I do that?” is that I very much cater to other people around me, just because so often people don't validate [my gender], and so i'm just like, “Okay, I might as well just go with it.”

Nonbinary individuals frequently made decisions to ignore, downplay, or ‘closet’ their gender identities; but not because their identities were unimportant to them. To the contrary—many nonbinary individuals took on a sort of protective role over their gender identities, given their frequent experiences with invalidation and potential threats. As such, many nonbinary participants made strategic decisions around disclosure. Ollie, a 21 year old Black gender nonconforming person summed up this tension when they said,

[My gender identity is] a huge part of my personhood, and it’s a huge part of how I construct my day-to-day. And it’s a huge source of my self-actualization... [but] I've felt that people just don't really get it. And it makes them angry that they don't get it, and I don't want to be the victim of [their anger].

As we can see, cisnormativity renders nonbinary individuals unintelligible in their very being. In a cisnormative gender structure, nonbinary people are not afforded a commonly accepted sex option of which to tether their gender identities. The consequence of this is twofold: (i) nonbinary people are often taken as cisgender when they are not and do not wish to be seen as such, and (ii) nonbinary people’s gender categories are often invisibilized in everyday interactions.

The question then remains: is gender self evident? It appears to depend on *who* answers. For binary participants, there exists a cisnormative framework that ‘justifies’ their gender identities. Ultimately “men” and “women” are made legible through the socially constructed dichotomous biological sex groupings “male” and “female.” Both cis and non-cis *binary* participants relied on a cisnormative framing of gender category to validate their gender identities. Nonbinary participants, however, did not have the option to legitimize their gender identities through cisnormative assumptions about their bodies. It seems then, that gender is self evident *for some* of us and only insofar as our bodies fit into a cisnormative expectation of who has a justified claim to the gender categories “man” and “woman.”

Definitions

Before going further, some definitions are necessary in explaining the terms¹³ that are fundamental to my analysis. Cisgender and non-cisgender are each orientations to the medical ritual of being assigned the sex of “male” or “female” at birth. *Cisgender* refers to a gender status that marks the acceptance of the expected social role and identity based on sex assignment at birth. The cisgender status is *necessarily binary*, with the only options being either cisgender

¹³ These and other terms can be found in Appendix C.

man or cisgender woman.¹⁴ *Non-cisgender* refers to a rejection of the expected social role and identity based on sex assignment at birth and the acceptance of an alternative binary or nonbinary social role and identity.

“Non-cisgender” as hypernym may refer to those who identify as transgender, and/or nonbinary, and/or some other non-cis identity. There is no one way the non-cisgender status must look— save for the fact that those who possess it *must not identify as cisgender*. It is important to note that there is an important distinction within the term that creates an additional considerations within the non-cisgender status: namely that there exist *binary non-cis individuals* (transgender men and transgender women) and *nonbinary non-cis individuals* (who may or may not also identify as transgender). Unlike their binary non-cis counterparts, nonbinary non-cis individuals have limitless options in naming and understanding their gender categories. Some examples of nonbinary non-cis gender categories are: “genderqueer,” “nonbinary,” “agender,” “dandy,” “femme-masc,” and “gender non-conforming,” “genderfucked,” etc.

It bears repeating that the goal of my work is not an attempt to create an exhaustive list of all gender identities and experiences, or to somehow take on the (impossible and inappropriate) task of deciding other people’s genders. The purpose of my work is, instead, to outline a framework of gender power and privilege that will help us make sense of the patterned gender experiences we observe as social scientists. As such, my offering of concepts such as gender category and status, and cis and non-cis statuses etc. should be used only for the purposes

¹⁴ However technically accurate, “cisgender” as a qualifier is rarely used by those who are cisgender. Because cisgender a normative status, the majority of cisgender men and cisgender women understand themselves simply as “males” and “females” or “men” and “women”.

theorizing gender power and privilege, not for the purposes of naming a given individual's experience and/or identity.

The language and definitions we use to denote one type of gender instead of another are not immune from the processes and pull of history: our genders along with their categories and statuses are created and recreated discursively (Butler 1990) and shift over time. For instance, the term *transgender* emerged specifically as site of subject formation as well as subjugation through the discourse of academics and activists in the late 20th century (Valentine 2007). Although “transgender” has often been recognized as an ever-expanding umbrella term, its usage as a hypernym to denote all non-cis people has more recently come into question. Gender in and of itself is a contested, variant, and ever-changing entity. Many common terms we use to talk about gender were only recently introduced into the lexicon and may very well be problematized to the point of their etymological retirement in the future.

This work, then, is not meant to bear out timeless truths about what gender words are *correct* or *incorrect*, or whose gender is *really this* or *really that*. Instead, I seek to capture a snapshot of some of the most elusive gendered power dynamics in this particular moment in this particular society; I endeavor this all while knowing these dynamics have and will continue to evolve so long as gender remains a major site of interpersonal and institutional power and struggle.

Conclusion

Gender simultaneously marks and bonds us to the social order. It is germane to every social interaction and, like race and other master statuses (Hughes 1945), remains an enduring primary social identifier. “Gender” is not a one-dimensional entity, though; it is comprised of both *category* (i.e., the conception of oneself as a man, woman, nonbinary, etc.) and *status* (the state of being cisgender or not). The express distinction between gender categories and statuses is important because gendered actors are never perceived through their gender category alone—rather there is a gender status qualifier present in every social interaction. As we will see in upcoming chapters, it is an entirely different social experience being perceived as a *cisgender* woman than being perceived as a *transgender* woman, for instance.

Although gender categories and statuses are each socially constructed, their persistence as ‘natural’ and ‘discreet’ groupings are often taken as common knowledge or— as Frye might refer to them—*facts about the beast* (1983). There exists extensive biological and social scientific evidence that clearly demonstrate sex and gender are not binary entities with fixed boundaries, and yet our institutions and interpersonal interactions largely suggest otherwise.

We rely on a binary, mutually exclusive cis-gender classification system to interact with and identify one another. Despite our compulsion to place and be placed in distinct gender categories and statuses, the lines that draw differentiation between one gender from the next are inherently blurry and fail to hold up upon closer inspection (e.g., Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1994; Lucal 1999; Rubin 2006). Gender categories and statuses lack consistent evidence of their distinction, but that does not curb our social impulse to treat them as though they are

comprehensive, internally-distinguishable identifiers. The prevalent social expectation is that a person will fall into *a single* gender category and status that necessarily precludes their membership in any others.

Instead of a prior and stable knowledge of what it means to be a *man* or a *woman*, or *cisgender* or *non-cisgender*, assessments of gendered attributes unfold in real time and are often post-hoc interpersonal constructions (Kessler and McKenna 1978:6). Further, the interplay of multiple gendered attributes that we acknowledge in sum *as a given gender category* are relatively easily transformed; they are tempered by place (Kazyak 2012), time (Connell 1987), secondary sex characteristics (Dozier 2005), cohort (Herek 1986), and culture (Twenge 1997). Yet despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, as Carrera and colleagues (2012) have pointed out, we continue to approach gender categories and statuses as *fixed* and *natural*.

The rigidity of gender boundaries and classification play out in our institutions as well. The institutional imaginations of this society rarely account for gendered experiences that stray off the cisnormative path. Unfortunately, the general social experiences of those thought to transgress sex and gender binaries reveal disturbing patterns of institutional violence and exclusion (see James et al. 2016).

Our social belief that gender is a collection of clearly defined groups is not without consequence. Indeed, those perceived to transgress gender status boundaries face disproportionate rates of violence, suicide, poverty, physical and mental health issues, homelessness, as well as school and workplace discrimination (Ansara and Quick 2016; James et al. 2016). Social scientists have clearly documented the enduring patterns of interpersonal and

institutional violence non-cisgender people face for their perceived “gender transgressions.” In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to disentangling and outlining the concept of gender transgressions. By exploring what it means to break gender rules, my hope is that we may better understand the ideological structuring of the gender order and thus be better equipped to challenge it.

Chapter 2: Gender Transgression

Maybe I just wanna hang out with girls and do girl stuff.

-Billy, a 36 year old white cisgender man

Gender category and status inherently structure social life. While gender categories are manifold and ever-expanding (i.e., identities such as man, woman, nonbinary, genderqueer, dandy, agender, femme boi, etc.), gender statuses are essentially a dichotomous concept distinguishing between those who are cisgender and those who are not. However crucial they are in understanding the gender social order, the concepts of gender category and status do not suffice in comprehensively explaining our gender system. In order to fully appreciate the conceptual purchase of gender category and status, we must turn our attention to the gender rules that keep them in place. Gender rules run in the background of everyday life and are often treated as unremarkable, until they are breached (Garfinkel 1967). For every rule there is the possibility of transgression, and transgression is precisely the site in which we might begin to truly make sense of the interactional gender order. It is in this way, then, that a sociological concept of *gender transgression* must be clearly established in order to better understand the boundaries between gender categories and statuses as well as the larger mechanics of the gender system.

Under varying terms, the concept of what I call *gender transgression*¹⁵ has been studied since the sex/ gender distinction was widely accepted in the second half of the twentieth century (Rubin 1975; Stoller 1964); however, analysts lacked a definitive framework for explaining what gender transgressions *actually are*. Consequently, the body of work that explores gender transgression remains conceptually fragmented.

In addition to issues of conceptual cohesion, previous work on gender transgression has failed to thoroughly explore gender rule-breaking in-kind among *all* gendered groups. For example— as I will eventually show— although *every* gendered actor breaks gender rules, the early literature on gender transgression tends to disproportionately focus on the experiences of non-cisgender (particularly, *transgender*) people. For a group who comprises merely 0.58% of the national population (Flores et al. 2016), those who identify as transgender are not only overrepresented in the foundational transgression literature, they have misleadingly become the primary gender-representatives of these conversations. For instance, consider the ways that foundational theorists such as Garfinkel (1967), West, and Zimmerman (1987) discussed transgression and relied on the mere existence of transgender people to prove the social construction of sex and gender.

Although the idea of breaking gender rules (what I refer to as “gender transgression”) is commonly invoked in sociological literature, there isn’t a consistent, specific, or unifying term for the concept. West and Zimmerman (1987) refer to *defying normative* (categorical) *gender*

¹⁵ This concept is also referred to in various literatures by using terms such as “cross-gender behavior” (e.g., Fagot 1977; Sandnabba and Ahlberg 1999) and “gender deviance (e.g., Nelson and Robinson 1994; Schneider 2012).

behavior, and elsewhere West and Fenstermaker refer to the countless mundane situations in which men and women can seem “out of place” (1995:22). Jenness and Fenstermaker (2014:27) highlight the salience of “*accountability to a set of normative standards and cultural gendered ideals...*” Kane (2006) notes *gender role deviations* as evidence of transgression, while Schilt (2006) refers to *gender ambiguity*, and Dozier (2005:299) explains the transgressive undercurrent of those who “grow up to have a gender identity contrary to that expected from their socialization.” Pascoe (2012) explains, through the lens of *fag discourse*, that gender rule-breaking does not always signify crossing from one side of the gender binary to the other; for instance, one can be *unmasculine* without necessarily being *feminine*. Further, it’s been noted that whether or not gender is transgressive is contextual because “of the different imagined purposes of interactions that should occur in [various] settings” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014:50). Indeed, Kazyak corroborates that “the meanings of gender presentations vary by geographic context” (2012:826). In all of these foundational works, the concept of *gender transgressions* is present— and in many cases, it is the object of study— but an intentional, consistent, and specific theoretical framework has not emerged. As such, there has not yet been an investigation into the ways that gender transgressions might be distinguished between category and status, typified, and explored beyond the assumption that they are basically the same as non-normative gender performances. The literature lacks a meaningful discussion on the typology, prevalence, and function of gender transgressions that incorporates *all gendered actors*— including, and especially, those *actively identified* as cisgender.

My goal in this chapter is threefold: first, I will demonstrate that gender transgression is not unidimensional by outlining a typology of the concept. I will then discuss the prevalence of gender transgressions— specifically how they emerge among various gender statuses and

categories. Finally, after clarifying what gender transgressions are and who does them, I will explore their functional role in social life and everyday interaction, ultimately explaining why they occur in the first place.

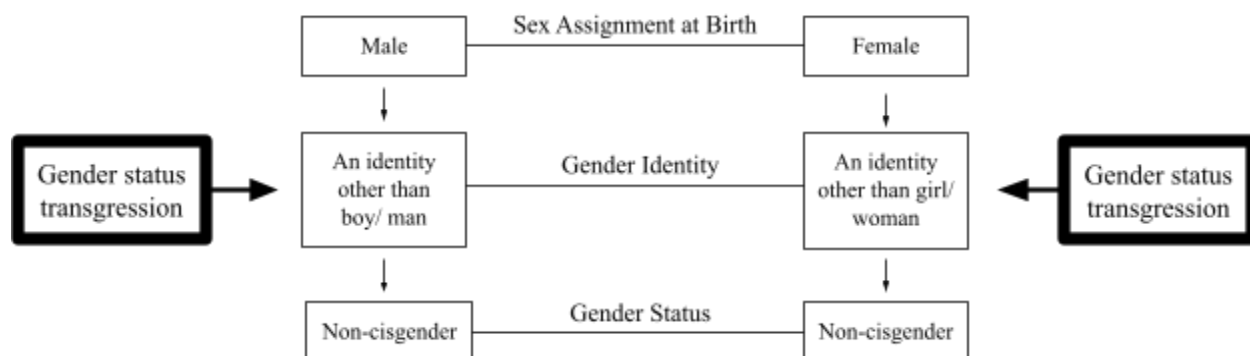
Typology of Gender Transgression

Because gender rule-breaking occurs in myriad ways, *gender transgression* is not one-size-fits-all and must be understood as multidimensional. The conceptual framing of gender category and gender status are critical in producing a typology of the various ways gender can be transgressed. As I will demonstrate, gender transgressions are numerous and modified by factors such as (actual *and perceived*) gender category and gender status.

When *gender status* is transgressed, it is because the gendered actor in question has rejected their sex assignment at birth as a roadmap for social identity— in other words, it is because the gendered actor in question is non-cis. For instance, those who are transgender or nonbinary inherently engage in gender status transgressions simply on account of *not being cisgender*. As such, only non-cisgender people engage in true, definitional status transgressions¹⁶. Likewise, cisgender individuals do not engage in gender status transgressions because they accept their sex assignment at birth and consequential gender assignment. Note the position of gender status transgressions in model below:

¹⁶ As I will later demonstrate, even though non-cis people are the only gendered actors who engage in status transgressions, they are not always the only ones who are policed for *perceived* status transgressions.

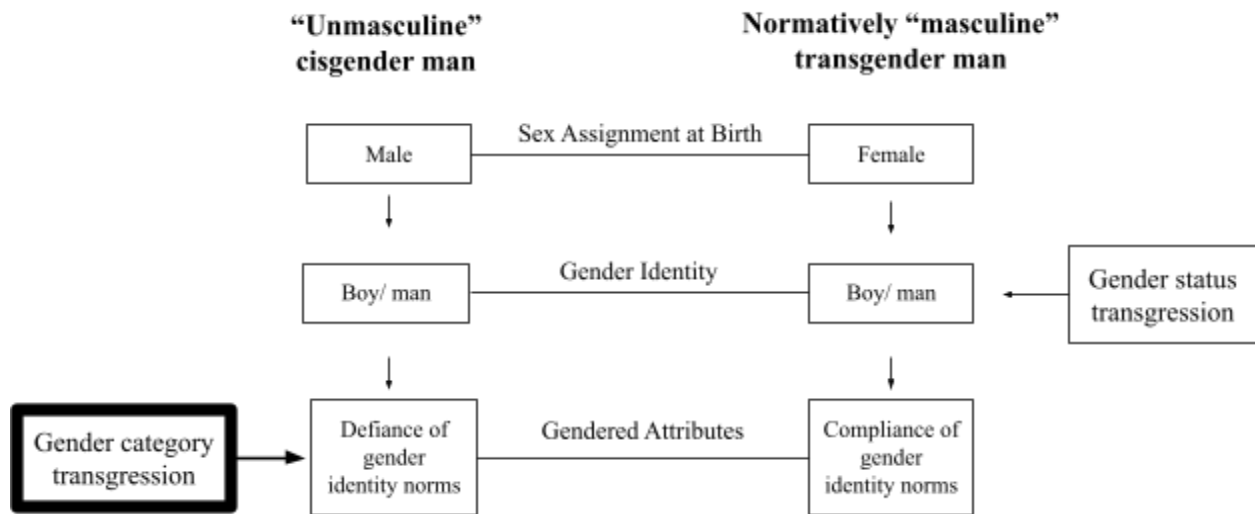
Figure 2.1 Gender Status Transgression



When *gender category* is transgressed, it is because the gendered actor in question, regardless if they are cis or non-cis, defies the bounds of their *gender identity* in some way. The distinction between gender status transgressions and gender category transgressions is useful in exploring the nuance of gendered experiences between both cis and non-cis members of a given gender category. For instance, the gender category “man” includes both cisgender and transgender men. Regardless of *gender status*, men are subjected to the normative expectations of their gender category; in this case, *all men* are ultimately accountable to the measure of hegemonic masculinity that is imposed on anyone who is a man (Connell 1987). Gender category transgressions are distinct from gender status transgressions because they are not based upon one’s relation to sex assignment. Instead, gender category transgressions occur, for instance, when those in the gender category “man” step outside of the normative (racialized and classed) gender expectations for men. Keeping with my hypothetical of gender transgressive men, below is an example that compares the transgressions of two men— one cisgender and one

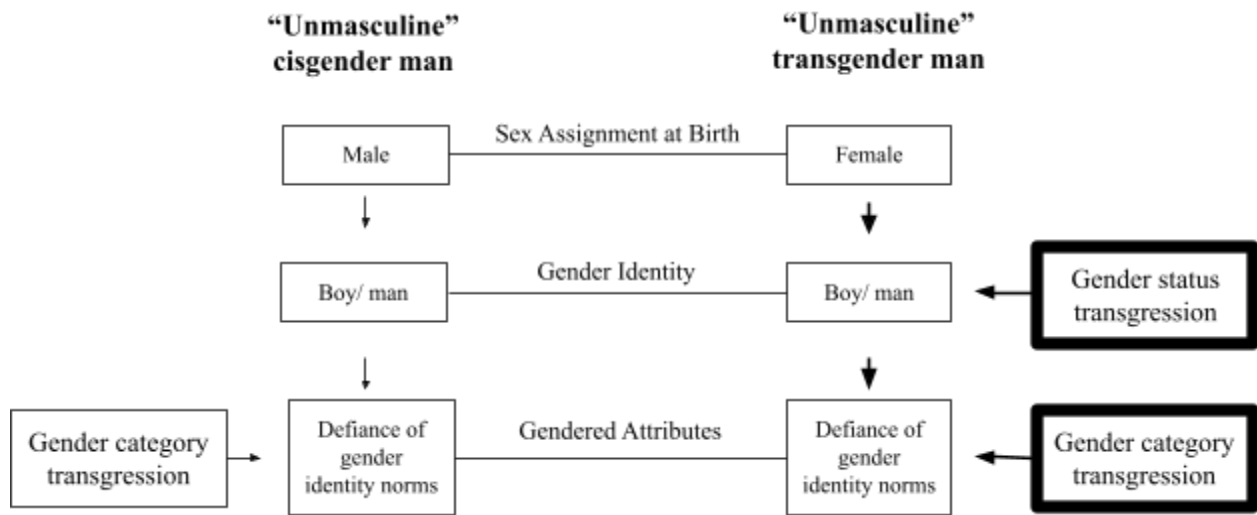
transgender. Notice the distinction between the way gender category transgressions and gender status transgressions take place:

Figure 2.2 Gender Category Transgression Example



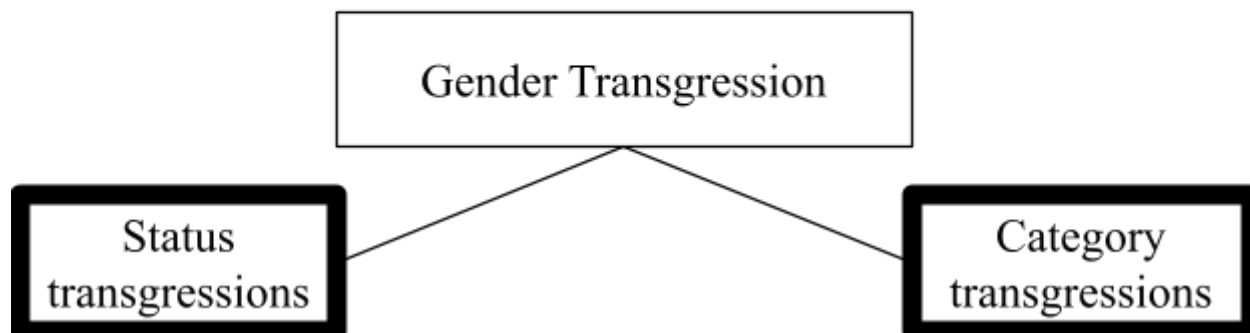
Although gender status transgressions and gender identity transgressions are distinct, they are not mutually exclusive and may occur concurrently. This can be seen by slightly changing the gendered attributes from the example above. In the example below, both the cisgender and transgender man both have “unmasculine” gendered attributes and are categorically transgressive. In addition to his *gender category transgression*, the transgender man is also *status transgressive*. Although the cisgender man is categorically transgressive, he is not status transgressive on account of his cisgender status. See Figure 2.3 below for a visual representation of the co-occurrence of status and category transgressions.

Figure 2.3 Gender Category and Status Transgression Example



Gender transgressions occur when gender rules are broken. Thus far I have built out the two major ways in which gender transgressions take place: by breaking normative rules around gender status (i.e., being non-cisgender), and by breaking normative rules around gender category (i.e., a man with “feminine” attributes or a woman with “masculine” attributes). See Figure 2.4 below for a foundational breakdown gender transgressions:

Figure 2.4 Gender Status and Category Transgressions

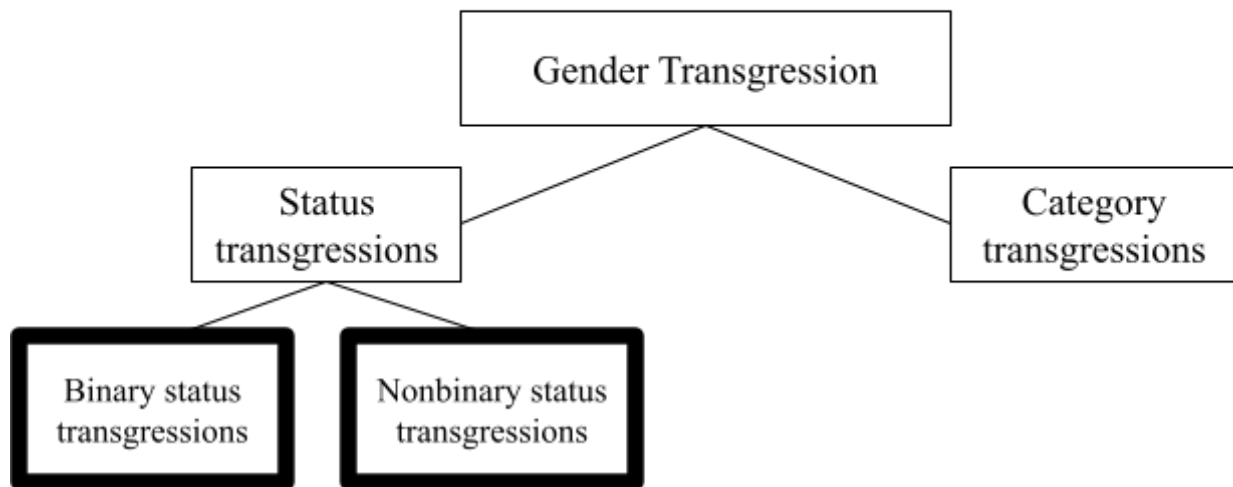


Now that I have established the major organizational framework through which gender transgression occurs, I will explain the breakdown of both gender status transgressions and gender category transgressions. Gender status transgressions take place because the gendered actor in question rejects their assigned sex as a blueprint for their social identity; in other words, status transgressions refer to the state of being non-cisgender. Some examples of those who are non-cisgender, and therefore status transgressive, are: transgender men, transgender women, and those with any other nonbinary gender identity¹⁷. Those who are non-cis are inherently *status transgressive* because their gender identities differ from what is socially expected given their respective male or female sex assignment. As such, status transgressions must be further specified by taking form as either *binary status transgressions* or *nonbinary status transgressions*. It is important to differentiate between binary and nonbinary status transgressions

¹⁷ Here I am using the term nonbinary as an adjective that refers to any number of non-man or non-woman gender identities (such as genderqueer, agender, nonbinary, genderfucked, etc.), rather than a self-ascribed gender identity in and of itself.

because, as I will show in later chapters, they are perceived, presented, and policed in significantly different ways. See Figure 2.5 below for a visual breakdown of binary and nonbinary status transgressions:

Figure 2.5 Binary and Nonbinary Status Transgressions



Just as gender status transgressions require non/binary specification, *gender category transgressions* must be further differentiated. Although varied, gender category transgressions generally fall into one of two types: (i) those which break normative gender rules (i.e., men with “feminine” attributes or women with “masculine” attributes), or (ii) those which negate gender category (i.e., a nonbinary person may *not* correct someone who misgenders them). I refer to these distinct types of category transgression as either *intrapersonal* or *interpersonal*, respectively.

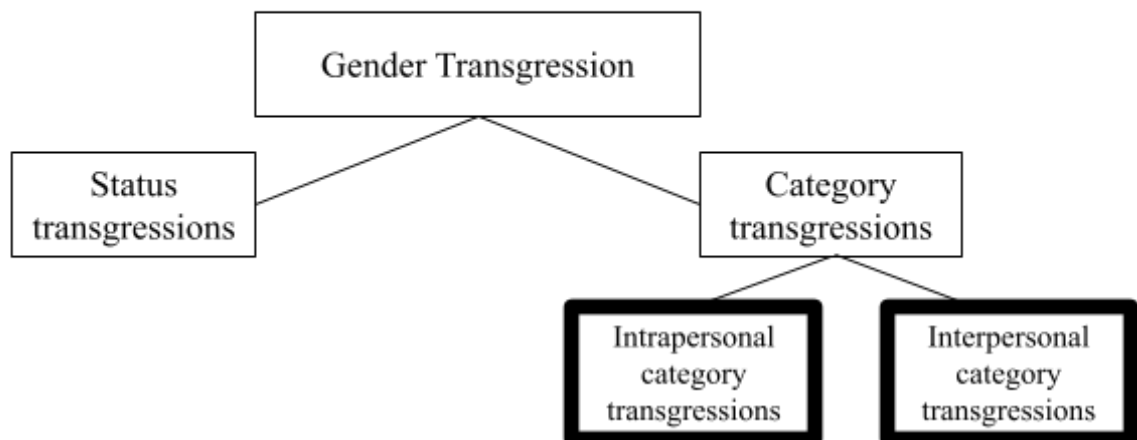
Intrapersonal gender category transgressions refer to attributes wherein a gendered actor somehow defies the stereotypic ‘limits’ of their gender identity. I use the qualifier “intrapersonal” because these actions, behaviors, and/or attitudes reflect the preferences of the gendered actor and appeal to an internal sense of self. Take for instance the intrapersonal category transgressions of Hiroshi, a 42 year old Japanese American cisgender man, and Grover, a 29 year old white transgender man, who both report actively engaging and enjoying “domestic,” and stereotypic “feminine” duties such as child-rearing, cooking, and gardening. Hiroshi noted that his interests “may not be traditional[ly] [masculine] characteristics... and some people may see them as more, like, a homemaker or stay-at-home trait.” In this case, both Hiroshi and Grover are engaging in intrapersonal category transgressions because their self-understood defiance of the normative masculine social script, rather than as a response to an interpersonal interaction.

Interpersonal gender category transgressions refer to the situation wherein a gendered actor denies, suppresses, downplays or otherwise negates their gender identity. I use the qualifier “interpersonal” because gender identity denial is inherently relational and takes place *between* gendered actors. For instance Marie, a 60 year old white transgender woman, explained “I had to suppress [my identity as a woman] almost my entire life due to societal pressures and the need to care for my family, and earn a living for them.” Marie engaged in interpersonal category transgressions by suppressing her gender identity for the financial sake of her family. Ollie, a 21 year old Black gender nonconforming person, reported a similar interactional motivation to engage in interpersonal category transgressions in order to keep a bond with their friend:

My best friend is a trans woman, so, like, I step in and hold that space for her to build that sisterhood [with me], which is really interesting because our friendship is kind of like a sisterhood in a way... And if that's what's needed to make her feel safe and comfortable, then I'll perform that for her, *and I'll be a sister*. And I'll negate my non-binary ethic, and I'll step into that role.

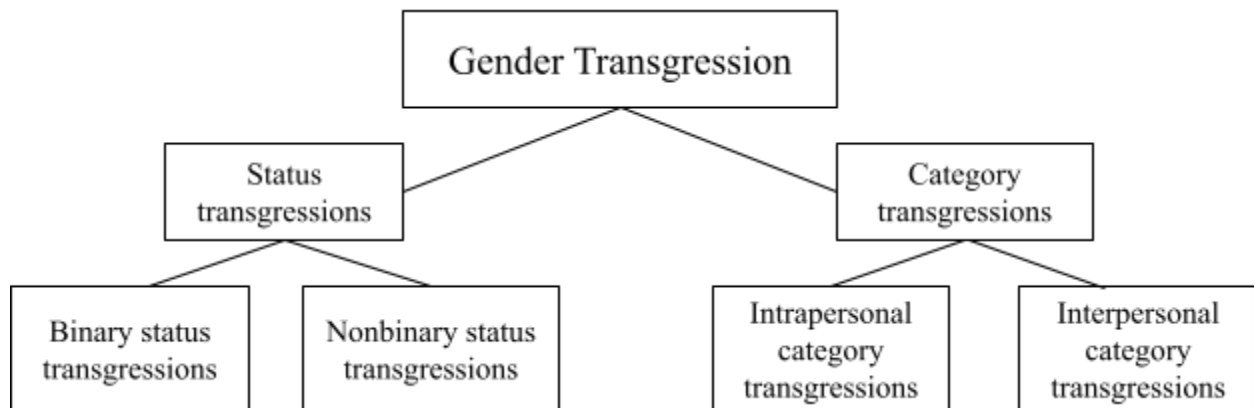
Intrapersonal and interpersonal category transgressions each break distinct normative expectations around gender category. *Intrapersonal category transgressions* defy the societal expectations of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (Connell 1987). By requiring the gendered actor to deny their gender for the sake of interaction, *interpersonal category transgressions* defy the expectation that one's respective gender is intimately tied to one's identity (Witt 2011). See Figure 2.6 below for a visual breakdown of intrapersonal and interpersonal category transgressions:

Figure 2.6 Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Category Transgressions



As I have demonstrated, gender transgression is not simply an amorphous concept that refers to the identities and gendered attributes of non-cisgender people; no, the concept of *gender transgression* must be understood with a level of distinction that meets the complexity of the gender system which provides the context for its very existence. Gender transgression is first modified by gender status and category and then further broken down into binary/ nonbinary and intrapersonal/ interpersonal distinctions. In Figure 2.7 below I offer a full typology of gender transgression.

Figure 2.7 Typology of Gender Transgressions



Our identities and interactions are all gendered and understood through normative gender rules that apply to gender category *and* gender status. As such, there are seemingly endless opportunities *for all gendered actors* to breach different kinds of gendered expectations. In the

next section of this chapter I will further explore the prevalence of gender transgressions, specifically identifying the various gendered groups amongst which they occur.

Prevalence of Gender Transgression

Trans may be uncommon, but gender variance itself is not rare.

Virginia Goldner (2011:163)

Regardless of gender category or status, *all* participants reported gender transgressions. Whereas the foundational framing of gender rule-breaking has disproportionately fixated on non-cis people, my analyses revealed that there is no evidence to support the (mis)conception that non-cis people are exemplars of gender transgressors. Non-cis people aren't more gender transgressive than cis people. Furthermore, in a number of instances non-cis people actually reported *greater categorical gender adherence* compared to their cis counterparts.

Below I will detail the interplay between gender transgressions and gender categories and statuses. Specially, I will show that there is great theoretical purchase in marking that which has been previously unnamed in the literature: *the cisgender status*. Ultimately I will demonstrate that *all* gendered beings enact distinct kinds of gender transgressions as a necessary consequence of being gendered in this particular social system.

Status Transgressions

I might look cis, but I'm not cis.

As I have shown, gender transgressions are varied and must be distinguished; not all gender transgressions are the same. In order to determine the *type* of transgression that occurred, one must first identify what, exactly, is being transgressed. In the case of *gender status transgressions*, the gender rule that is being broken is the social expectation that those assigned “male” will ultimately identify as “men” and those assigned “female” will ultimately identify as “women.” In other words, gender status transgressions occur at the point in which a given gendered actor *is not cisgender*. In this way, status transgressions are inherent to non-cis identity occur exclusively among all non-cis people.

Gender status transgressions occur simply by the fact of *not being cisgender*. I am focused on the cis/ non-cis duality of gendered life for the sake of analytically and theoretically separating the hegemonic entity (in this case, the cisgender status) from all others. As I have stated elsewhere, my inquiry on cis/ non-cis status should not be taken to mean all cisgender or non-cisgender experiences are the same. There are endless gendered arrangements through which gender status transgressions occur. The most frequent observations I made of *status transgressions* were with participants who either identified as *transgender men*, *transgender women*, or as *gender nonbinary*. In this sense, the *binary/ non-binary* distinction became a meaningful modifier of status transgressions. Below I explore both binary and nonbinary gender status transgressions.

Binary Status Transgressions

Binary status transgressions were prevalent among transgender men and transgender women. Because binary status transgressions are inherent to any gendered actor who (i) is not cisgender and (ii) *is* a man or a woman, *all* transgender men and *all* transgender women were inherently *binary status transgressive* and reported experiences corroborating that fact. Participants who reported binary status transgressions did so under varying narratives. In particular, transgender women more frequently discussed their non-cis status as an enduring and natural predisposition (colloquially referred to as the *born in the wrong body narrative*), whereas transgender men more frequently discussed arriving to their non-cis status through a process of discovery. For both groups, however, themes of gender-truth and self-acceptance were common.

Enduring and natural predisposition

It was not unusual for participants to understand their binary status transgressions as inherent and constant— and oftentimes even biological— properties they were either “born with” or “always” possessed. Although this framing was not unique to any singular gendered group, it was most frequently reported by transgender women¹⁸. For instance Angel, a 63 year old transgender woman, explained “I do have the gene that makes me want to be a girl. And, it’s not my fault. It’s just who I am.” Similarly to Angel’s description of her naturally occurring transgression as not her “fault,” Nikki, a 52 year old white transgender woman, also understood her binary status transgression as out of her control. She explained of her non-cis status: “I knew that I wasn’t a boy, and I couldn’t function as a boy. I really wanted to just wake up in the body that I belong in, and be who I needed to be.”

¹⁸ It should be noted that in the demographic questionnaire participants completed before being interviewed, transgender women were twice as likely to use biological terms to name their gender identities (i.e., “female”) than were transgender men (i.e., “male”).

Other participants mentioned their binary status transgressions were integral to their longstanding self conception. For instance, Chloe, a 59 year old Native American transgender woman, shared that she “always felt like” she “didn’t belong in the [cisgender] life” that she was living, and Axel, a 58 year old white transgender man, stated “I mean, I see myself as a man... it's just me. It's me, like I've always been a guy in my mind, it's my normal.”

Although these participants understand their binary status transgressions simply as a persistent and naturally-occurring part of who they are, they are also reiterating central tenets of what Johnson (2015) calls *medical accountability*. Johnson (2015) conceptualizes medical accountability as a normative accountability structure that restricts binary transgender individuals’ access to material and social resources based on their ability to adhere to transnormativity. Medical accountability tends to focus on experiences such as *lifelong identification* and feeling as though one was *born in the wrong body* in order to legitimize the existence of the (binary) non-cis status through a medical model (Johnson 2015). In this sense, we begin to see the complexity of gender transgression emerge wherein binary non-cis identities (and by extension, binary status transgressions) are framed as enduring predispositions that occur naturally within the same (cis)gender system that undermines their very existence.

Process of discovery

Some participants understood their non-cis status— as well as their binary status transgressions— as the product of a *realization* over time. These participants tended to be transgender men and frequently recounted “not knowing” that claiming a non-cisgender status was even an “option” for them. Take for instance Alex, a 23 year old Mexican American

transgender man, who shared “finding out” that he “didn’t have to identify as a cis woman... if I didn’t feel like that...” and ultimately realized “the best identity that fits me is transgender.” Like Alex, Hunter, a 36 year old white transgender man, was unaware for many years that he could hold a non-cis status and shared “My gender, honestly, is something I've always tried to ignore. Because I never thought there were options. It was something I didn't like, so... I never paid it any attention.”

Some participants like Xavier, a 25 year old white transgender man, characterized his process of discovery as “late in the game.” He recalled seeing a famous trans man, Chaz Bono, on television for the first time as an adolescent and thinking: ““Oh, it's possible. You can do stuff to your body and you can look different.”” Like many other participants who were transgender men, Scott, a 32 year old white Latinx transgender man, shared that he “Realized I was transgender when I went off to college...” and that prior to that he “didn't know it was a thing.”

The experiences reported by my participants in terms of ‘coming to’ their non-cis gender status is what Natacha Kennedy refers to as *tacit deferral*, referring to a period of time before one becomes explicitly aware of their non-cis gender status (2020). Tacit deferral is a byproduct of “cultural erasure” and often characterized by gendered actors feeling “different” in some fundamental way but lacking access to the language that would explicitly name a non-cis status (Kennedy 2020). Kennedy explains that tacit deferral may be followed with what she terms “*epiphany*,” or the realization one is non-cis. We see an example of this process in Brian’s (22, white, transgender man) experience when he shares “I was always a tomboy growing up, I guess you could say, and then once I figured out the [trans]gender thing that made a lot more sense.” Exploring binary status transgressions through a *process of discovery* framing highlights the way

that cisnormativity shapes gender status and transgression. Cisnormativity plays a fundamental discursive role whereby non-cis people often find themselves lacking access to vocabulary that would communicate their non-cis identities and experiences.

Gender-truths and self-acceptance

Trans men and women tended to frame their binary status transgressions somewhat differently in terms of lifelong non-cis identification; however, there was more consistency between the groups when it came to other narratives around acceptance, self-knowledge, and defining their binary non-cis statuses. For instance Ava, a 21 year old white transgender woman, explained that her womanhood is defined as much by what it is not *by what it is*: “It feels wrong to classify myself as [a man] or as non binary. I can't explain why. But I just don't think that— I just feel that that's not what it is.” Kent, a 29 year old white transgender man, similarly described that “It's really important to my conception of being a man... is not being seen as a woman.” Like Kent and Ava, Jackie, a 34 year old white transgender woman explained her non-cis status through the interplay between self-knowledge and *definition by negation*: “I mean... [although] I presented it as a man for so long, I knew in my heart that it wasn't who I truly was.”

Self-recognition and self-acceptance as non-cis tended to go hand in hand for binary participants. As Anastasia, a 75 year old white transgender woman, explained of her non-cis status and consequential binary status transgression:

The toughest thing a trans person goes through is accepting who you are and what you are. I went through a year where I was ashamed and guilty, until I realized that this is who I am and that I should not be ashamed about what people think. I've accepted myself for who I am, and I'm proud of who I am. It doesn't bother me that people know who I am.

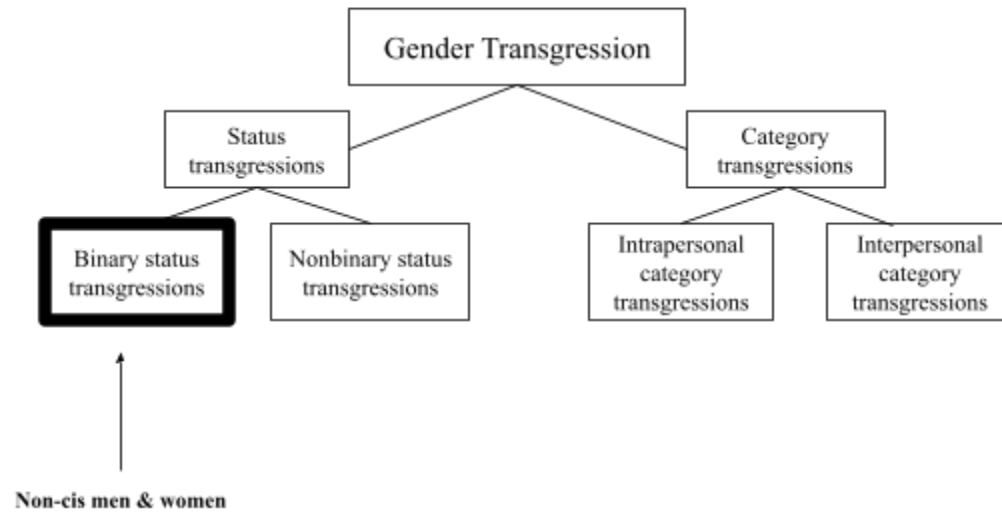
Similar to Anastasia, both Axel, a 58 year old white transgender man, and Dorothy, a 54 year old white transgender woman, highlighted the importance of self acceptance regardless of the perceptions of others. Axel described the saliency of his non-cis status despite being seen otherwise by outsiders: “To the world, I was always just like a ‘housewife’ and a ‘mother’ and all that stuff. To me, like, no— I was different. So that’s where I am now.” Like Axel, Dorothy emphasized self-recognition and feeling authentic in claiming a non-cisgender status:

I think the whole transgender thing is not necessarily that you *pass*, but how you *feel*. Because going right back to the beginning, that state of mind [is what is important]— even if I look like a boy wearing a dress, *I feel me. I feel happy, this is me*. And I don’t really care what you think.

It should be noted that although participants like Axel and Dorothy explained the important fact that non-cis identities are inherently legitimate and not necessarily dependent on “passing,” the majority of binary non-cis participants *did* frequently pass and were actually quite categorically normative as men and women in their everyday lives. This point is essential in highlighting the need for the concept of *gender transgression* to be broken down in greater detail. As I have discussed, gender transgression has been treated as a catchall term, often vaguely referring to non-cis men and women *in general*. It is true that non-cis men and women all enact binary status transgressions, but that is not the full picture of gender rule-breaking; further, just because we know that someone is binary status transgressive (i.e., a trans man or woman) doesn’t mean we will necessarily have any information about their categorical gender

adherence or presentation as men and women. See below for a visual illustration of the prevalence of binary status transgressions among gendered groups:

Figure 2.8 Prevalence of Binary Status Transgressions among Gendered Groups



Nonbinary Status Transgressions

Nonbinary status transgressions were prevalent among those who did not identify as men or women. The cisgender status only accounts for a binary conception of gender and, in large part, is predicated upon an identification *as a man* or *as a woman*¹⁹. As such, nonbinary participants are precluded from the cisgender status by default on account of their non-man and non-woman identities. Just because nonbinary participants held a non-cis status, did not necessarily mean they identified as transgender. It should be noted that some nonbinary participants did identify as transgender and others did not. Nonbinary status transgressions are inherent to any gendered actor who (i) is not cisgender and (ii) is not a man or a woman,

¹⁹ Because status transgressions are about defying the expectation of one holding a cisgender status and because cis men and cis women ultimately identify with the binary gender they were assigned at birth, they are technically unable to engage in any (binary or nonbinary) status transgressions.

therefore *all* gender nonbinary participants were *inherently* nonbinary status transgressive and reported experiences corroborating that fact. Participants reported nonbinary status transgressions under varying themes of being *not-binary* as well as *gender fluidity*.

Not-binary

Nonbinary participants frequently framed their status transgressions through a lack of identification as either men or women. Many nonbinary participants described the ways in which the gender categories “man” and “woman” were not right or accurate in describing their identities. For instance, Jaume, a 29 year old white and Hispanic trans person, explained that despite being transmasculine and often read as a man by others, he does not identify as such and ultimately understands himself as nonbinary:

I identify as trans and I often just use the word “trans” to describe myself. And that is important to me because I feel like I don’t identify as a man or a trans man. And I also know that a lot of people assume that about me because of my presentation. But I think if people just ask me, I would say that I identify as “trans.”

Similarly, Beau, a 52 year old nonbinary person explained that although they are “Definitely more masculine than feminine,” their “masculinity is always underscored by [their] effeminate gay-maleness” and they “don’t identify cleanly as [a man] or [a woman].” While participants like Jaume and Beau discussed not identifying with binary gender categories, other participants dismissed the binary altogether such as Ollie, a 21 year old Black gender nonconforming person, who simply stated: “I don’t believe in the categories of man and woman.” In this sense, one of the major ways that nonbinary status transgressions were communicated was through the rejection of the gender categories “man” and “woman” by nonbinary participants.

Gender fluidity

Nonbinary participants also commonly framed their status transgressions through the lens of gender fluidity. As nonbinary participants shared the foundational mechanics of their non-cis statuses, they used terms like “layers,” “levels,” “boxes,” and “ambiguity” in describing the limitations of the gender binary. Additionally, many nonbinary participants spoke of their gender identities and statuses more as a dynamic journey, rather than a final destination. For instance Cookie, a 27 year old Latinx queer person, explained:

I would say there are various identities within my identity. I consider myself trans, but I don't physically take any hormones for that. I currently don't feel that I want to change my body physically. But if anyone asks, I just say I'm queer because it's a really broad category and it's really fluid. Like, I came out at fifteen I wanna say, and I'm twenty-seven now, but I'm still learning about my identity and my queerness.

Like Cookie, Lazarus, a 31 year old white and Latino nonbinary person, shared that they also found the fluidity of a nonbinary gender identity more authentic in the face of cisnormative gender expectations: “[My gender is] not necessarily rooted in whatever the prevalent social norms are. I always kind of personally identified as something more ambiguous, and not quite as boxed in. It's pretty steadily been nonbinary.”

Some non-cis nonbinary participants understood their identity in ways that completely transcended normative concepts of gender. For these participants, gender was something that existed more out of social utility, rather than a personal identity. For example, Max, a 27 year old white person who does not identify as any gender, explained Max's²⁰ gender as something that

²⁰ Max uses “Max” and “Max's” as pronouns.

exists for “your comfortability,” and explained the process through which gender plays out interpersonally for Max:

If you think I’m a man, I’m a man, if you think I’m a woman, I’m a woman. If you think I’m a they, I’m a they... I stopped identifying [as any gender] because it was all about [other people’s] thoughts, that *they* needed to know [my gender]. So, if you call me a man, I will not correct you. If you call me a woman, I will not correct you. If you call me a “they,” more power to you because you’re starting to get the point.

Participants like Max transgressed gender by subverting the foundational assumptions around it. In making gender existentially meaningless, a number of participants experienced a complex interplay where, in a world that does not allow them to escape gender (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lucal 1999), they managed to understand themselves as essentially genderless.

Ajpu, a 35 year old Afro-Mestizx gender non-conforming person, echoed Max’s sentiment about their gendered self-understanding being essentially irrelevant to social interaction; however participants like Ajpu did highlight the personal significance of their gender identity and fluidity:

I like to play around with [my gender] on a personal scale... [and] that performance is for *myself*. Like, ‘who do *I* want to be today?’... [and] I don’t feel like answering people’s questions as to why maybe one day I wore a dress, and another day a bow tie... I don’t feel the necessity to have to explain why or why not I do certain things.

Max and Ajpu questioned the import of gender as an interactional necessity altogether; however, other participants signaled appreciation for the ways their nonbinary status transgressions pushed against the binary in interaction. Specifically some participants spoke of

the importance of interactional concepts like “indecipherability” and “in-betweenness” regarding in their non-cis gender statuses and nonbinary identities. For example Loren, a 36 year old white nonbinary person, shared:

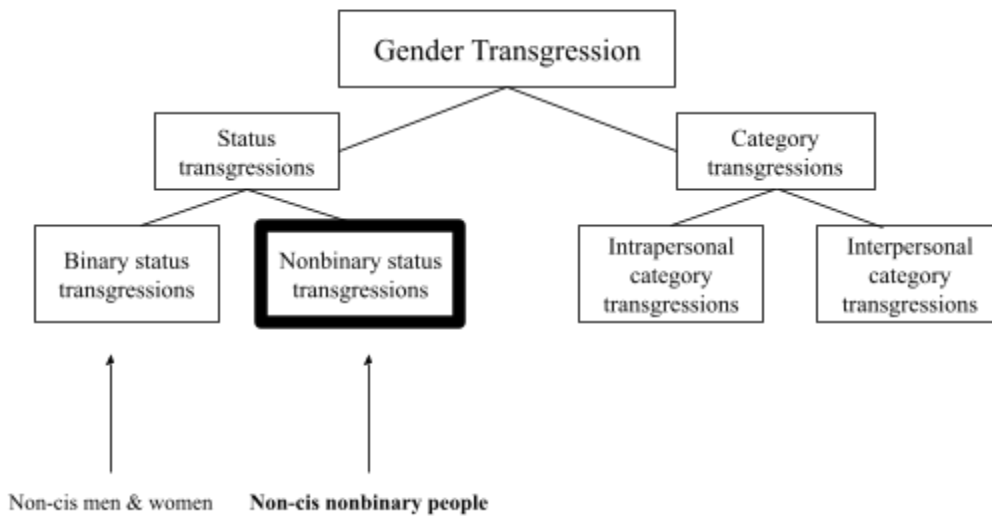
I identify as non-binary. I also identify as a fag or a pansy. I identify, in a way, as an effeminate man. Like, in other words, I guess it's more comfortable for me to have feminine characteristics if I'm being read as [a cis man], for some reason... if I'm going to be read as just [a cis woman], I feel like I can't have my feminine mannerisms. Like I can only have [femminine mannerisms] within the complexity of there being an indecipherability of my gender. And I think that idea of indecipherability is very important to me... I feel like I've arrived at that because in a way, as I go through the world, when I [recognize others and think], “Oh, this person's another me,” it's always these genderqueer, in-between-gender, indecipherable people...

Jaume similarly expressed the ways his nonbinary status transgression was particularly centered around the concept of gender fluidity:

I identify with kind of, like, feminine masculinities. Words that I have used in the past have been like “dandy” or “fag”— and those are part of my gender identity, and I present kind of masculine-of-center, but also have pretty feminine traits in some ways when I feel safe and comfortable to express those.

Whether it's framed via self-conception or social-perception, gender fluidity was a key theme for non-cis nonbinary participants as they discussed gender status transgressions. In general, nonbinary status transgressions were only prevalent among non-cis nonbinary participants. See below for a visual illustration of the prevalence of nonbinary status transgressions among gendered groups:

Figure 2.9 Prevalence of Nonbinary Status Transgressions among Gendered Groups



Category Transgressions

Whereas *gender status transgressions* were prevalent only among those who were non-cisgender, *gender category transgressions* were ubiquitous among all gendered groups and individuals. As I mentioned previously, a given transgression can only be defined by the rules it breaks. In the case of *gender category transgressions*, the gender rules that are being broken are twofold: (i) the social expectation that gendered actors possess *normative* gendered qualities (i.e., “masculine” men and “feminine” women) (see: Connell 1987; Schippers 2007) and (ii) the social expectation that being of a given gender is an undeniable sense of self critical to our social identities. In other words, gender category transgressions occur at the point in which a given gendered actor *either fails to meet the normative gender expectations of their gender identity, or suppresses, denies, downplays, or otherwise invalidates their gender identity*. As I will show, category transgressions are inherent to being a gendered actor in this society and they are, therefore, prevalent among all gendered actors.

Intrapersonal Category Transgressions

All binary participants reported intrapersonal category transgressions. Regardless of gender status, participants who identified as either *men* or *women* ultimately experienced instances of transgressing normative conceptions of manhood or womanhood. Intrapersonal category transgressions are often unremarkable variations in performing a binary gender identity (by any man or woman, regardless if they are cis or non-cis). In this way, intrapersonal category transgressions bear no qualitative difference when they are performed by cisgender or non-cisgender participants. For instance both Thomas, a 21 year old Mexican Irish cisgender man, and Xavier, a 25 year old white transgender man, understood themselves as categorically transgressive for being men with “high-pitched” voices and reported forcefully lowering their vocal range in order to not commit the transgression of being a man with a “feminine-sounding” voice. Likewise, Luna, a 25 year old Mexican American cisgender woman, and Candace, a 47 year old Hispanic transgender woman, each explained they felt “pressure” to wear dresses in order for others to easily see them as *women*; yet, they were both transgressive in their dislike of wearing dresses.

Regardless of cis- or non-cis status, the expectations inherent in a binary gender system proved too rigid to fully accommodate the basic range of characteristics, attributes, and desires that all participants regularly experienced. Although normative forms of ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ are constantly evolving, participants frequently understood themselves as falling outside of the imagined, mutually-exclusive parameters of masculinity and femininity. Luna struggled defining concepts like “masculinity” and “femininity,” ultimately concluding, “[if there is] such a thing as masculinity and femininity, I think I would have all those traits inside of me.”

Similarly, Xavier understood that— however minimal— his “[feminine] personality traits” were still an essential part of his personhood.

Unlike their binary counterparts who all pushed the bounds of their gender identities as men and women, nonbinary participants did not report *any* intrapersonal category transgressions. Although they certainly engaged other types of gender transgressions (such as status transgressions), nonbinary participants were not subject to— nor did they operate under— the same set of normative gender rules that apply to binary people. Take for instance Beau, a 52 year old genderqueer person, who discussed their “men’s clothes,” “short haircut,” and sarcastically said that they “often forget” they are “supposed to be a woman,” and also described themselves as “queeny,” “sassy,” “campy,” and “effeminate.” Although Beau’s gender identity blends stereotypic elements of both masculinity and femininity, they don’t enact intrapersonal category transgressions because their nonbinary identity and status allows for exactly the type of fluidity that Beau exhibits.

Gender transgression is multifaceted and subject to both self- and other-interpretation. For example, nonbinary participants didn’t report intrapersonal category transgressions because there does not (yet) exist a normative framework for *nonbinary* in the same way there exists a normative framework for *masculinity* and *femininity* (i.e., Connell 1987; Schippers 2007).²¹ This isn’t because all nonbinary participants were the same in their gender presentations and experiences, because they were somehow completely void of binary attributes, or because they reported feeling totally secure in their nonbinary identities; rather, instead of understanding

²¹ This does not mean nonbinary participants somehow escaped facing gender accountability or gender policing from others, but it does mean that nonbinary participants’ self conception was largely free of intrapersonal category transgressions.

themselves through hegemonic notions of manhood or womanhood, nonbinary participants found a gender loophole of sorts wherein their gender identities²² afforded them flexibility unknown to those who identified as *men* or *women*.

Engaging in stereotypically binary behaviors, actions, or expressions did not necessarily fall outside of nonbinary participants' understanding of themselves *as nonbinary*. Previous work has shown that binary gendered terms are useful, whether by way of similarity or contrast, in describing nonbinary gender identities. For instance, Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, and Ramirez (2017) found that participants often described their “nontraditional” gender identities with “traditional” binary gender terms. Binary attributes are simply a feature of the gender dynamism that some nonbinary participants experience. To further illustrate this point, consider the way in which the very same attributes take on significantly different meaning depending if they are applied to binary or nonbinary identities. For example genderqueer Beau wearing “men’s clothing” is not intrapersonally categorically transgressive because their gender category of “nonbinary” is not transgressed by masculine (or feminine) attributes; whereas others that are woman-identified such as Red, a 34 year old white cisgender woman, or Nova, a 23 year old Latinx transgender woman, who also reported wearing men’s clothes *are* intrapersonally categorically transgressive because their gender category of “woman” is transgressed by masculine attributes.

Binary participants frequently reconciled their gender variance by explaining there exists a *caveat* to their gender identities— that, while being a (cis or non-cis) man or woman was *technically* accurate, it wasn’t the *whole* picture. Although cisgender participants accepted their

²² Some examples of participants’ nonbinary identities included: gender non-conforming; nonbinary; dandy, queer; and femme-masc.

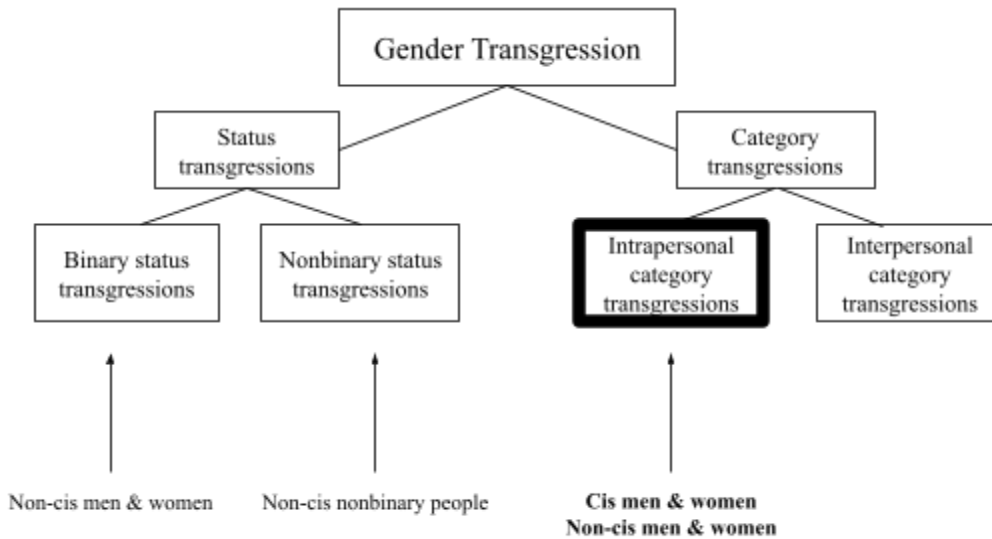
gender status *as cisgender*, they often encountered problems with the expectations associated with their gender identity categories as *men* and *women* and relied on intrapersonal category transgressions to make sense of their gendered experiences. For example, Thomas (21 years old, Mexican Irish) stated that his identity as a cisgender man is accurate simply “Because I was assigned male at birth and resonate with that,” but further explained that “I definitely have effeminate moments and... gender is what you make it.” Thomas’ definition of his manhood existed outside of traditionally prescribed roles, “For me, being a man is just being myself and feeling comfortable.” Thomas explained that growing up in a small conservative town led him to understand the traditional, binary version of masculinity he once presented was inauthentic, “It was more survival that I did present as [a man] and that I was [normatively] masculine, even though I really wasn’t.”

Binary transgender participants were equally subjected to the same traditional notions of manhood or womanhood as their cis counterparts; and binary transgender participants similarly relied on gender identity transgressions to make sense of their limiting binary identities. Like Thomas needing to be himself and feel “comfortable” with his gender and his femininity, Alex (23, Mexican American, transgender man) understands his “effeminate mannerisms” as an integral part of his manhood, rather than evidence of its void, “Some people will say, ‘Oh, [your mannerisms are] very feminine.’ And I’m like, “Yeah, well, that’s how I am.”

All binary participants engaged in intrapersonal category transgressions by reformulating— to some degree or another— what it means to be a man or a woman. Examples of mundane intrapersonal category transgressions such as those I described above were commonplace among all binary participants. Intrapersonal category transgressions are based on

gender identity, not gender status—and so this type of transgression occurs among both cis and non-cis gendered actors. See the figure below for a visual illustration of the prevalence of intrapersonal category transgressions among gendered groups:

Figure 2.10 Prevalence of Intrapersonal Category Transgressions among Gendered Groups



Interpersonal Category Transgressions

Intrapersonal category transgression is based on the failure to meet structurally-informed normative gendered expectations of one’s gender identity *for the sake of self-conception*.

Interpersonal category transgression is based on making gender concessions *for the sake of interaction with others*. These compromises are always contextualized by social interaction and often take the form of suppressing, denying, or invalidating one’s gender identity or some aspect of it. Interpersonal gender transgression allows participants to maintain access to resources,

relationships, social standing, or a sense of safety they would feel otherwise barred from if they did not make gender concessions. In other words, whereas intrapersonal category transgressions are about sustaining a relationship with *oneself*, interpersonal category transgressions are about sustaining relationships with *other people*.

My analysis revealed there are two primary ways in which participants either suppressed, downplayed, denied, or otherwise invalidated their categorical identities for the purpose of interacting with others. The first type of interpersonal category transgression occurred through active or passive denial of one's gender identity. Active denial appeared interactionally most often where a participant was either 'closeted' not 'out' as their gender identity, and passive denial occurred most commonly when a participant did not affirm their gender identity, despite being 'out' (i.e., not correcting misgendering).

Nearly all non-cis nonbinary (and to a lesser extent, many non-cis binary) participants engaged in interpersonal category transgressions by actively or passively denying their gender identities at some point. Because gender is about attribution as much as it is about identification (Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978), and because, despite their prevalence, nonbinary genders are seen as less legitimate than binary genders (e.g, Garfinkel 1967; Richards et al. 2016), it was not uncommon for participants to frequently resort to denying their nonbinary or non-passing²³ binary gender identities in a broad range of social scenarios.

Verbal misgendering was one of the most frequent ways participants were alerted that their gender identities were being misunderstood or dismissed. Most non-cis participants did not

²³ Some participants reported that they did not believe they always passed as their given gender.

attempt to correct others who misgendered them, especially when it was done by a cisgender person. Like Liliana, a 54 year old Hispanic transgender woman, and Nikki, a 52 year old white transgender woman, who typically did not say anything to correct misgendering, Xavier, a 25 year old white transgender man, explained, “I rarely verbalize it. It's embarrassing to be like, ‘Actually, I'm a guy.’” Non-cis participants noted that however painful it feels being misgendered, denying the impulse to assert their gender identities is common and likely. Amoxtli, a 20 year old femme/masc person, explained their rationale for not speaking up and enacting interpersonal category transgressions in this way:

I mostly find it within cis communities that they don't want to be corrected... the people that I've interacted with, very much have been like, ‘I'm an ally’ and then go do things that aren't showing allyship. [And] when people call them out, they're like, ‘No, but I'm an ally!’ I feel more comfortable correcting someone that is within my community, within the trans community, because I feel like they'll understand more.

Like Amoxtli, Leon, a 38 year old transgender man, discussed some of his thought process that went into engaging in interpersonal category transgressions when he was being misgendered: “I think a lot of the time I just ignored all of it because I just didn't want to deal with it. I didn't know that I had any other option but to just sit there and suffer.”

In addition to identity denial, another kind of interpersonal category transgression that emerged through the participant's attempt to counter negative stereotypes about their gender category. In a number of cases, binary participants understood that some of the normative social scripts ascribed to their gender identity categories included negative attributes (i.e., *men are predatory; women are weak*; etc.), and they used interpersonal category transgressions to temper interactions with others. For instance Billy, a 36 year old white cisgender man, explained:

Generally, I'm concerned about being perceived as a predator. That's actually a really concrete thing, I think, associated with masculinity. So, *men are creeps and sexual predators. They're always interested in pursuing. Or, men can't really be friends with women. We're really after sex or some sort of relationship all the time*, which is stereotypical. But hey, it's really there. So yeah, I can occasionally get self-conscious about whether I'm being perceived that way.

Billy recounted “try[ing] extra hard to act as if I’m not interested or find[ing] ways to get out of” interactions with women. In this example, Billy engaged in interpersonal category transgressions by being a man who is uninterested in women to address his concern of being associated with negative stereotypes about men. Similarly Xavier, a 25 year old white transgender man, shared that he will “queer it up” and “code switch to be a little bit more gay and flamboyant” with other LGBTQ+ individuals in order to be seen as “family²⁴” and to avoid being interpreted as “some cis asshole straight dude.” Here we can see both Billy and Xavier clearly engaging in interpersonal category transgressions in order to counteract the negative stereotypes that exist about their shared gender category.

Participants also discussed using interpersonal category transgressions to challenge negative stereotypes associated with women. For example Aly May, a 23 year old Black cisgender woman, explained: “...As a woman you’re always supposed to be caring and lower yourself to other people and that’s not [who I am]. I definitely stand up for myself, I definitely take leadership positions and that’s when I feel more dominant where society usually pushes back a lot on me.” Red, a 34 year old white cisgender woman, echoed Aly May when she shared “I feel like I have a problem with the role I was assigned in society and I don’t do a lot of it like wearing makeup and deferring myself to men.” Aly May and Red’s transgressions may be best

²⁴ LGBTQ+ individuals sometimes use the term “family” to identify others in the community.

understood through Schipper's *pariah femininity*, in that they are enacting the "quality content of hegemonic masculinity" which is fundamentally transgressive, given their identities as women (2007:95).

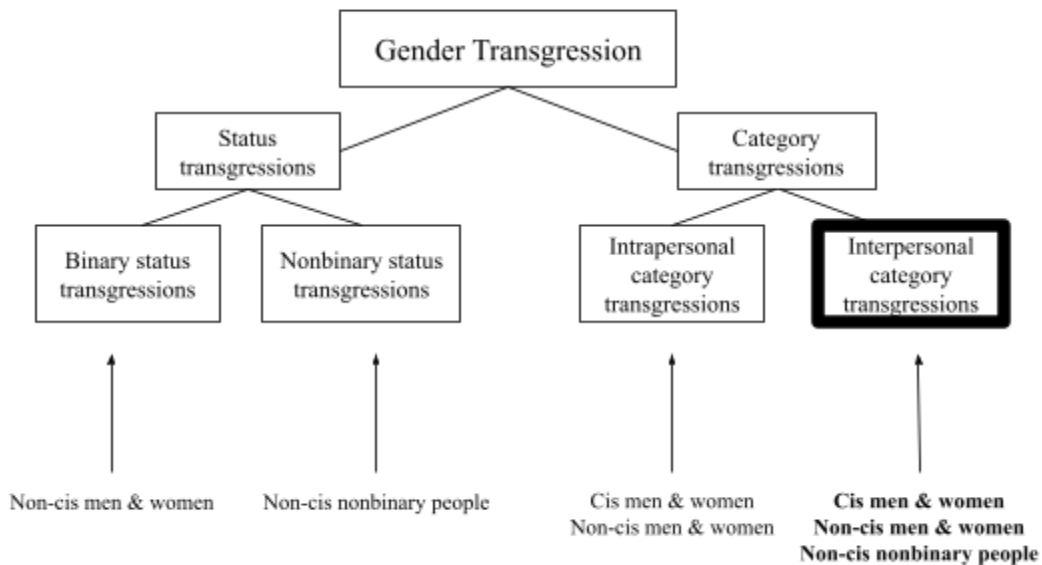
Both Aly May and Red articulated the way interpersonal category transgressions helped them move beyond negative stereotypes about women. Riley, a 27 year old white cisgender woman, elaborated on this phenomenon further, detailing the personal satisfaction she experienced from engaging interpersonal category transgressions and her wish to inspire others to do the same:

I'm really proud of being a woman who defies some of the tenets of femininity. So, even though I'm 100% all the time aware of being a woman, I feel like I'm proud of being a strong woman and an assertive woman. I'm also proud of being a well-educated woman. And also a woman in very traditionally masculine environments... I'm super proud to be a woman, and I want to be a role model for other women that feel like they can't be assertive, or feel discouraged to pursue higher education; discouraged to be in these masculine circles and stand out and talk. So I think it's really important.

Data like this should be taken in the context of the overall whiteness of my sample and the additional context that gender stereotypes are inherently racialized; and so even though participants may enact gender transgressions to counter negative stereotypes, does not mean their efforts will necessarily be successful or received positively by others. This dynamic can be made clearer when we consider the ongoing historical exclusion of Black cis women from (white) womanhood and cis femininity (hooks 1981); as a white cis woman, Riley's pride in transgressing (white) femininity may also be informed by the fact that her gender transgressions will not also be weaponized against her racialized gendered group in the same way they would be if she did not possess privileged racial group membership.

As I will explore in more detail below— where I discuss the function of gender transgression— the reasons for interpersonal category transgressions are varied. Unlike *intrapersonal category transgressions* which arise from an internal conflict with normative gender expectations, *interpersonal category transgressions* are always contextualized by social interactions and positioning. Ultimately, interpersonal category transgressions have to do with making social concessions for the sake of preserving one’s personal safety, deescalating interactions, maintaining one’s dignity, success at work, and/or sustaining relationships. Interpersonal category transgressions were prevalent among *all gendered groups*, which includes those who were cis, non-cis, binary, and/ or nonbinary. See the figure below for a visual illustration of the prevalence of interpersonal category transgressions among gendered groups:

Figure 2.11 Prevalence of Interpersonal Category Transgressions among Gendered Groups



Gender Transgression Prevalence among Gendered Groups

As I have shown, gender transgression is inherent to social life, and often occurs through unremarkable practices and attributes. Where there are gendered actors, gender transgression will surely follow. All gender transgression is not the same, however, and it is important to note the prevalence of different *types* of gender transgressions among various gendered groups. The major distinction I have demonstrated in terms of gender transgression is the difference between *status transgression* and *category transgression*.

Because *gender status transgressions* are based on crossing the bounds of the cisgender status, the only gendered actors who are ‘eligible’ to perform them are those who are non-cisgender. This includes *non-cis binary* individuals such as transgender men and transgender women, as well as *non-cis nonbinary* individuals such as those who are nonbinary, genderqueer, or don’t identify as any gender²⁵. Status transgressions occur either on a binary or nonbinary level. Binary status transgressions are prevalent only among non-cis binary individuals and nonbinary status transgressions are prevalent only among non-cis nonbinary individuals. Regardless of whether one is binary or nonbinary, all who are *non-cis* perform status transgressions. As such, gender status transgressions are prevalent among all non-cis gendered actors.

Because *gender category transgressions* are based on crossing the boundaries of one's gender identity category, and all gendered actors fall into one gender identity category or another, *all* gendered actors are ‘eligible’ to perform category transgressions. Category transgressions occur either through failing to meet normative gender expectations or otherwise invalidating

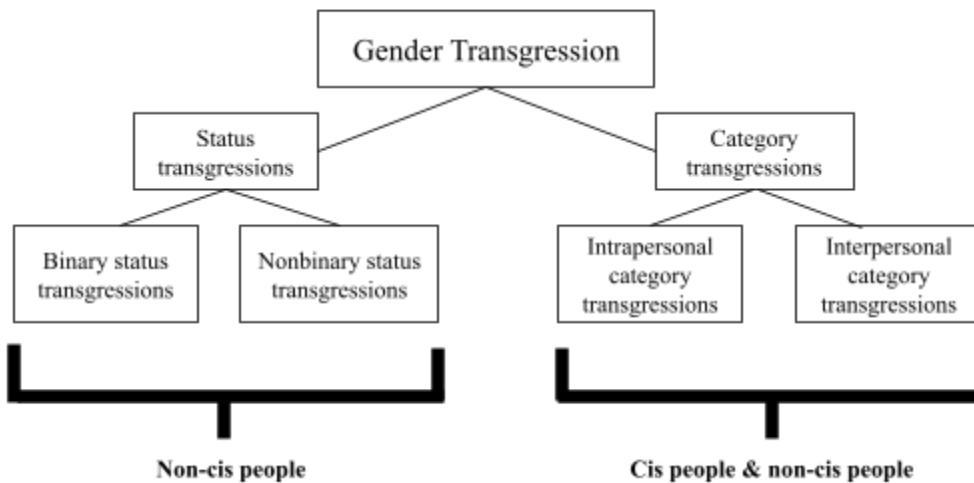
²⁵ This is by no means an exhaustive list of all possible nonbinary identities.

one's own gender identity in order to assimilate into a given social context. Further, category transgressions occur on either an intrapersonal or interpersonal level.

Intrapersonal status transgressions occur when the gendered actor fails to meet the normative expectations of their given gender identity. Because at this point in time, there exists only normative expectations for the gender categories "men" and "women," intrapersonal status transgressions are only prevalent among cis men, cis women, non-cis men, and non-cis women. My research has indicated that *all men* and *all women*, regardless of gender status, engage in intrapersonal category transgressions. Cisgender women accounted for 70.9% of the total instances of coded category transgressions among *women*. Transgender women accounted for 20.1% of the total instances of coded category transgressions among *women*. Cisgender men reported 58.2% of the total instances of coded category transgressions among *men*. Transgender men reported 41.8% of the total instances of coded category transgressions among *men*. Taken together, my analysis revealed that *cis* men and women *more* often report categorical transgression in everyday interactions than trans men and women.

Interpersonal status transgression occurs when the gendered actor strategically denies, downplays, or invalidates their gender category, which any gendered actor can do; and, so, interpersonal status transgressions are prevalent among cis men, cis women, non-cis men, non-cis women, and nonbinary people. As such, gender category transgressions are prevalent among all cis and non-cis gendered actors. See the figure below for a visual conception of the prevalence of gender transgressions among gender groups:

Figure 2.12 Gender Transgression Prevalence among Gendered Groups



Function of Gender Transgression

An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither credible nor discreditable as a thing in itself.

Erving Goffman (1963: 13)

The current framing of “gender transgressions” has largely taken the cisgender status for granted and, as such, required further clarification of *who does what kinds of gender transgressions and why*. My analysis shows that *gender transgressions* are not only common across all gendered groups, but also deeply functional in a number of instances. Gender transgressions were functional, in some regard or another, for *all* participants regardless of their gender status or category. In other words, both cis and non-cis participants relied on gender

transgressions in navigating their personal and social lives. Gender transgressions proved to be multi-functional: they were essential in aiding matters of self conception; they served to uphold, reformulate, and subvert gender categories; and they were also a primary strategy in protecting personal safety and self preservation.

The function of gender transgression is hinted at in the literature, specifically in works that look at status transgressions and *gender passing*. Although the term might suggest otherwise, gender transgressions are not inherently deviant or anti-social, and in many cases turn out to be a positive and necessary aspect of both cis and non-cis people's gendered experiences. Indeed, in a number of works about gender perception and gender passing, gender status transgressions have been referred to as "celebrated," (Kane 2006:158) "normative," (Kazyak 2012:827) 'validating,' and 'freeing' (Dozier 2005:305).

In the following section I will outline the various functions of gender transgressions. Specifically, I will explore the ways gender transgressions are crucial in constructing personal narratives around gender identity and aiding interpersonal protection. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that the function of gender transgressions is as multifarious as gender transgressions themselves.

Feeling like a Whole Person

On varying levels, *all* participants understood both the *cisgender status* and *binary gender categories* as limiting. All participants of recounted needing to perform varying combinations of status and/ or category transgressions in order to feel like a complete, dynamic

person. Gender transgressions were as functional for normatively gendered individuals as they were for those who who adhered relatively little to gender norms. In this way, gender transgressions functioned as a saving grace allowing participants to experience a multifaceted existence.

Without the aid of gender transgressions, participants felt only fleeting overlaps between their gender identity and who they “really” were. Gender transgressions created a platform by which participants felt whole and “humanized.” Consider Amoxтли, a 21 year old Xicanx femme/masc person, who explained that their status transgression of being non-cis allowed them to feel “more authentic,” or Sam, a 34 year old white cisgender woman, who shared that her category transgressions made her “feel like my true self and not a lie.” Just as Amoxтли and Sam discussed the importance of gender transgressions in feeling closer to their self-truths, Nikki, a 52 year old white transgender woman, added that her category transgressions of being a “tomboy” allowed her to experience herself fully and “just kind of live my life as *me*.”

Beyond providing a sense of authenticity, gender transgression also proved important to participants feeling like a whole person. Ollie, a 21 year old Black gender nonconforming person, put this succinctly when they stated: “To say I’m non-binary is to remind myself that I’m a full person.” Indeed, status transgressions were inherently affirming for non-cis participants, as they allowed participants to see themselves more fully.

Participants tended to discuss gender transgression as an integral aspect of their personhood that was at odds with their broader social context. As such, they often shared the wish to not have to “hide” the “full” versions of themselves. When discussing the importance of

gender transgression in feeling like a whole person, Wyatt, a 19 year old Mexican genderqueer man, explained “It’s more about *not* repressing a feeling.” In this way gender transgressions often felt necessary for participants. As Bowie, a 30 year old white cisgender man, put it, he didn’t want to have to “kill part of [himself] in order to live in society.

Because gender categories are widely understood as mutually exclusive (Lorber 1994), and because we attribute the gender of others as “... either one or the other, zero or 100 percent.” (Kessler and McKenna 1978:2), it may seem that we would similarly understand ourselves as *100 percent* man, woman, or genderqueer, etc. In actuality, however, 100 percent was rarely the case for participants of *any* gender status or category. When posed an interview question regarding the percentage in which participants actively ‘felt like’ their genders, their range of answers spanned anywhere from 3% to 200%, with the average being around 80%. Although instinctively we look for, and usually easily detect²⁶ the “100 percent” in others (Freud 1933), it appears to be a challenge when it comes to ourselves. Francis, a 67 year old white cisgender man, who reported feeling like a “man” around 3% of the time said, “I describe myself as a [cisgender man]. But I don’t, like, to buy into a huge amount of what that means to a lot of people I guess.”

It’s notable that many of the “100%” answers I did receive, came from non-cis (particularly nonbinary) participants. Beau, a 52 year old genderqueer person, enthusiastically shared that, on a scale from 0- 100 percent, they felt nonbinary *200%* of the time. Since transgender non-binary participants understand their genders as inherently fluid, perhaps they are

²⁶ However in/accurate we may be...

more easily able to feel their gender “100%” of the time compared to others who understand their binary gender categories as inherently limiting. Additionally, the majority of times that non-cis participants reported feeling less than 100 percent of their gender was directly tied to instances where they needed to strategically suppress their gender in a work, family, or social setting, which I will explore further when I discuss the functionality of gender transgressions for the purposes of self-preservation.

In many ways, gender categories proved too limiting for participants in understanding themselves as *whole people*. Lane (30, Pilipino, cisgender man) qualified his gender identity as a cisgender man by stating “[but] that’s not the whole thing.” In order to deal with this gender constraint, binary participants frequently engaged in gender category transgressions to interface with their gender in a way that was more functional for them. Francis (67, white, cisgender man) who is “tired” of putting on “macho” airs and “talking about sports,” describes his interactions with other cisgender men in this way: “I actually relate to them in a very... soft way, which may be perceived as more feminine.” In this instance, Francis used gender category transgressions to transform his manhood into something that was more functional and meaningful for him.

My analysis revealed that gender categories in-and-of themselves were only partially useful in the ways participants came to understand who they were as persons. When asked to describe their gender identities, participants frequently struggled to provide clear answers. As Luna (25, Mexican American, cisgender woman) noted, “I do identify as a woman, even though I don’t actually know what that entails.” Like most other participants, Billy, a 36 year old white cisgender man, went as far as questioning the concept of gender itself:

I never felt comfortable as identifying as anything other than a man. But every time I think about it, I'm forced to confront, 'Why do I identify as a man?; Why am I uncomfortable identifying as something else?; Why do I feel like I need to identify with a gender at all?' That sort of thing. And I don't have good answers, especially to that last one.

Gender transgressions were not just useful in participants feeling like a whole people themselves, in some cases they were also salient for recognizing humanity in others. For instance, Loren detailed the importance of perceiving gender transgression in others:

People don't seem real to me unless they have seriously fucked with gender. I don't know why, but... people who don't have a critical relationship to gender feel fake to me. They feel like... they're not really [being] themselves. I totally love some cis women and cis men who have critical relationships to their gender and their appearance— it's not just that you have to *not* be cisgender. But it's just, like, for me, something [that's necessary in order to] feel like there's [an actual] person there that I can relate to.

Ultimately, both gender status transgressions and gender category transgressions proved functional in *self*— as well as *other*— conception.

Self Preservation

Gender transgression was not only useful for the purpose of feeling whole; another common way that gender transgression proved functional was through its ability to aid in identity reformulation, personal safety, and access to resources. I refer to this particular function of gender transgression as *self preservation*. *Cis and non-cis binary* participants all reported using gender category transgressions in challenging some of the negative stereotypes that exist about their gender categories so that they may maintain social standing in a given situation.

Additionally, *all* participants reported using gender category transgressions to assimilate into

various social contexts for the purposes of personal safety and securing social and material resources. Whether they occurred for the purposes of maintaining safety, employment, reputation, or social standing, gender category transgressions proved to be self-preservative.

Prior research has documented the stereotypical belief regarding women as weak, passive, or dependent (i.e., Williams and Bennett 1975), but Luna, a 25-year-old Mexican American cisgender woman, frames her understanding of womanhood through her gender transgressions, and in the process counteracts negative stereotypes about her group, stating, “I feel like being a woman makes me a total badass...” She went on to explain, “I [see myself being able to protect myself] and being my own head of household... [and I consider myself as] being physically strong, and being able to hold my own.” Here, Luna’s category transgressions serve as both the basis through which she understands herself but also through which she challenges the limitations imposed on her binary gender identity category. Sadie, a 25-year-old white cisgender woman, similarly rejected the stereotype of women as weak or averse to manual labor. She discussed the need for gender category transgressions to counteract negative stereotypes in a previous job, where, she explained, “they would have no use for a stereotypical woman that can’t lift a thing, that doesn’t wanna get dirty, that doesn’t wanna do anything in their shop. Like I wouldn’t be useful to them...” she went on to explain:

So, I think when I worked with all men, I had this perception of, like, “I want to be treated like one of the guys”... [and] the behaviors I was doing were to show them that I could work just as hard as they could... I was covered in grease everyday when I left.

In the previous examples, both Luna and Sadie found great utility in their ability to use category transgressions to challenge negative stereotypes about women. In Luna’s case gender

transgression proved useful in establishing herself as an independent adult to others. According to Sadie, gender transgression was key in keeping—and being respected in—her job.

Cisgender men are disproportionately the perpetrators of sexual violence (Hoertel et al. 2012) this is not only known by victims, but by cis men as well. For instance, Anderson et al. (2021) found that on average 29% of cis men in college report engaging in sexual perpetration behaviors. Both cis and non-cis man-identified participants understood their gender as being associated with sexual violence; and both gendered groups went to various lengths to disassociate themselves from being perceived as sexual aggressors and ensure what Francis, a 67 year old white cisgender man, called “Respectful and clear boundaries” with women. Hiroshi, a 42 year old Japanese American cisgender man, explains that he prefers either being in solitude or the company of “women” as opposed to spending time with other cisgender men. Hiroshi cites his association of cisgender men with sexual violence as his underlying motivation in this decision, “I’ve had times when I’m hanging out with other men... other straight men, and I’ve gotten uncomfortable with the way they talk about women.” In this case, gender transgressions are functional for Hiroshi in distancing himself from the sexual violence associated with “other straight men” like himself. As Bird (1996) notes, the hegemonic social script among heterosexual men interacting with one another all but explicitly requires the sexual objectification of women; this common expectation, however, was problematic for Hiroshi, who refused to express his masculinity in this way. Hiroshi resisted participating in negative stereotypes of men as sexual aggressors in interacting with other men. Edward, a 36 year old African American cisgender man, on the other hand discussed modifying his gendered behavior in interactions with women as a tool of self preservation to maintain his social standing and resources:

We're in the age of *Me Too* and there have been heterosexual men have been treating women badly in the past, and they are getting caught now and they're losing their jobs or going to jail. So, as a heterosexual man, I have to be more careful what I say.

While cis men sought to counteract negative stereotypes in order not be “seen as a predator,” as Billy, a 36 cisgender man, put it, non-cis men often framed their desire to counteract negative stereotypes through a more empathetic and woman-focused lens. As such, non-cis participants assigned female at birth who pass as men reported taking concerted actions around those they perceived as women and children as to counteract some of the predatory stereotypes associated with masculinity. For example, those who understood that they *passed as cisgender men*, frequently reported intentionally avoiding those they perceived as women at night and in sparsely-populated public places. It's not uncommon for transgender men to take measures like crossing a street, walking a different route, or avoiding smiling and eye-contact as to not make those they perceived as women and children uncomfortable.

Grover (29, white, transgender man) understands these precautions through a unique lens since he was sometimes misperceived as a woman in the past. He recalls a time where he was walking behind a stranger he perceived as a woman in a parking lot at night and sensed that his presence was troubling, “[I was] very uncomfortable, since I was aware, and have had those feelings of not feeling safe... knowing what was going on for her was very uncomfortable for me.” Like Grover, Dylan, a 23 year old white transgender man, shared he tries “to give women more room on the sidewalk, and on streets and stuff, [especially] if it's at night.” Scott, a 32 year old white Latinx transgender man, reported similar motivations, saying “I'm aware of my behavior [around women]. So that they feel safe. I would want to make it known that I was not a threat and I will be... I value their space and their safety.”

Gender transgressions proved to be a core element of how non-cis men related to strangers they perceived as women and children. Further, gender transgressions allowed non-cis men to redesign their masculinity as non-threatening. Having had other gendered experiences perhaps gave them additional motivation for enacting these gender transgressions. As Grover stated, “The fact that I’m perceived as [a man], there’s an assumption that [preying upon women and children is] something I will be doing.” My non-cis men-identified participants were not unusual in their frequent attempts to appear non-threatening. Lee, a 27 year old Asian androgynous transgender man, summarized a common motivation to “give [women] more space.” Previous work has shown that trans men understand they “would be threatening to women at night” as well as noting a general “increase in women’s fear of them,” and as a result of this, take appropriate measures to appear benign (e.g., Dozier 2005:307). The self preservative function of these gender transgressions allowed non-cis men to reformulate their manhood to be the types of men they wanted to be.

Binary participants understood some attributes associated with their gender identities as problematic, and found gender transgressions functional in counteracting them, ultimately preserving their social standing. Although attempting to distance themselves from sexual violence was common among all participants who identified as men, they also used category transgressions to impact their working and interpersonal relationships. Billy (36, white, cisgender man), a tech worker, shared that his workplace disproportionately employs cisgender men and noted the care he puts into interacting with coworkers he perceives as women:

A lot of times, when I’m interacting... with [women] engineers... I find myself becoming really self-conscious of like, ‘Okay, am I having a gendered interaction now? Am I making this person feel less comfortable in this environment because of their gender? Am

I making unconscious assumptions or am I bringing bias to this interaction or work assignment?”

Hiroshi similarly expressed his desire to change the perception of his gender group in his job as a counselor to unhoused single mothers:

[I want to show them] ‘not all guys are out to exploit you or to take advantage of you.’ Or, ‘You can have a respectful, positive, and supportive relationship with men. If they’re being nice to your your kids, it doesn’t mean that they’re using your kids to try to get to you.’”

For both Billy and Hiroshi, category transgressions were the key to dispelling negative stereotypes about cisgender men, and ultimately allowed them approach their jobs in fuctional ways. Billy tried to counteract the notion that cisgender men create hostile work environments for women in the tech industry (see: Logel et al. 2009), while Hiroshi performed his gender category in a way that challenged the *heterosexual hostility* (Glick and Fiske 1997) associated with the normative masculine role (Connell 2005) that often makes women into sexual objects.

In the given examples we can see how category gender transgressions are helpful in identity reformulation as it pertains to counteracting negative stereotypes. Counteracting negative stereotypes is an important interactional maneuver necessary for the purposes of self preservation and maintaining social standing. I will now turn my attention to the ways in which gender transgression is useful to self preservation through practices of assimilation that increase the likelihood of personal safety and access to social and material resources.

The criteria for establishing “gender non-conformity” has been commonly understood in the literature as the *consistent, persistent, and insistent* enactment of one’s “cross-gender”

identity (see: Anton 2008). While these criteria are used exclusively to describe gender non-conformity, they are useful in thinking about the ways in which we expect gender identities to be ‘justified,’ and I suspect they are likely applicable to gender identity development *in general*— regardless of gender status or gender category. Indeed, I noted some version of consistency, persistence, and insistence, across all of my participants²⁷, with a minor, yet significant caveat.

While the majority of my participants explained *consistently* and *persistently* engaging their gender category, there was some complication in the realm of *insistence* for nonbinary and non-passing²⁸ binary participants. As Westbrook and Schilt note (2014:50), cisgender people tend experience continuity of gender classification in various social spaces, where “transgender people may be given different gender classifications by social actors depending on the type of interaction occurring in the space.” For such participants, *insisting* on their gender identity was not always a viable option if they already knew they weren’t passing in a given scenario. While a sense of consistency and persistence went unchanged, the degree to which nonbinary and non-passing binary participants externally *insisted* on their gender identity had more to do with strategically using gender transgressions to ensure self-preservation, rather than an accurate reflection of how much they truly understood themselves as inhabiting their gender identities.

²⁷ A minority of participants who were questioning their gender identity at the time of our interview did not describe consistency and persistency, as they understood themselves to be in a transitory stage of their gender identity development.

²⁸This assessment is based solely on participants’ accounts on whether or not others perceived them as their gender identity.

I considered nonbinary and non-passing binary participants' selective gender insistence as an *interpersonal category transgression* in that they were, in most cases, passively denying their gender identities in misgendering situations. Misgendering, or using gendered language to refer to someone that is inconsistent with their gender identity (see: Serano 2016), is “a covert vehicle through which gender expectations [are] communicated... to help uphold the social order” (Shuster 2017:495) that views cisgender and binary status as “a natural matter of fact” (Garfinkel 1967:123).

Denying someone their gender identity, however, is not at all evidence of the degree to which a person will actually *identify as* their gender, as Kessler and McKenna state: “...one's gender identity can be relatively independent of the gender attributions made by others.” (1978:9). Not insisting on their gender identities in misgendering situations was a strategic move that participants made to assimilate into a given social environment, maintain their emotional capacity, preserve their relationships, keep their employment, familial relationships, and/ or ensure their personal safety. The urgency of self-preservation was made clear by Grover's (29, white, transgender man) recollection of what he experienced when others invalidated his gender identity and he faced physical violence because of it: “Some of my scariest experiences happened before I [medically] transitioned and passed [as a cisgender man] and had to do with people getting angry about my gender.”

All nonbinary and non-passing binary²⁹ participants reported engaging in gender transgressions by either actively or passively denying their gender identity at some point. *Active denial* of their gender identity meant taking measures to present as a gender they did not actually identify as. The motivation for active denial was based on the understanding that being *any gender status* besides cisgender was unacceptable. Uniformly, participants' decisions to actively deny their gender identity was tied to employment and family.

Candace's (47, Hispanic, transgender woman) therapist encouraged her to share her gender identity with her school-aged daughter, but Candace chose not to, noting the "cruelty of kids these days," deciding to wait until her daughter was 18 years old. "I wanted her to have a normal childhood. Not 'Oh, look, that's the girl whose [parent is] transgender,' and being made fun of." Candace did, however, openly share her gender identity at work but quickly realized she would need to actively deny it if she wanted to keep her job: "...I came out at work and it was just ridicule. And people talking, and talking bad. So that's still kind of in the back of my mind." Like Candace, KC (67, white, questioning) actively denied his questioning gender identity around family and at work because, in his words, "Frankly it would make my life difficult and it would make [my family members'] lives difficult to have to re-evaluate how they related to me [and as far as work goes], it would lose me business." Additionally, Ajpu (35, Afro-Mestizx, gender non-conforming) understood work as an unsafe space to advocate their gender identity: "At work, I don't necessarily challenge some of the cisgender norms simply because there could be repercussions." Lazarus, a 31 year old white and Latino nonbinary person, echoed the

²⁹ All participants— and surely, all people— are tasked to pass as some gender or another (e.g., Kessler and McKenna 1978). The cisgender participants in my sample were no exception to this rule and some of them in fact did not always pass as cisgender and were frequently perceived as transgender.

sentiments presented above and also expanded on the utility of interpersonal category

transgression:

I had to play up different parts of me that weren't necessarily me to fit the mold of what people thought they were perceiving, so it would keep things even-keeled. Because I didn't want to be like, "Oh, well I'm not a woman." Depending on the situation... if you're trying to get your oil changed or return something at customer service, you don't want to create tension. I had to play up these falsehoods and kind of just go with it, and it would be very aggravating. And while I could still be a congenial person, it wasn't genuine.

Whereas actively denying gender occurred through intentionally suppressing one's gender identity, *passive denial* involved choosing to *not* correct or address misgendering when it occurred despite the participant already being out as their gender identity. Allowing misgendering to go unchallenged proved deeply troubling for participants. Indeed, misgendering has been shown to hinder one's full participation in society (McLemore 2015).

The motivation for passive denial was based on participants' understanding that the people who misgendered them either refused to see them as their gender identity, were ignorant about gender variance in general, and/ or were acting out what Sue (2010) calls microaggressions. In any case, participants understood that misgendering represented varying degrees of hostility towards people *like them*. Therefore, their decision to passively deny their gender identities was typically based on protecting their emotional capacity and personal safety. Nova, a 23 year old Latinx transgender woman, understood her passive denial as "practical", explaining:

...A lot of the time I just disregard... I don't want to say it's more trouble than it's worth, but I can't with every single person that I need to interact with in a day, go through that conversation. That's too much, that's way too exhausting... Every person I encounter, I can't be like, "Hey, by the way, I'm actually femme, in spite of what you think." ...because it'd be too much work to correct everyone, but I

would like everyone to know, anyway. Like, I wish I could put a little neon sign above me [that says] “By the way...”

On some level either correcting misgendering or enacting a category transgression by accepting it were experienced as mutually exclusive choices. At the point that misgendering occurred, participants were already oriented toward damage control— weighing the pros and cons of their “limited options” (see shuster 2017) by either asserting or suppressing their gender identities. As shuster has shown, misgendering is a form of *discursive aggression* that...

...Regulates trans people in everyday social settings and produces for them the feeling that they are not received in the ways they wish to be known, that they are made invisible, and that their self-authorship in naming and claiming a gender identity is questioned. (2017:498).

Indeed, participants frequently tuned out misgendering as an act of self preservation but this didn't mean they were unaware it was happening; misgendering ultimately took a severe toll on non-cis participants.³⁰ As Xavier (25, white, transgender man) explains,

[Being misgendered] feels like shit. It feels like everything I have done to that point to try to change the image you're going to have of me has failed. Maybe I can't do enough to my body, or I can't do enough behavior-wise to make you change your mind... It doesn't matter what [I] change with [my] hair and clothes. Like, people are gonna perceive [me] as [a woman]. That's just how it's gonna be. And that was like a crushing reality. Every time.

Unfortunately, Xavier's experience was not unique; when asked *how it feels to be misgendered*, individual non-cis participants were essentially unified in their responses, using

³⁰ Misgendering also posed threats of bodily harm and sexual violence to some of my cisgender participants who have been mistaken as transgender (specifically, those who were mistaken as transgender women); however, what I am talking about here is the emotional impact on participants that are routinely invalidated and denied their gender identities. I will discuss gender transgressions as they relate to violence in following chapter.

descriptions like “frustrating,” “upsetting,” “turmoiled,” “excruciating,” and “scary.”

Misgendering elicited such feelings in participants because they essentially understood the act as an invalidating communication (i.e., Lane, 30, Pilipino, cisgender man: “on a basic level, [misgendering is] someone not seeing you”) and dehumanizing (i.e., Cookie, 27, Latinx, queer: “It sucks, definitely. You definitely don’t feel like you’re a human being”).

It was not uncommon for participants to describe the feeling of being misgendered in visceral terms. Alex, a 23 year old transgender man, felt that being misgendered resulted in “this sinking feeling in [his] stomach”, while Beau (52, white, genderqueer) explained “[being misgendered feels] awful... It just feels worse than nails on the chalkboard. It’s almost like a body blow.” Indeed, Ava, a 21 year old white transgender woman, explained misgendering as feeling “like a stab,” and for Jackie, a 34 year old white transgender woman, being misgendered was “like taking a bullet.” Misgendering was a serious slight to participants that deeply affected them mentally, socially, and physically. Indeed, the grating impact of misgendering has been noted in the literature. For example, Dozier has previously found that being misgendered is a “constant reminder of the incongruence between social identity and internal gender identity (2005:306).

The careful balance between either choosing to correct or allowing misgendering played out on a case-by-case basis. By correcting misgendering, participants affirmed their identity, yet in that process they risked a great deal—relationships, employment, emotional capacity, and/ or personal safety. Because of the risks involved with insisting on their identities *after* they’ve been misgendered, participants commonly reported the process through which they learned to suss out who was safe to tell and who wasn’t. Lazarus, a 31 year old white and Latino nonbinary person,

explained, “I guess it’s not worth the energy to explain or expose that part of myself. And I’m not sure how much of a risk it would be depending on who it is, so I just save [sharing my gender identity] for people who I think are more worth my time.”

Additionally, participants who challenged misgendering typically found themselves in a position of having to educate others about their gender identities. Lorde recognizes this type of bridging work as a dehumanizing distraction that “is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns” (2012:113). Indeed, there is a great deal of *emotion work* (Hochschild 1979) required of misgendered participants to artificially produce so-called appropriate feelings—by way of inducing positive emotions or inhibiting negative emotions, prioritizing the perspective of (mostly cisgender) others who originally misgendered them. In the case of misgendered participants, the “appropriate” social response is to acquiesce to binary and cisnormative (and by extension, transphobic and enbyphobic) sensibilities (shuster 2017). Amoxtli, a 20 year old Xicanx femme/masc person, understood that correcting others who misgendered them was the difference between being socially accepted or rejected:

[If I were to say,] ‘Hey, those aren't my pronouns. They’re this and... [That’s] not my identity; I'm not cis.’ People would get really taken aback. And that comes [down to the difference between] people liking me or not liking me, because I came off too rudely because I corrected someone for disrespecting me.

Unfortunately, participants who attempted to challenge misgendering usually experienced obstacles that forced them to retreat back into passive denial, a phenomenon that’s been previously noted in the literature (see: shuster 2017). Amoxtli explained being invalidated when trying to share their gender identity with their parents, “[They] don’t necessarily understand my identity... even when I try to explain it to them... they’re just kind of like, ‘You have to fit into

this role and be that.” Like Amoxтли, Cookie, a 27 year old Latinx queer person, explained their desire to share their identity with their mother whose previous comments that implied she did not understand Cookie’s gender non-binary identity: “I was like, ‘You’re not ready. I can’t talk to you about this.’” Cookie further explained their frustration with coworkers who did not acknowledge their gender identity, “At some point you just get tired of talking to somebody who’s not trying to understand that it makes you uncomfortable.”

Allowing misgendering to go unchecked— which occurred frequently— spared already marginalized participants the emotional exhaustion of being tasked to educate socially-dominant others as to their “needs” and “existence” (Lorde 2012:113); however, permitting misgendering required participants to enact category transgressions and ultimately become co-conspirators in denying their personhood. This was a troubling experience for misgendered participants, as Candace, a 47 year old Hispanic transgender woman, explained: “It doesn’t feel good. If there was a pill that.. I could take [to stop misgendering], I would’ve taken it a long time ago.” Indeed, passive denial required participants to deal with the fallout effects of misgendering, which have been shown to negatively affect self-esteem, social identity, and felt authenticity (McLemore 2015).

For misgendered participants, the use of a single pronoun communicated a wealth of information about perception, authenticity, and respect. Xavier, a 25 year old white transgender man, expressed the sentiment of the majority of misgendered participants when he shared, “Someone misgendering me was like [saying], ‘Ha! I [can] see through you. You’re a girl. You’ve been lying to me the whole time, and you’re in a costume.’” Similar to Xavier’s framing of being ‘exposed,’ a number of non-cis participants understood misgendering through the lens of *gender*

failure. For example Kent, a 29 year old white transgender man, said misgendering “Feels disrespectful... and also feels at the worst of times, like a failure; like you haven't made yourself clear enough.” Levi, a 25 year old white transgender man, explained the feeling of failure changes an interaction “You know, if you feel good about yourself, and then you get misgendered it's kind of like this feeling of defeat, I would say defeat and invalidation.” Pearl, a 45 year old white transgender woman, named a reflection commonly shared by non-cis participants who were misgendered when she explained her thought process immediately following misgendering was “Okay, *what did I do wrong?*”

Because some participants’ experiences with misgendering was so constant and overwhelming, category transgressions functioned as an act of self-preservation that at least gave them the option of salvaging the situation and retaining their memberships in their families, schools, and/ or places of work. Misgendered participants ultimately found themselves in a lose-lose scenario, where passive denial often proved to be the lesser of two evils. In this way, gender identity transgressions allowed misgendered participants the potential of assimilation to cisnormative expectations and functioning in situations and around others who exhibited hostility towards them.

Conclusion

“Gender transgression” is not a simple hypernym that refers only to non-cisgender people. To the contrary, as I have demonstrated, gender transgression is a useful and complex concept that finds purchase with *every* gendered actor. The social construction of our gender

system has been well-documented. There exist a multitude of inconsistencies, contradictions, and impossibilities in our cisnormative gender system; and gender transgressions help us make sense of our varied gendered experiences in the face of these limitations.

Building out the concept of *gender transgression* is essential to the sociological study of gender. By carefully distinguishing aspects of gender transgression such as typology, prevalence, and function, we can begin to investigate the underlying mechanics of our hierarchical gender structure. Gender transgressions are not all the same; there are different types of gender transgression because there are different gendered rules that structure our social lives. Because we are all subjected to gendered rules based on social constructions that make them impossible to truly uphold, gender transgressions are ubiquitous. In other words, anywhere a gendered rule appears, gender transgression is certain to follow. Gender transgression, however, should not be understood as inherently negative or dysfunctional. To the contrary, as I have shown, gender transgressions are highly essential for gendered actors as they navigate the social world.

Despite their complexity, universality, and functionality, the concept of gender transgression is generally disdained and has become a common scapegoat in attempts to justify gendered violence and marginalization (Bettcher 2007; Pascoe 2012; Lee and Kwan 2014; Westbrook and Schilt 2014; James et al. 2016). Gender transgressions are monitored and punished through the act of gender policing which ranges from interpersonal (e.g., heightened instances of familial abuse of non-cis youth) to institutional (e.g., anti-trans bathroom bills). A comprehensive understanding of gender transgression is necessary for analyzing gender policing, which plays a key role in structuring social interaction in this society.

Chapter 3: Gender Policing

There's a part of me that really, really wants to pass [as a cis woman]. It's like, if I did, then I wouldn't have to deal with this shit because you know... there wouldn't be ambiguity; and maybe it's my fault because I am visibly trans.

Jos (26 years old, white, questioning)

Gender is a master status, one of the fundamental ways we perceive others in this society. Gender categories and statuses are socially constructed and regulated. Breaching the social gender contract is a widespread occurrence and *everyone* does it. Gender rule-breaking is as complex as it is ubiquitous; this is because gender rules are broken in significantly different ways and for significantly different reasons, depending on the so-called *transgressor's* gender status and gender category. I use the term “gender transgression” to refer to the social phenomenon of breaking gender rules. I've noted that gender transgressions frequently take form in quotidian, unremarkable ways; however, this doesn't mean they exist without consequence.

A key finding my analysis revealed is that as long as there are gendered actors, there will be gender rules. I also found that as long as there are gender rules, there will be *gender transgressions*. Keeping on theme... as long as there are gender transgressions, there will be *gender policing*, which leads us to our primary focus of interest in this chapter.

Gender policing has been heavily documented in the literature but it has not yet been analyzed with an express focus as *a tool to regulate gender transgressions* in the distinct way I have conceptualized them. My objective in this chapter is threefold: I will (i) outline the conceptual basis for gender policing; I will then (ii) identify the various interactional practices in which gender policing takes place; and finally, I will (iii) present an analysis of *who* engages in gender policing, with a specific focus on *gendered* gender policing.

The Logic of Gender Policing

If you lead a certain way of life and you're presented with something that shows there's more than just one way of living, well, then, I guess that can be disturbing to people.

Lee, a 27 year old Asian androgynous transgender man

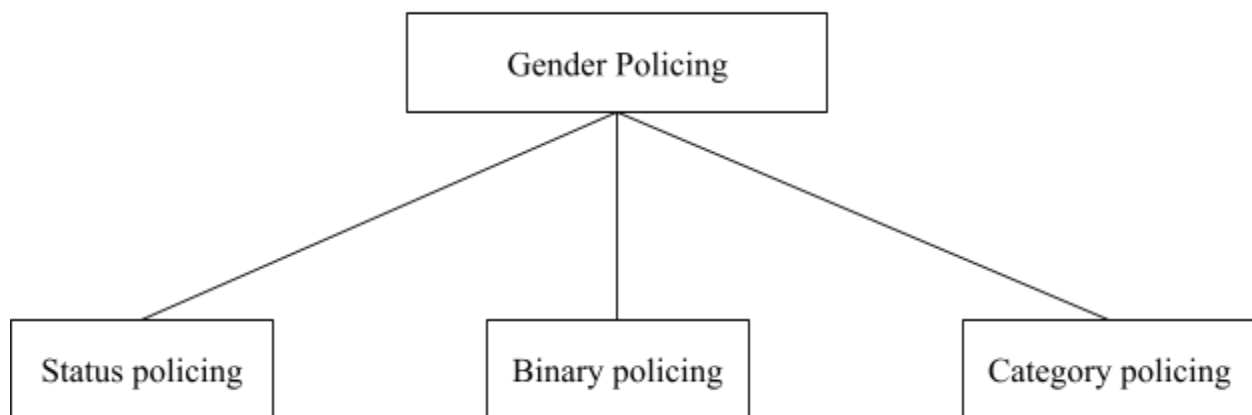
Gender transgressions exist as a response to a gender system that is unable to fully accommodate the range of identities and experiences of the gendered actors it holds. As I have shown, gender transgressions are *necessary* and *functional* for all gendered actors to experience self-recognition and/ or practice self-preservation. Despite their namesake, *gender transgressions* are not always treated as deviant. Not all gender transgressions are policed because they are not all framed negatively. For instance, in many cases *interpersonal gender category transgressions* require the gendered actor to perform inauthentic gender normativity or assimilate to a given gendered environment, and actually tends to reward those who comply. The logic of gender policing is based on upholding key elements of the hierarchical gender structure³¹, and some kinds of transgressions threaten that structure more than others. Therefore, some kinds of transgressions are policed more severely and more often than others.

Gender policing occurs both interactionally and institutionally to maintain a hierarchical system of social control. The major scaffolding elements of the gender structure in this society are *cisnormativity* and *hegemonic masculinity*. Cisnormativity is the expectation that one's *binary* sex assignment will correspond with one of two mutually exclusive genders, and that

³¹ It should be noted that my use of *gender policing* is related to— but very much distinct from— what Walby (2009) calls *gender regimes*, which refers to the public and private patriarchal subordination of cisgender women through institutional harassment and exclusion, as well as interpersonal physical, sexual, and domestic violence. Gender regimes are not a response to *gender transgression* like gender policing is, but occur precisely to reinforce the hierarchical (cis-binary) gender order which values cismasculinity over cisfemininity (as well as all other non-cismasculine gendered forms).

one's consequential gender identity will be normatively masculine or normatively feminine. Cisnormativity is based on normative binary expectations about *gender status*. Hegemonic masculinity legitimizes the current gender order by prioritizing culturally-valued (white and cis)masculine traits over all other gendered attributes. Hegemonic masculinity is based on normative expectations about *gender category*. The hierarchical gender system protects itself through gender policing. Thus, the conceptual objective of gender policing is to protect the *three essential elements* of our current gender order: (i) the cisgender status, (ii) the gender binary, and (iii) hierarchical normative categorical attributes (i.e., hegemonic masculinity and emphasized/hegemonic femininity). As such, these pillars of the gender order are protected by way of the following three types of gender policing: (i) status policing, (ii) binary policing, and (iii) category policing. See figure 3.1 below for a typology of gender policing:

Figure 3.1 Typology of Gender Policing



Gender policing protects the cisgender status

Cisnormativity and cisgenderism (Lennon and Mistler 2014) play a critical role in maintaining the current gender order. Gender policing makes the cisgender status normative through delegitimizing non-cis identities via invalidation or outright erasure, ultimately promoting the *binary sexed-assigned body* as the definitive “truth” about what gender *really is*. Consequently, any instances of (binary or nonbinary) gender status transgressions that deviate from the binary sex-assigned body will be subject to *status policing*.

Gender status transgressions are policed interactionally *and institutionally* as well. A brief look into enduring anti-transgender legislative efforts and policies clearly shows the insitutional *impossibility* (à la Collier and Daniel 2019) of the non-cis gender status. For example as of March 2021 The Human Rights Campaign claimed 2021 a record breaking year for anti-transgender legislation (Ronan, 2021). Unfortunately, *structural* transphobia and enbyphobia (see: James et al. 2016) are not the only way non-cis people are relegated in social life; my participants recounted numerous *interactional* accounts in which their gender status transgressions were met with delegitimization, invalidation, or outright erasure.

One of the key ways non-cis people are made marginal in social interactions is through the interactional denial of their gender statuses and/ or categories. In particular, questioning the legitimacy of trans and/or nonbinary people proved to be a significant way that non-cis participants felt restricted and diminished. For instance, Aaron, a 31 year old white nonbinary person, describes their reaction to the constant invalidation they experience:

If I’m out in public, I just don’t [correct those who misgender me]. It just doesn’t seem worth it. Because, to my understanding, so few people have even heard of [nonbinary as a gender identity], or consider it a real thing if they have heard of it.”

Whereas Aaron discussed the way strangers made their gender status and category invisible and illegitimate in everyday interactions, Amoxtli, a 20 year old Xicanx femme/masc person,

explained how their identity is erased by those who they know personally and who are aware of their non-cis status and nonbinary identity:

If I'm around a group of cis women, and we're out and about, they'll refer to us all as "women." So I'm just like, "Okay, you've just erased my entire identity." I'm very vocal about all my identities. That is, like, one thing that I am very vocal about, but it still happens. And it's very exhausting for me to be like, "Hey, you know..." 'Cause I'm [correcting them] often, and I don't think I should have to be.

Regardless of whether participants knew those who misgendered them personally or not, they tended to feel as though being taken seriously as their gender was out of their control. Alex, a 23 year old Mexican American transgender man, shared that despite "Work[ing] so hard to finally achieve [his] happiness," he finds himself often defeated when he is "remind[ed by others], 'Hey, you're not really [a man], you're whatever you were defined at birth!'" As Morgan, a 23 year old white trans-masculine nonbinary person, mused, "It's really bizarre, it's like, people sort of look at you make a snap judgment about your gender, and then nothing you can do will change their mind." To Morgan's point, Anastasia (75, white, transgender woman) explained that "[Others] see what they expect to see," referring to the ways gender attribution tends to be fixed in the eyes of the beholder (Kessler and McKenna 1978).

Some participants like Dominic (25, white, transgender man) and Leon (38, white, transgender man) discussed the ways their identities—which may have previously been treated as legitimate, if they were passing as cis men, became quickly invalidated once others learned of their non-cis status. As Dominic explained,

It doesn't work out well with cis women when they realize, or when I disclose to them, that I'm trans. I don't feel like I'm always treated the same as their cis guy friends. At that point it's more of like, "Oh, you're a cute little trans guy" type of thing. I don't feel like I'm always seen the same [as cisgender men]... They can treat you more like one of their girlfriends instead of one of their guy friends. Like, they don't interact [with cisgender men] the same way.

Leon explained that he doesn't "like people [he's] going to meet to find out [he's not cis] before they meet [him] because they tend to develop opinions and confirmation bias." Instead, he likes to "be the one to tell people [that he is a transgender man,] and will wait until [he] feel[s] like they have a fully established idea of [him] in their head before [he] tell[s] them." Like Dominic, Leon reported being treated differently once people learned of his non-cis status. Unfortunately, the difference in treatment and invalidation these participants experienced as soon as they were known to be non-cis was palpable; as Leon explained, "I can always tell if somebody knows [I'm not cis] beforehand, and I've never been wrong about it."

It was not uncommon for non-cis participants to report sensing how others interpreted their gender statuses. Just as Dominic and Leon could tell whether others knew they were non-cis men, Marie, a 60 year old white transgender woman, recounted a time when a "random" cisgender woman engaged her at the sinks of a public restroom to compliment her hair, "I don't think this woman read me [as non-cis]... there was not a hint of anything in her behavior that she thought of me as anything other than another [cisgender] woman." The experiences of Dominic, Leon, and Marie show that part of the ways non-cis participants experience status policing is through its notable absence.

Constantly experiencing gender denial and erasure led a number of participants to feel that they needed to take action they may have not otherwise taken in order to validate their gendered realities. Grover, a 29 year old white transgender man, attributes his normative masculinity as a direct result of the status policing he experienced:

I had so much pushback.. and I had to be tenacious [in my self-validation]... and insisting I be treated as a man socially ended up solidifying a more traditional gender identity that I never expected to have. Having to claim that space [in order] to have it respected, made me feel like there wasn't a lot of flexibility in terms of gender, since [my gender fluidity wasn't] respected. Having to adamantly claim

[the validity of my gender] led to a more rigid identity, as very-much-so *a man*.

Jaume, a 29 year old white and Hispanic trans person, reported a similar reaction to status policing as Grover, when he shared:

To a certain extent, my choices around medical interventions have been partly motivated by [having my gender invalidated]. For example, before I took hormones, people would constantly misgender me. And at the time, I did not feel, like, super motivated internally to take hormones. But, I felt like the world just kept not seeing me; and there was something about taking hormones that [made me] more intelligible as a trans person to others.

Due to status policing, both Grover and Jaume reported actions that they may not have taken if they were validated initially. Beau, a 52 year old genderqueer person, empathized with the hardships of invalidation and described the pressure to legitimize one's gender in the eyes of others as a "trap," where the non-cis gendered actor must make gender compromises in order to be treated as valid:

It's funny, I struggle with [being validated as genderqueer by others]. It's funny, because it's like, "What would mark me as more [visibly genderqueer?]. . . should I wear more manly clothes?" But then it's like, "Wait, am I falling into a different trap here?!"

Ultimately, a number of non-cis participants reported feeling that their best chance of escaping the invalidation of status policing was to find refuge in the company of others with similar experiences. Anastasia, a 75 year old white transgender woman, spoke about her high motivation to meet other non-cis people, and the important role her community played in quelling the isolation and invalidation she experienced as a result of status policing, "I wanted to do something [to meet other non-cis people], because when you meet another from your group it makes it more real, and you realize you're not alone in the world." Similarly, Ava, a 21 year old transgender woman, explained feeling "safer" around other non-cis people in the following way,

Simply because it's less likely that a transgender person is transphobic, compared to a cis person; and that's just how it is. Because transgender people *are transgender*, they believe they exist. They're not these [cis] people who think "Oh, this can't exist!"

The cisgender status is policed and protected in such a way that non-cis participants (regardless if they are binary or nonbinary) report various degrees of gender denial, invalidation, and erasure of their non-cis status in their everyday interactions. Just because gender policing has a logic to it, though, does not mean it's always *logical*. As it relates to protecting the cisgender status, some of the major contradictions in status policing take place where transgressions are acceptable for cis people but not for non-cis people; where non-cis people are given unintended gender affirmations; where cis people report being mistaken as non-cis and become targets of transphobic policing; and where *passing* allows non-cis people access to the validation, safety, and respect they would have otherwise been deprived of had their non-cis status been known.

When it comes to status policing, the actual content of gender transgressions matter much less than *who* does them. Many participants discussed the various ways in which the cisgender status remains largely unquestioned for cisgender people, despite their categorical transgressions. In other words, there were many reports where categorical gender transgressions were more or less acceptable so long as they were 'done' by cisgender people and did not threaten the cisgender status by indicating a status gender transgression.

In this way, participants explained numerous instances where they *knew* that categorical transgressions did not necessarily equate to status transgressions. For example Axel, a 58 year old white transgender man, explained that even though "effeminate gay [men]" engage in categorical transgressions, he "still view[s] them as [cisgender] men, just with effeminate traits." To Axel's point, Erich, a 64 year old white cisgender man, shared that even though he "can be quite a flamer" people know he's a cisgender man everywhere he goes.

In discussing his categorical transgressions, Edward, a 36 year old cisgender man, explained that “even though [he has] some feminine aspects” such as “being caring...liking animals... and being creative... doesn't mean [he’s] a woman” Similarly, Lucy, a 36 year old Latina cisgender woman, shared that despite “only” feeling like a woman “50% of the time,” doesn’t mean she “feel[s] like a man.” Other cisgender participants like Gael (20, Latinx, man) and Yuri (24, white Asian, woman) discussed the ways they maintained their normative gender status despite their gender transgressions. Although Yuri did share that she questioned her category and status at one point, due to “hav[ing] issues with some gender-related things,” she ultimately decided “woman” and “cis” were “the most useful labels” for her. Gael attributes his maintenance of a cisgender status as a matter of “confidence,” stating:

I'm confident enough to embrace things that aren't masculine, just knowing that if not everything I do is considered masculine by what others perceive, I'm still confident enough in my gender identity [as a cisgender man], and I don't feel like that part of my self is being lost [by being unmasculine]... or that my gender identity is gonna change or be under attack.

All of my cisgender participants engaged in categorical transgressions and, despite that, *all* of them also managed to retain their cisgender status. I will later discuss the ways these participants may be subject to *gender category policing* on account of their transgressing normative categorical attributes, however, in the logic of status policing, these participants remained unimplicated. This phenomena is not lost on non-cis participants. Jaume, a 29 year old white and Hispanic trans person, was particularly attuned to the ways cisgender people are protected from certain kinds of gender policing when he noted:

Yeah, cis people might have traits... or expressions of their gender that don’t fall within the very stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine realms, but it might not feel as big of a deal because it doesn’t question that they’re ultimately a [cisgender] man or a [cisgender] woman.

Because their gender status insulates cisgender people from one of the major “branches” of gender policing, they sometimes reported taking more liberties in categorical transgression than their non-cisgender counterparts. For instance Francis, a 67 year old white cisgender man, proudly shared that he enjoys “wear[ing] flowery shirts” and other “non-prototypical” masculine clothing. Unlike Francis, Kent, a 29 year old white transgender man, explained the way in which his relationship to clothing is entirely tempered by status policing:

I dress and present masculine; and something that I'm very slowly figuring out is... like a floral print shirt, where a cis guy might feel totally comfortable wearing a floral print shirt— I'm still kind of iffy on it. Because I feel like I need these [masculine] identifiers to show that I'm a man. So I'm gonna wear baggy gym shorts and sneakers and look like a good old Indiana white boy... And I've been on testosterone for a while, and now that I get misgendered almost never... now that I'm [passing as a cisgender man] more... I think I'm slowly coming back to being like, “Oh, *this* is my style.” And my style is a little softer, and less cargo shorts and khakis.

In order to avoid status policing, Kent felt obligated to dress in a way that defied his personal tastes in clothing. Like Kent, Gus, a 24 year old Afro Latinx transgender man, also understood that category transgressions seemed more acceptable when done by those thought to be cisgender. However, Gus was not as willing to deny the fullness of his gender expression to avoid status policing. Despite the consequences of his category transgressions, Gus stated he was “open to [clothes] that are more provocative, more showy, and maybe colorful,” and he’s “not gonna wear a grey shirt and khaki pants just because it helps [him] pass better.” These instances illustrate the way that one of the major logics of gender policing is the protection of the cisgender status; when it comes to status policing, it’s not about the floral shirt— it’s about the *gender status* of whoever happens to be wearing it.

The logic of status policing ensures the protections of those who are cisgender. Because determining gender status requires the knowledge of sex assignment and gender category and,

because strangers rarely— if ever— have access to that information, our social interactions with unknown others are nearly all based on an assumption of gender status. In this way, those who *pass* (or, those who are thought to be cisgender) are afforded social privilege of which others *who do not pass* (as cisgender) find themselves ineligible (Billard 2019).

Non-cis participants who passed as cis reported experiences with others that were largely free from the more extreme forms of violent/ harassing status policing, *so long as they were thought to be cis*. For instance, a number of transgender participants discussed being treated as cisgender by others. Anastasia, a 75 year old white, transgender woman, reported that she passes “well enough that people normally treat [her] as a [cisgender] woman when [she’s] dressed as a woman.” Similarly, Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman) explained that her employer has “absolutely no idea” that she is not cis and recently asked Chloe if she “had been in a sorority.” Dominic (25, white, transgender man) shared that when it came to interacting with strangers, there was “no more doubt” that he was cisgender; and that he doesn’t “think they realize that [he’s] trans,” because “they just see [a cisgender man] at this point.” Leon (38, white, transgender man) further explained that his experience of passing as cisgender extended to his interactions with medical professionals and other non-cis people:

I'm just a generic [cis passing] white guy now... At this point, it's really rare for even another trans person to be able to spot me, or a doctor. Like, I was in front of two doctors with my shirt off recently, and I have scars on my chest and they still did not know.

It must be noted that *passing* does not imply anything other than one’s membership within the cisgender status. In other words, that one “passes” as cisgender conveys nothing about their adherence to or transgression of normative categorical attributes. In fact, a number of non-cis participants shared reflections of times when despite others perceiving their categorical

transgressions, they ultimately passed a cisgender members of their given gender categories.

Voice and speech are one of the primary ways that we perceive gender in others (Whiteside 1998). Indeed, a number of non-cis participants discussed the role that the sound of their voice or speech played in passing. Although non-cis participants largely concluded that voice and speech can be a critical aspect in being taken as cisgender or not, they also noted a number of instances where their vocal-based category transgressions did hold any implications for the perception of their gender status. For instance Marie (60, white, transgender woman) and Kent (29, white, transgender man) both recounted instances where others took them as cisgender people despite their categorical transgressions of being a woman with a “deeper voice” and a man with a “higher voice”, respectively. Marie said of others who have momentarily misgendered her over the phone are apologetic when corrected. Marie also said she knows she is being taken as cisgender in those instances because it’s clear those she’s talking to “are okay with the fact that [she is] a [cisgender] woman with a deep voice.” Kent discussed similar experiences when he’s been misgendered on account of his voice and that, once corrected, those who misgender him are “sorry” and might do the emotional labor of making an “awkward joke” to ease any tensions. Nikki, a 52 year old white transgender woman, explained that she’s experienced these types of unintended cisgender affirmations before and has, at times, been playful in response to them:

There are times that I had to have a good sense of humor with it. There was a time I pulled up to a drive-through [intercom] and ordered food. I drove up the window, and the lady at the window— without having looked over at me— said, “That’ll be this much, sir.” And at that point, she turned and looked, and saw me and went, “Oh, *ma’am*! I’m so sorry. I’ve been doing that all day.” And so my response to her was, “What? You had a drive-through full of trans women with voice issues all day?” And she looked at me like, “Huh?”

Like Nikki, Gus (24, Afro Latinx, transgender man) recounted a time where he engaged a

stranger's moment of confusion regarding his categorical transgression, only to be taken as cisgender in the end. In Gus's case, this interaction revolved around the "traditionally feminine" name on his identification (which also included an "F" gender marker):

If I have to, like, hand my ID off to somebody, they'll look at it and become [confused]... When I got blood work done recently, the lady was like, "*This* is your name?" and I was like, "Yep, *that's* my name!" And she's like, "Your parents named you *this*?" and I said "Yes, my parents named me *that*." And she was like "That's a weird name for a boy" and I was like, "Yep, it really is, thanks..."

As these examples show, it was not uncommon for non-cisgender participants to receive unintended cisgender validation from unknowing others. Non-cis participants recounted numerous times where others may have been unsure of their gender categories *at first* (or detected some vocal or name-based category transgression), but upon deciding that these non-cis participants were "really" cisgender, the interaction became much more apologetic and respectful. For instance Hunter (36, transgender man) explained, "There's more of an apology behind the eyes once they perceive [cisness]. Whereas, before [passing as a cisgender man], it was more of, like, a distaste... Almost instantly. And now, they're always embarrassed afterwards."

That passing participants were not immediately met with status policing in an interaction did not mean they weren't ultimately subjected to it, though. *Passing* does not necessarily make a non-cis person safer from status policing, and in some cases it can put non-cis people in a dangerous position should their gender status become known (Billard 2019).

Once cisness is "determined," the prospect of being seen as non-cis potentially remains, and it becomes another sort of subtle terror in and of itself. After all, the logic of status policing is to target anyone who is either confirmed or *perceived* to be non-cis, and it runs in the background of every social interaction. And although non-cis people are the intended targets of this type of

policing, they are not necessarily the *only* ones who have experienced it. Indeed, there were numerous instances among my participants where *cisgender* individuals were perceived as non-cis by others and faced subsequent harassment. For instance, Aly May (23, Black, cisgender woman) said that “a lot of people think I’m transgender, because I wear a lot of makeup and I’m really curvy.” She shared a number of interactions where others did not recognize her cisgender status and observed that “Men get upset because they think I’m trans.” Aly May recounted the following experience with status policing:

It’s usually pretty violent. And it’s usually, like, men. Men out on the street saying, “Oh, *that’s a man!*” You know, they yell that. Or another time somebody got mad at me. He was with his friends, and they were all like “That’s a man! That’s a man!” and he was like “I’ll come beat your ass right now!”

Similarly, Red (34, white, cisgender woman) shared that she is often mistaken as non-cis and that it is not unusual for others to perceive her as a transgender woman. Red explained “The level of hostility shoots up when [she’s perceived as non-cis] and [she] just [doesn’t] feel comfortable...” Like Aly May, Red’s status policing was ironically based on her *categorical adherence* and stereotypical feminine aesthetic:

I almost never get called a “man” [in a transphobic way] when I’m wearing pants; but when I wear a dress or skirt, I get called a “man” a lot more. When my hair was dyed pink, I got called a “man” all the time. It’s just really weird that the more stereotypically feminine things I do, the more I get called a “man.”

Just as Aly May was physically threatened because others thought she was a transgender woman, Red also recounted an unfortunate instance where she was subjected to physical status policing in a public restroom:

I was about to go into the stall of the ladies’ room in the library and the janitor put her hand in the stall door so I couldn’t close it and she told me it was the “women’s room.” I told her “I am a woman,” and just pushed it closed. She sounded very scared, but the ironic thing was that *there was an actual man* in the bathroom at that time extracting a homeless woman from a stall. It was kind of

weird that *I* was the target when there was a *straight up man* in there. It was just kind of shitty, so I cried afterwards in the library in a quiet space. I felt really vulnerable and really sad.

As I have shown, the logic of gender status policing protects cisness through a number of strategies that effectively deny the existence and legitimacy— or compromise the safety— of anyone thought to be non-cisgender, *regardless if they actually are or not*. Questioning the validity of non-cis gendered realities is key in privileging the cisgender status over all others. See table 3.2 for an overview of gender status policing:

Table 3.2 The Logic of Gender Status Policing

	Response to:	Protects:	Target:
Status policing	All status transgressions	The cisgender status	All non-cis people

In essence, the logic of status policing is based on the protection of the cisgender status through targeting those thought to be non-cisgender. As I have demonstrated, status policing is enforced both institutionally and interactionally. *Gender policing* does not only protect cisness, though, it is also designed to solidify the gender binary and normative categorical attributes as hegemonic. In the following sections I will explore the logics of *gender binary policing* and *gender category policing*.

Gender policing protects the gender binary

The current gender order relies heavily on the hierarchical gender binary, which includes *men* and *women* to the exclusion of all others. The gender binary, like the cisgender status, is

protected by gender policing. Gender policing protects the gender binary via enbyphobia which claims there only exists *men* and *women*. The gender binary is made normative through delegitimizing nonbinary identities through invalidation or outright erasure. Any *nonbinary gender status transgression*, then, will be subject to *binary policing*.

One of the primary ways nonbinary status transgressions are policed is through simultaneously invisibilizing nonbinary identities and insisting that the only legitimate gender options are *man* or *woman*. As Aaron, a 31 year old white nonbinary person, explained “It’s clear that there’s two camps that you are supposed to fall into.” Dealing with a society and others that are, as Cookie (27, Latinx, queer) described, “So locked onto the gender binary” proves challenging and time-consuming for nonbinary participants. Amoxtli (20, femme-masc) echoed Cookie’s assessment of the endurance of the gender binary when they said “I feel like people are just socialized a certain way that they really believe in this gender binary.” Indeed, Wyatt, a 19 year old Mexican genderqueer person, explained that “A lot of people don’t even know [nonbinary people] exist, or just think it’s [binary] cis or trans.” Even though KC was questioning his gender identity at the time of our interview, he still insisted on the gender binary as the only viable option for gender identity, stating “Well I think I’m old enough— I’m 67— I’m old enough and was raised with two sexes. There were boys and girls that turned into men and women. I am of the time where either you were a boy or girl, *period*.”

Despite her binary gender status, Nikki, a 52 year old white transgender woman, shared that she did not think she possessed “the spoons” nor “the strength” she imagined necessary for nonbinary people to deal with “all of the work” of “explain[ing] yourself to others and struggling just to be who you are, to live an authentic nonbinary identity.” Ollie, a 21 year old Black gender nonconforming person, confirmed Nikki’s conceptualization of navigating the social world as a

nonbinary person as laborious. Ollie stated they “don't want to conflict-mediate” the “gender meltdowns” of others who have responded “antagonistic[ally]” to learning that Ollie is nonbinary. Ollie went on to share, “I have to kind of let it go... I have totally vowed to never do that labor ever again.”

Some participants discussed the ways they experienced others' inability to think and interact outside of the gender binary. For instance, Max, a 27 year old white person who does not identify as any gender, explained “To [others], even though I don't identify [as any gender], once they find out I'm not a man, they [automatically] think I'm a woman.” Similarly, Jaume, a 29 year old white and Hispanic trans person, described the invisibilization of his nonbinary identity:

It's kind of like an either-or, and there isn't another option. And so I think that if they're not seeing me as [a cis woman] anymore, then they're just seeing me as a cis man because they can't imagine... Or most people can't imagine that there are other options.

The nearly constant gender policing nonbinary participants reported in everyday interactions led the majority of them to give up on the expectation to be taken seriously by binary people. In addition to the erasure of nonbinary identities, some participants also discussed the nonbinary hostility they either faced, witnessed, or personally held. Nonbinary status transgressions were policed by others from *all* binary gender groups. In other words, both cis *and non-cis* men and women attempted to police the gender of nonbinary individuals. Amoxtli (20, Xicanx, femme-masc) captured this phenomena when they shared:

Mostly I feel like [my nonbinary identity] becomes an invisible thing. Because I've even had binary trans folks very much erase me, and very much not include me in conversations [about non-cis matters]. So I'm like, “I don't fit in there, I don't fit in there.”

Nonbinaryness was often treated with animosity from both cis and non-cis

men and women. A number of participants even framed nonbinary identities as a “trend” associated with young people. For instance Axel, a 58 year old white transgender man, struggled to reconcile his insistence of the gender binary with the existence of nonbinary people:

In my mind it's like, okay, you're [a man] or [a woman]. And it's not that I'm not trying to dismiss [nonbinary people] it's just because, like I said, I am a little more conservative... or maybe old fashioned in my views... But I still believe there's masculine or feminine. Like, you're either masculine or feminine, you're either [a man] or [a woman]. *Not necessarily based on your sex organs*, but you're either [a man] or [a woman]. So it's hard for me to completely grasp that... I would just feel uncomfortable. Because... I don't want to say it, because they're human beings just like everybody else... But to me [being nonbinary is] not within my worldview as “normal”... I don't want to dismiss nonbinary people, but to me, it's more, like, maybe a trend.

Others framed their understanding of nonbinayness as superfluous, indulgent, or privileged. For example, Beau (52, white, genderqueer) explained the policing they experienced from their binary friends who had become frustrated with Beau’s identity and use of they/ them pronouns:

I’ve even had a couple friends say I “should just get over it. Either transition [as a transgender man] or just be a woman!” There’s a sense of... it annoys people when they can’t get they/ them pronouns right. Or, [others have asked me] “When are you going to get over [being nonbinary]?”

Aaron (31, white, nonbinary) expressed self-consciousness about expecting respect as a nonbinary person. They noted that they would anticipate others being able to accomodate a binary non-cis identity, but they felt hesitant to expect to be seen as a non-cis *nonbinary* person:

It feels unnecessary, unproductive, and possibly a bit self-indulgent— as problematic as that sounds— to be like, “I need you to understand my gender identity.” Because it’s not even just [others] not labeling me correctly. It’s that if they don’t know what nonbinary is... then that’s a whole other level of conversation... For example, if I were a trans man, *they know what a man is*. They have their understanding of what a man is. So all they need to work on is changing the label that they use for me internally, and the language they use about me. Whereas, if I’m saying I’m a new thing that they’ve not heard of, that’s an

extra level of consciousness change, which seems, like, not appropriate for most situations.

Indeed, Red, a 34 year old cisgender woman, seemed to corroborate Aaron's concern of self-indulgence when she said:

I think that there is some level of privilege in expecting everyone to get your pronoun [right] immediately and not having any sympathy that people have other things going on. I think that boils down to wealthy college kids, and it gets annoying and it really pisses me off. Since that annoys me so much, I'm not going to throw a fit about somebody misgendering me. I know pronouns are important, but some people make it into a really big thing that comes from being used to getting what they want from the world.

Both Cookie (27, Latinx, queer) and Mari (37, mixed Latinx, nonbinary) sensed that their nonbinary gender identities were seen by others as self-indulgent, and had their identities brought up at seemingly inappropriate times during conflicts. For Cookie, this came up in an argument with a family member who, in the heat of the exchange, directed the topic of discussion to Cookie's gender:

And then she threw in my identity, she [accused me of] 'trying to change the way people view me, and their language, and she said that I had a control issue. The way she attacked me you could tell was about my [nonbinary] identity.

Mari also reported feeling like her nonbinary identity was factor in how she was treated during a conflict at work. For Mari, this happened when her co-worker threatened her with a knife in the office and Mari reported the incident to her supervisor. Mari recalled that her supervisor did not treat her complaint with the level of urgency most would expect if their co-worker threatened them at work:

[My supervisor's response] was all about gaslighting me, and I just remember thinking, like, you know... [my supervisor is] not taking me seriously. And I felt like [my nonbinary gender] was part of it. [It was as though my supervisor was saying,] "Oh, this is just [Mari] being some dramatic [nonbinary person]." You know, "First she decides that we all have to call her fucking 'queen,' and now she's making up this... Now she's all upset about this situation"

Others like Liliana, a 54 year old Hispanic transgender woman, sensed the general animosity directed at those who don't adhere to the gender binary. She recalled tension at work when one of her cisgender coworkers became visibly upset upon learning the office would be increasing gender inclusion efforts to include all-gender restrooms: "At work, they brought in gender neutral bathrooms and one of the [cisgender] guys said 'How many times do I have to say that I'm a man?!' So that was a really uncomfortable moment."

Binary policing protects the hierarchical gender binary by addressing nonbinary gender transgressions through invisibilizing the people who do them or— when that's not possible— delegitimizing their identities. Denying the possibility of nonbinary realities and experiences is key in privileging those who identify as *men* and those who identify as *women* over all others (Barbee and Schrock 2019). See table 3.3 for an overview of gender binary policing:

Table 3.3 The Logic of Gender Binary Policing

	Response to:	Protects:	Target:
Binary policing	Nonbinary status transgressions	The gender binary	All nonbinary people

The logic of binary policing is based on the protection of the hierarchical gender binary through targeting those who don't fit into it because they are nonbinary. Binary policing is enforced institutionally through binary gender markers on state-issued identification, binary restrooms, and other binarily gendered spaces, etc. As I have demonstrated, binary policing is also enforced interactionally through interpersonal invalidation and enbyphobia. I have shown the way gender

policing protects both cisness and the binary. I will now turn my attention to the ways that gender policing is designed to keep normative categorical attributes in place.

Gender policing protects normative categorical attributes

All binary participants reported engaging in intrapersonal category transgressions and experienced category policing as such. When it comes to gender category transgressions, which includes both *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* transgressions, only intrapersonal category transgressions are policed. This is because interpersonal transgressions occur only when the social context prompts or otherwise requires the gendered actor to suppress some aspect of their gender identity in order to assimilate. Because of this, interpersonal transgressions are more often rewarded, rather than relegated. *Intrapersonal transgressions*, on the other hand, occur only for the purposes of self-fulfillment, self-authenticity, or to honor one's gender non-normativity. As such, intrapersonal transgressions are policed for breaking the gender rules of normative attributes *without permission*. *Gender category policing*, then, occurs solely as a response to intrapersonal gender category transgressions.

Sociologists have long documented the maintenance and reinforcement of normative gender categories and their attributes. Particularly, analysts have focused on the interactional measures that keep normative masculinity and femininity in place. In the field of sociology, a great deal of this conversation is situated in the literature on hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (i.e., Connell 1987). Although all gendered actors are subjected to gendered cultural ideals, not all gendered actors have access to the benefits reaped from (perceived) proximity to the ideal; this is because normative gender categories and their attributes are constructed through the lens of whiteness which inherently others the femininity

and masculinity of gendered actors of color (i.e., hooks 1981; Collins 2009). These white cultural ideals regulate “men” and “women” in everyday social life and ultimately justify the current gender order.

Hegemonically masculine qualities include attributes such as whiteness, stoicism, strength, competitiveness, independence, and aggression. Indeed, participants who were men—whether they were cis or non-cis—were subjected to hegemonic masculine expectations that were often enforced through *category policing*. My participants shared numerous experiences where their categorical transgressions were met with category policing. A common theme around category policing is that men were scrutinized in various ways for appearing “weak” or “like a woman.” For example, men experienced category policing for categorical transgressions related to vocal pitch, physical strength, emotionality, and interest/ aptitude in sports. Take for instance Elliot (23, white, cisgender man) being “called a faggot a lot” for speaking “in a higher voice,” or Xavier (25, white, transgender man) who was often told things like “No, son... give me a *good* handshake!” by older men in response to his “lighter handshake” and “limp wrist.”

Both Vincent (22, white, cisgender man) and Thomas (21, Mexican Irish, cisgender man) reported their experiences with category policing in relation to sports. Vincent noted that he was “ostracized” by many of his peers in school because he “wasn’t really interested in sports,” and Thomas recounted category policing during his participation in sports. Specifically, Thomas shared memories of football coaches who would use gender category policing to shame, intimidate, and harass the children they worked with:

They’d say things to us like, “Don’t be queer,” “Don’t be a little faggot.” There was a particular coach that did not like me, and we were doing a crab walk backwards [around cones] . And it was hot outside, and we were in football gear. I was 12 years old, and I lost my balance and fell. And he was like, “If you fall again, I’m going to shove that cone up your ass, but you’d probably like it, being a little faggot.”

Whereas Vincent and Thomas experienced category policing in relationship to sports, Francis (67, white, cisgender man) and Nathan (24, white, cisgender man) were policed around their relationship to pain and emotional expression. For instance, Francis recalled an experience with policing when he got injured while working on a construction site:

I was using a grinder and got a piece of metal in my eye, and I was really worried about it, you know? And I went over to this guy and told him and asked “Oh my God! Do you see anything?” I am worrying about my eye and he looked at me and he just said “That’s why you got two eyes, isn’t it?” In other words, “Why do you want to whine about it when you know you have another eye?” [He was implying] that I was showing signs of being weak, or being a woman, or something like that.

Like Francis, Nathan also experienced category policing when it came to dealing with his pain. Nathan discussed his difficulty crying as an adult and how he believed his inability to cry is connected to the gender category policing he experienced as child:

[My father] was very involved in military culture and the idea of masculinity is very present in that... especially the idea of suppressing emotions and, like, being tough and being “a man” and stuff. And I think the greatest example I have of that, that my dad passed onto me... is that I have a really hard time crying (laughs). Which is weird to say out loud now in my 20’s (laughs)... But yeah I have a really, really hard time crying and I realized it was because when I was a kid, every time I would get hurt, I would look at my dad, to... I was looking to him for, like, a healing factor, but he would always look back at me dead in the eye, and he would just be like “Are you gonna cry?” and he would question me like it was a *bad thing*... It was like I could feel him asking me, “Are you gonna be a man about it and not cry?” and I now have a really, really hard time crying because it was just so engrained from such a young age that crying or showing vulnerability was the wrong answer even to, like, physical pain.

The underlying logic of gender category policing is based on the protection of normative categorical attributes. In the data presented above, participants recounted instances where their category transgressions *as men* were met with category policing. Gender category policing does

not only target men, though; all men *and women* are subject to it. Indeed, women are also policed for normative categorical attributes.

Hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal that sets gendered expectations for normative attributes in men, and *emphasized femininity* is the barometer for the gendered ideals of women. Emphasized femininity was first conceptualized by Connell as complementary and subordinate gendered attributes that accommodate hegemonic masculinity (1987). Schippers later reformulated the emphasized femininity as *hegemonic femininity* to name the phenomenon of ordering women amongst themselves (Schippers 2006). Hoskin further built out hegemonic femininity intersectionally as *patriarchal femininity*, “which necessitates the alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality and the adherence to racial and able-bodied norms” (2017:99). In summary, the normative gendered attributes for women provided plenty of opportunity for categorical gender transgressions to occur.

As such, women participants reported numerous instances of category policing in response to their categorical gender transgressions. Categorical policing of women primarily clustered around themes of visual and behavioral categorical transgressions. Specifically, women reported instances where their bodies, clothing, interests, and levels of assertiveness and autonomy were policed.

One of the major ways women experienced *category policing* was through their appearance. Participants recounted numerous instances of others commenting on their clothes or bodies. Policing comments about appearance seemed to act as a sort of reinforcer for normative categorical presentation. Appearance-based category policing often occurred through questioning some aspect of a participant’s femininity. For instance Anastasia, a 75 year old white transgender

woman, recounted an experience where another woman at her church questioned her because of her body hair:

There's not much hair on my hand because I'm pretty much hairless. I don't have much hair on my legs, and a lot of [cisgender] women have more hair on their arms and hands than I have on mine. But for some reason, this woman looked at my hands and saw hairs that shouldn't belong there, so it raised question marks in her head.

It's important to note that policing should not be thought of solely as degradation; in many cases policing occurred through the over-affirmation of gender category compliant behavior. For instance, participants Yuri (24, white Asian, cisgender woman), Kate (18, Asian American, cisgender woman), and Luna (25, Mexican American, cisgender woman) all mentioned receiving an onslaught of compliments for presenting normative femininity, although they usually didn't present that way. Participants felt the compliments they received were less tied to affirming the participant's personal expression and more focused on their categorical obedience. Yuri noticed "If [she] had worn makeup or if [she] wore something more feminine like a dress, instead of a blazer or pants, [she would] get a lot of compliments like, "You're looking really good today." Luna and Kate both discussed receiving either compliments or snide remarks depending on others' approval of their clothes. Feeling as though she needed her femininity to be "approved" by her mother and sisters, Luna shared it was not uncommon for her mother to try to influence her outfit choices "She would tell me she likes what I'm wearing [if it was stereotypically feminine], or she'd tell me to change." Kate shared that her friends would police her femininity by either praising her categorical adherence or comparing her to men, "They're always like, 'Oh that's cute. You dressed up today.' Or like, 'Those are some nice sweatpants. You're matching that guy over there.'" In all of these instances, participants

understood the compliments they received as a response to their categorical gender conformity, rather than support for authentic self-expression.

Some participants discussed altering their appearance due to the category policing they experienced. For instance both Kate (18, Asian American, cisgender woman) and Sam (34, white, cisgender woman) mentioned refraining from wearing bottoms with cargo pockets due to category policing from their respective parents. In Kate's case, this occurred with her mother and a pair of cargo pants:

I had this one pair of pants that I really liked, but they were cargo pants. And they were so comfortable and they had so many pockets and I loved them. But then my mom's like, "Guys wear those pants." So I stopped wearing them.

Like Kate, Sam also stopped wearing cargo shorts due to her father's category policing, and she further responded to the situation by incorporating more stereotypically feminine clothing into her wardrobe:

I bought a pair of men's cargo shorts because they were really comfortable, and I just wanted to wear them. And my dad called me a "dyke" because it automatically became a sexual orientation thing when it had absolutely nothing to do with that. It was just because I liked cargo shorts and they were comfortable. But because I dressed like that, [he implied] that automatically made me a lesbian. So now I try to throw in the occasional dress.

Kate summarized the experiences of many women with appearance-based category policing when she described the way that her body and clothes are a regular topic of discussion: "It's always like: I'm either challenged or complimented based on how feminine I am."

Women also experienced category policing when it came to their activities and demeanors. Maya (20, white, cisgender woman), Sam (34, white, cisgender woman), and Sadie (25, white, cisgender woman) all recounted experiencing category policing regarding their participation in "risky," "masculine," or "tomboyish" activities. Maya explained that her parents

got “mad” at her for engaging in “dangerous” activities. She recalled being disciplined to stop “roughhousing,” and she was often given explanations such as: ““No! You’re delicate, you’re a girl.”” Sadie also discussed being disciplined by her mother for “playing around [in a physically rough way] with [her] cousins, who were all boys.” In one instance, she reported her mother “freaked” in response to Sadie’s “tomboyish” actions of “running and sliding across the floor” with her cousins. Although Kane (2006) found that “femininity” is generally devalued to the point that some parents endeavoring to raise cisgender girls will accept or even promote “tomboyishness” in their children, my analysis reveals that these reactions are not monolithic and those raised as cis girls reported experiences of gender policing for their categorical gender transgressions.

Sam experienced policing with her coworkers when she shared her categorically transgressive hobbies while in a group discussion about weekend activities. Sam’s efforts to participate in office smalltalk were often met with tension, for instance she explained:

I’ll try to interact with them, and I’ll say something like, “Oh, this weekend I built a chicken coop” [and they respond with:] “Oh, that’s nice.” And if I bring up certain projects that I’m doing, it’s just *awkward*. And I think it’s more awkward for them because they don’t know how to interact.

The “awkwardness” Sam senses in these interactions may seem trivial, but it is actually crucial information about the social structure Sam and her coworkers live in. The content of the conversation matters much less than the form. Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn have noted that conversational form both reflects and maintains social structure (2017). In this case, Sam’s categorical gender transgressions and consequential policing made her relative status among her coworkers clear.

Participants also experienced category policing based on their demeanors, emotions, and behaviors. Rachel, a 22 year old white cisgender woman, explained that she experiences category

policing in response to her varying emotional states, especially when she is feeling particularly confident or negative emotions: “When I’m assertive or more masculine, or more grumpy or rude, people say I’m a ‘bitch.’” Rachel’s experience with gender category policing in this instance is contextualized by her gender transgression in relation to what Hochschild calls *feeling rules*, which are gendered and dictate the acceptable emotions in a given social situation (1979). Further, these normative expectations intersect with other salient identities such as race (Wingfield 2010) and class (Power, Cole, and Fredrickson 2011).

Riley (27, white, cisgender woman) shared that she was policed for her categorical transgression of being a woman in an authority position at her job as a Teacher’s Assistant:

I’ve had [students who are men] try to intimidate me or scream at me and try to get in my face, or asking me out in the middle of class, or those sorts of things that I don’t think would happen with a [man] TA. Also, my teaching reviews are very gendered. Like I’ll get a lot of comments about how I’m biased and I hate men, and stuff like that. And I don’t think that if a man presented the same content, he would be accused of being biased or anything. I’ve also been policed in what I wear in my teaching reviews as well, which I don’t think would happen if I was a man.

The category policing that both Rachel and Riley experienced has been documented for years in the literature, particularly in work that explores women being policed for displaying ‘masculine’ emotions or holding positions of power. In Riley’s case, gender-biased teaching evaluations that police women for holding authority positions have been documented every decade since the 1970’s to now (Ferber and Huber 1975; Martin 1984; Baker and Copp 1997; Sprague and Massoni 2005; Friederike and Zölitz 2019).

Although Max (27, white) does not identify as any gender, that does not stop others from attributing gender (Kessler and McKenna 1978) onto Max, and Max shared that Max experienced similar interactions as Rachel and Riley:

Because I come off as not-dainty to [men in work meetings]. They don't understand it, and so they get threatened—is the word they use, “threatened” by me. [They tell me:] “You come off as a combative bitch and you're threatening.”

That Max does not identify as any gender and, therefore, is not actually enacting the gender category transgression Max's coworkers believe Max is, makes no difference in the lens and logic of gender policing. In terms of *protecting normative gender attributes*, what is most important in this situation is that Max *merely appear* to be transgressing a gender rule enough for that transgression to be perceived by others.

Category policing protects normative categorical attributes, and consequently the larger gender hierarchy, through interactional reinforcement. Men and women reported category policing from childhood into their present adult lives. No intrapersonal category transgression proved too small to be policed; from emotional expression, to clothing, to hobbies, to career fields, participants reported gender category policing based on subtle and overt transgressions. Constant and lifelong category policing is key in privileging normative gender categorical attributes over all others and keeping the current gender order in place. See table 3.4 for an overview of gender category policing:

Table 3.4 The Logic of Gender Category Policing

	Response to:	Protects:	Target:
Category policing	Intrapersonal category transgressions	Hierarchical normative categorical attributes	All men and women

The logic of gender policing is based on protecting three critical components of our current gender system: the cisgender status; the gender binary; and normative gender attributes³². Gender status policing protects the cisgender status and targets all non-cis people. Gender binary policing protects the gender binary and targets all nonbinary people. Gender category policing protects normative gendered attributes and targets all men and women. All gender policing takes form both institutionally and interactionally. Instances of gender policing are as varied and dynamic as the gendered actors they seek to subjugate. It was not unusual for a participant to experience multiple forms of gender policing in a single interaction. Further, gender policing is based on the *perception* of others' gender categories and statuses. As I have demonstrated, there are, in fact, some instances where "targets" of gender policing are misinterpreted as breaking gender rules when they actually aren't. It should be noted, though, in the logic of gender policing, *the mere perception of a gender transgression* is often taken as reason enough to

³² It bears repeating that these normative categorical attributes *must* be read as cisgender. In other words, someone thought to be a cisgender man who is "normatively feminine" would likely be subject to category policing. Even though the categorical attributes are technically normative in the mentioned example, they do not "correspond" with the "appropriate" categorical identity based on sex assignment. In this case, a person thought to be assigned male with normative feminine attributes would likely face both status and category policing.

enforce a punishment. See table 3.5 for a full outline of the logic of gender policing:

Table 3.5 The Logic of Gender Policing

	Response to:	Protects:	Target:
Status policing	All status transgressions	The cisgender status	All non-cis people
Binary policing	Nonbinary status transgressions	The gender binary	All nonbinary people
Category policing	Intrapersonal category transgressions	Hierarchical normative categorical attributes	All men and women

In the logic of gender policing, those who transgress key aspects of the gender structure (cisness, the binary, hierarchical normative masculinity and femininity) are sanctioned and essentially treated as threats. Ultimately, all gender policing is in service to what Halberstam has previously named the *cardinal rule of gender*, which requires instant [cis] gender legibility (1998:23). The point of gender policing, then, is to identify and respond to *gender threats* in a way that upholds the current hierarchical gender order. The various responses to gender threats are what I call *forms of gender policing*, which I will now explore.

Forms of Gender Policing

Thus far I've discussed the rationale that underlies gender policing; but I have not yet outlined the specific types of practices through which gender policing occurs. Gender policing is a response to actual *or perceived* gender transgressions and it is a major interactional feature of social life. The logic of gender policing, as I've conceptualized it, is to maintain the key elements

of our hierarchical gender system; as such gender policing takes numerous forms to protect cisness, binaryness, and normative gendered attributes. I will now discuss the ways gender policing manifests legally, economically, medically, spatially, temporally, physically, discursively, and nonverbally.

Legal Forms of Gender Policing

Legal gender policing occurs when the validity of gendered actors is subject to unequally-imposed legal processes. This occurs through laws or other legal processes (such as name and gender marker change requirements) that exist to relegate those who enact gender transgressions. By this point in the U.S. in 2022, there is widespread awareness of non-cis gender statuses among members of our society (Luhur, Brown, and Flores 2019; Pew Research 2020). Even if one does not personally know others who are non-cis, the sheer amount of anti-binary transgender legislation written and passed in recent decades makes evident that the general awareness of non-cis people's existence is relatively high.

Non-cis people are not the only gendered actors subjected to legal gender policing; although legislation mandating normative gendered attributes is less common now, categorical gender transgressions (which apply to gendered actors of all statuses) have been legislatively sanctioned against since at least 1848 and as recently as 1974 in the U.S (Sears 2015). Indeed, legal gender policing has been recorded as early as 1620 in the earliest days of American colonies (see: Beemyn 2014). Unfortunately, some of my participants experienced the effects of this type of legislation first hand, such as Angel (63, white, transgender woman) who was “caught and taken down to juvenile hall” for wearing gender affirming clothing when she was a child.

Currently when gender policing takes legal form, its focus is on protecting the *cisgender status*, and as such, it primarily impacts non-cis people. Legal gender policing determines access to everyday necessities like State and Federal identification needed for participation in major institutional aspects of social life. As such, legal gender policing impacts non-cis people's access to formal work and education, the healthcare system, financial institutions, civic participation, and even participation in sports. Consequently, non-cis people experience a lack of access to material resources due to gender transgression currently unknown to their cis counterparts (James et al. 2016).

Non-cis people understood that their participation in social life relied on their ability to navigate the intricacies of legal gender policing. Many described taking legal measures to change their name and gender markers on government issued documents so they may gain entree into institutions that readily accepted those with a cisgender status. Participants like Aaron (31, white, nonbinary), Dylan (23, white, transgender man), and Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman) all shared a sense of relief once they obtained gender-concordant legal documents. Aaron explained they felt "more integrated into things" since their legal name change. Chloe recalled a sense of validation once she was able to update her government issued documents:

The day I had my name legally changed was the day that I came home, packed up all of my [men's] clothes, and got rid of them. And once my name changed, I went into the Social Security office and had my social security card changed, and I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles and had my name changed there, too. At that point, I never looked back.

The solace of having the correct information on government issued documents was not unique to my participants. Numerous inquiries have all corroborated one another in their findings that legal recognition of non-cis people's names and genders improves wellbeing (e.g., Hill et al 2018; Restar et al. 2020).

Many non-cis participants reported either being previously or currently unable to change their name and/ or gender marker legally and reported consequential issues navigating social life. There are significant financial barriers to obtaining gender-concordant identity documents. In their nationally-representative study of transgender individuals in the U.S., James and colleagues found that 32% of respondents did not have gender-concordant identification because they could not afford it (2016:89). These barriers leave non-cis people in a challenging predicament to find ways to participate in institutions and interactions while they are also being outted and/or their gender identities are invalidated. For example, Xavier (25, white, transgender man) explained the precautions he had to take while shopping before his legal name and gender marker change:

I've also kind of preemptively done things, though. If I was in a situation like paying for something, and I knew they were going to ask to see my ID for my credit card or something, I'd be like, "Okay, but I look much different than this on my ID..."

Legal gender policing necessarily positions non-cis people up against the harmful stereotype that we're not *really* who we say we are (à la Bettcher's *deceivers*, 2007), and puts us in a position to potentially face violence because of it.

In many cases, legal gender policing led to other types of gender policing. For instance, Lilliana (54, transgender woman) explained that once she was required to wear a nametag with her legal name at work, she "started getting misgendered much more." Legal gender policing not only produces institutional consequences for its targets, it creates interactional ones too; it seems, then, that *legal gender policing* only begets more gender policing.

Economic Forms of Gender Policing

Economic gender policing occurs when gendered actors lose or are denied access to material resources as a consequence of gender transgressions. Specifically, there are noted direct relationships between gender status transgressions and markers of economic marginalization such as job loss, unemployment, exclusion from the formal economy, familial excommunication, and/or housing insecurity. Economic gender policing as a response to gender status transgressions is well documented in the literature. For example, The Williams Institute found that among LGBTQ+ people, transgender individuals experience especially high poverty rates (Badgett, Choi, and Wilson 2019). Indeed, Carpenter, Eppink, and Gonzales (2020) note that trans people report significantly higher poverty rates, paired with lower employment rates and household incomes than their cis counterparts. Further, there is a relation between being perceived as non-cis and unemployment (Leppel 2021). Nearly one third of non-cis people live in poverty compared to 12% of the general population (James et al. 2016). Non-cis people’s experience with economic gender policing is not monolithic, though; for instance, Eastwood et al. (2021) found that in addition to gender category, status, race, and class, serostatus played a role in the economic realities of young trans women. It has been documented that *transgender women*— particularly transgender women of color— are either deprived of survival resources or policed for accessing them (Crenshaw et al. 2015; Yarbrough 2021). In discussing the disproportionate amount of trans women involved in informal work such as the sex trade, Hwahng (2018) found that trans women of color tended to perform *survival* sex work to meet economic needs compared to their white counterparts who more often engaged sex work *recreationally*.

Non-cis participants experienced the effects of economic policing. For instance, Angel a 63 year old white transgender woman recalled losing a “very well-paying civil servant job” in

her 30's after coworkers became aware of her non-cisgender status. She shared the series of events that led to her being pushed out of her position: "I had a situation where I got questioned... I didn't do anything wrong, but I was dressed [in women's clothes]; and then [my boss] started the process that got me put out of [my job]. At the time of our interview, Angel explained she spends about "50% of [her] time dressed" in gender affirming clothes, but that she has real concerns about the consequences of economic gender policing. As such explained: "I mean, yeah, I would love to live full-time right now, I would love to be on hormones; but I also like having a place to live and making a living. And so I don't..."

There is often a comorbidity that exists between the various forms of gender policing. For example, the effects of legal gender policing may exacerbate the effects of economic gender policing. As such, participants discussed the challenges of securing work with a non-cis gender status. For example, Nikki (52, white, transgender woman) shared the severe impact of legal and economic gender policing on her coworker's experience looking for a job without gender-concordant identity documents:

She had to kind of temporarily detransition in order to get the job, because she was struggling [and needed income]. And because she hadn't got to the point of having her legal identity changed and stuff, so her legal paperwork still had her old gender and name and all that on it. So that's what she had to use in order to find work. And that was just, like, terrifying to me to think of having to go through that.

In addition to the opportunity to obtain and maintain work within the formal economy, familial support is a critical element of financial security— especially for young people. Economic gender policing disciplines those who transgress the gender order by diminishing their access to material resources. Housing security is a major component of economic wellbeing. A disproportionate number of non-cis people experience barriers to stable housing. For instance, 30% of non-cis people have experienced housing insecurity in their lifetime (James et al. 2016).

The relationship between housing and familial support is significant; James et al. found that non-cis people who reported familial rejection were twice as likely to have experienced homelessness than those who were not rejected. Further, nearly three-fourths of non-cis people who are kicked out of their family's homes end up experiencing homelessness (James et al. 2016) Unfortunately Scott, a 32 year old white Latinx transgender man, experienced just that:

When I did come out, my parents actually were not super accepting at first. So they disowned me that year and I was homeless after my freshman year of college. So that kind of disrupted my life. I was able to start transitioning, I think the following winter, so I was homeless that summer, and ended up in a youth shelter.

Economic gender policing impacts people of all ages and genders; but it is particularly challenging for young transgender people who, despite comprising a disproportionately high percentage of homeless youth, remain largely unaddressed in public policy (Sellers 2018). Ultimately, whether it is through job loss, unemployment, or housing insecurity, economic gender policing is one of many powerful tools used to regulate the life chances of those who transgress the gender order.

Medical Forms of Gender Policing

Medical gender policing occurs when gendered actors face barriers to accessing healthcare as a consequence of their gender transgressions. Specifically, there are gendered disparities between cis and non-cis people's ability to meet their gender-related medical needs through formal institutions like hospitals and insurance companies. For example, James et al. found that one in four transgender people reported problems with insurance companies barring their access to care because of their non-cisgender status (2016). In many cases, transgender people were denied coverage for gender-related or reproductive care, denied the ability to accurately update their insurance records for gender marker and/ or name changes; or outright

denied coverage for routine, non-gender related care (James et al. 2016). This experience was not uncommon to my participants; for instance Beau (52, white, genderqueer) shared that they know “a lot” of people who “struggle and to get hormones, and are able to get surgery.”

My data revealed that non-cis participants experienced varying degrees gender-related health needs. This finding is reflected in the literature which has established that there are multitudinal ways to embody gender categories and statuses, such as *social transition without medical transition* (Nieder, Eyssel, and Köhler 2020) or *medical transition without social transition* (Rachlin 2018)— all of which are valid. For many (particularly binary) non-cis participants, however, access to gender-appropriate health services and medical transition was a key component of their interpersonal and institutional interactions. For example, Nikki (52, white, transgender woman) said the following of her medical transition:

There are things that I want to do for me, and I see my presentation as a tool I use to guide people into perceiving me, and treating and interacting with me the way I want to be treated. I see [medical transition] as a tool I use to help express my gender—to get the response I want.

Miles, a 23 year old white transgender man, also expressed the importance of medical transition to his interactional gendered experience:

I am never mistaken for being a woman now. So that is kind of a luxury for me... [because before medical transition] I wasn't perceived how I wanted to be perceived [which was as a man]. And, so, since I've been able to have surgery, I am seen... you know, just whoever sees me, they perceive me as a man. And, so now, I don't necessarily have to, like, overcompensate with, like, worrying about how I walk or how I dress, or, you know, certain things that would help make my image appear more masculine.

Medical gender policing impacts non-cis people at the point in which they lack access to meet their medical needs as a consequence of holding a (transgressive) gender status. It has been well established that non-cis people do not occupy the same social world as cis people that would allow them a reasonable expectation to meet their gendered health needs (i.e. James et al. 2016).

Further, it has been proven time and time again that access to gender-affirming for non-cis people is a quality of life and safety issue (White Hughto and Reisner 2016; Jellestad et al. 2018; van de Grift et al. 2018; Rowniak, Bolt, and Sharifi 2019).

Access to gender affirming healthcare is not a given for non-cis people, and those who *are* able to access medical transition must endure a considerable experience of *gatekeeping* and *waiting* that has been characterized as “dehumanizing,” (Ashley 2019) and “pathologizing” (Bockting et al. 2004); impacts the ability to function in intimate relationships (Dubov and Fraenkel 2018); and produces feelings of “weariness, submission, and precarity” for non-cis people (Pitts-Taylor 2020). Taken together, it becomes clear that the institution of healthcare is a primary site in which gender transgressions are dealt with via *medical gender policing*.

Spatial Forms of Gender Policing

Spatial gender policing occurs when the safety, respect, or inclusion of gendered actors in a given space is compromised in response to gender transgressions. Specifically, the social response to gender category and status transgressions inform one’s sense of safety in places like restrooms and particular geographic locations. As I will discuss, spatial forms of gender policing are ultimately an attempt to control the movements and representations of those who transgress gender rules.

It should be noted that various forms of policing significantly interact with one another. For instance, anti-trans bathroom bills are both a legal form of gender policing as well as a spatial form of gender policing. The distinction between legal and spatial policing in the case of bathroom bills is that one is enforced institutionally (legal) while the other is enforced interactionally (spatial). In this way, the distinctions I offer between the various forms of gender

policing are not meant to establish hard lines of mutual exclusivity as much as they are to show the multitudinous ways that gender transgressions are ‘dealt with’ in this society.

Many participants reported spatial gender policing in restrooms. Although it was primarily non-cis participants who experienced spatial policing in restrooms, it wasn’t *only* them; remember, gender policing is a response to actual *or perceived* gender transgressions, and as such, there were instances where cis participants were policed for their (inaccurately) perceived status transgressions. For example, a stranger attempted to forcibly remove Red (34, white, cisgender woman) from the stall of a women’s restroom at a public library. For the most part, though, spatial gender policing in restrooms has to do hostile or othering treatment toward non-cis people that communicated they were not welcome in a particular space because of their gender status transgression.

Max (27, white, does not identify as any gender) and Ollie (21, Black, gender nonconforming) each reported using both “men’s” and “women’s” restrooms and reported being antagonistically stared at and/ or questioned. Max explained, “If I’m in a men’s restroom, it’s like [I’m being asked,] ‘Are *you* in the right place?’ And if I’m in a women’s restroom, it’s more like [I’m being asked,] ‘Are *they* in the right place?’ Ollie reported a similar experience of spatial gender policing in restrooms:

[In the women’s restroom], I’m like, “It’s okay, I’m not a man. I’m not here to ruin your life.” And then in the men’s bathroom, I’m like, “Oh my God, please don’t hurt me. I’m just trying to use the bathroom.” I’m trying to, like, still operate in a docile way.

Both Ollie and Max understood that because of their status transgressions, their presence in gendered spaces like restrooms was contested. Further, they each knew that their presence in these gender spaces constituted a threat, both to themselves and others. Ultimately, like so many other non-cis participants, Max and Ollie determined that gendered spaces like restrooms were

unwelcoming environments for (status-transgressive) people *like them*. It is no mistake that these spaces produce a subtle and constant terror for non-cis people; afterall “the very architecture of public bathrooms is panoptic” (Bender-Baird 2016:985). Ollie’s exact naming of the “docile” survival strategy in these binary gendered spaces should be understood directly through the lens of Bender-Baird’s *situational docility* (2016).

That non-cis participants viewed binary restrooms as unsafe spaces is not unique to my sample. In general, experiences of access denial, harassment, assault, and sexual violence experienced by non-cis people in restrooms are all clearly documented in the literature (Herman 2013; James et al. 2016). Because of this, non-cis people understood restrooms as potential sites of trouble for those who are gender transgressive. For example, Dylan (23, white, transgender man) explained his concerns about being a person with a non-cis status in public restrooms:

I think in the worst case there would be a risk of violence. I think more likely what would happen is that someone would start, you know, calling me names or just verbally battering me more than physically. I think that would be the most likely situation because, you know, few people want to go to jail for someone they hate. I think the most likely outcome would be that there was some sort of verbal altercation that... resulted in the building security being called and [me] being asked to leave if [security] read the situation wrong and thought that I was the aggressor. Especially [in this rural, conservative setting] where [gender variance is] not really that well known and trans people just aren't as visible out here. I would worry that, you know, there may be some sort of physical altercation or something and [if there was] I may not get backup from other onlookers that [would intervene] if I lived in a more liberal area of the US.

In addition to sharing restroom safety concerns expressed by other non-cis participants, Dylan touched on another arena where spatial policing occurs: geopolitical locations. Specifically, Dylan felt there was an association between the likelihood of gender policing and the political landscape of a given location. For instance, he recently moved to somewhere “more conservative” and shared that he needed to be on guard for the gender policing that he

anticipated would be normalized in his new environment: “So, you know, I may be adjusting some of my [gender transgressive] behaviors, when I don't know the political leanings of who I'm talking to.”

Dylan was not the only participant who felt the tension between gender transgression and geopolitical locations. A number of non-cis participants discussed instances of spatial gender policing that they associated non-urban and non-liberal areas. Specifically, participants shared that non-cis visibility was a key factor as to whether or not they would feel safe in a given space.

Caroline (49, white and Native American, transgender woman) and Jackie (34, white, transgender woman) both experienced rural settings as overwhelmingly cis and binary. Jackie strongly felt the effects of spatial gender policing and noted that her survival as a non-cis person felt particularly precarious given the combination of her non-cis status and where she grew up:

I was raised in, like, rural farmland honkytonk. So it's like, gender had a place in society and it was either [cis] *boy or girl*. And there wasn't really an in-between there. And I was raised as: *boy or girl*, you know, *pink or blue, square or triangle*... And you're not around people that are that are different from you that were taught or knew about the spectrum. You know, you just sort of had to like, accommodate and adapt to what was around you to fit in for survival. You don't want to stick out... you don't want to be different. Because then it's like, you're an easy target.

Although she came from a different rural setting, Caroline echoed Jackie's sentiments: “I live in [a rural town] and you rarely see people playing with gender, or being particularly ambiguous. It's usually pretty clear what people are going for.”

As I've previously mentioned, various forms of gender policing co-occur in a single situation. This happened to Marie (60, white, transgender woman) when she relocated from a major US city to a state in the “Bible Belt” for work. Particularly, Marie discussed experiencing spatial and economic gender policing at the same time:

Practically as soon as I was set up in an apartment [in my new location], I was in [Marie]-mode again, and dressing [in gender affirming clothes] as often as I could get away with it. And of course, I was very closeted. This was in the Bible Belt... I don't think there was even a gay bar in [the nearest major city] at that time, let alone any concept of transgender people. So I had to be very much in the closet at the risk of my safety, let alone my job. This continued for three years.

The interplay of spatial and economic gender policing are compelling forms of intimidation that effectively caused Marie to lose three years of her life as *Marie*.

Whether or not they actually are (see: Doan 2007), non-cis participants generally reported feeling safer in urban and liberal settings. For instance Nova (23, Latinx, transgender woman) explained of her liberal college town:

Here at [my liberal college town], people don't really seem perturbed by [my gender status transgression]. I guess because it's such a liberal area and I think in general there's more awareness of trans and gender-variant individuals. So, I don't feel like there's that much of a reaction.

Spatial gender policing is a powerful tool that negatively impacts one's ability to fully access institutions, move freely, and participate in public life. In general, non-cis participants found that cities, college towns, and other liberal settings to be more conducive to their relative unconstrained mobility. My data confirms what both Jauk (2013) and Doan (2007) have previously found: (spatial) gender policing produces a limited spatial mobility of non-cis people that is significant enough to impact the function of their everyday lives. In sum, Xavier (25, white, transgender man) captured the thrust and impact of spatial gender policing rather simply when he said, "I mean, this is why I don't leave [the major city I live in]."

Temporal Forms of Gender Policing

Temporal gender policing occurs through the *gendered social ordering of time*, which has been shown to depend on factors related to gender transgression. For instance, Halberstam has demonstrated that “Queer uses of time... develop in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction,” wherein the those who transgress the gender order via gender category/ and or staus are relegated through normative chronological expectations that do not reflect their lived experiences (2003:314). Temporal gender policing manifests, then, via othering that necessarily frames gender transgressors as chronologically-deficit or undeveloped. Specifically, temporal gender policing imposes categorical- and status-based normativity in the face of gender transgressions. All gendered actors are subject to temporal gender policing.

One of the major ways that temporal gender policing came up for participants was through the delegitimization of their gender identities on account of their category and/ or status transgressions. Gender category and status non-normativity was often used as evidence that a given gendered actor was going through a “phase” that would eventually dissipate once they learned the (cisnormative) ‘truth’ about how gender works. This type of sentiment is clearly demonstrated by examples like Beau (52, white, genderqueer) being told by friends to “Just get over” their nonbinary identity.

Anyone who is gender transgressive has the potential to be the target of temporal gender policing— just consider tropes about cis women’s “biological clocks” ticking that have been repeated since the 1970’s (Friese, Becker, and Nachtigall 2006); but temporal gender policing was *particularly* salient for the nonbinary individuals in my sample. For example both Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman) and Riley (27, white, cisgender woman) associated being nonbinary as a phenomena associated with young people. Riley shared “Yeah, nonbinary folks are definitely in the minority; but, I would say, yeah, there’s more in pockets where there’s young

people,” and, when asked about perceiving others as nonbinary, Chloe mentioned that she “see[s] some young people today who one day, they’ll look one gender, and then [she’ll] see them another time and they’ll look a totally different gender,”

It was not unusual for participants to associate *nonbinaryness* as a quality that *young people* possess, and then to dismiss it. This type of policing could be perpetrated by others of any gender category or status. Although there may exist an expectation for non-cis people to support and accept one another, that is not always the case. For example, Axel, a 58 year old white transgender man, qualified his trivialization of nonbinary people by saying that he didn’t mean to dismiss them right before he went on to compare their identities to body modifications:

I don't want to dismiss non binary people; but to me, it's more, like, maybe a trend. [Being nonbinary] is kind of like— I don't know— just like... Well, like, I have a tattoo that I got when I was young, I got a tattoo. I had piercings when I was young too. To me, it's like, maybe something someone's going through; more of a transitory thing than permanent.

Axel’s temporal gender policing of nonbinary identities is an example of what Sumerau, Mathers, and Moon call *foreclosing fluidity*, where even those who are generally critical of structural inequalities can reproduce them (2019). Like Axel, Sarah, a 38 year old white cisgender woman, seemed to feel cautious about invalidating nonbinary people but also tended to associate them with being “pretty young.” She ultimately tempered her claim that nonbinary people shouldn’t be critical of binary gendered spaces and events in the following way: “But I don’t know— I don’t have an answer to these things. It’s not something I talk about. I feel like my take on it is a little reactionary, so it’s not something that I talk about to many people.”

Temporal gender policing played into nonbinary participants’ self-consciousness about their gender categories and statuses being nothing more than an “indulgence” (Aaron, 31, white) or “annoyance” (Beau, 52) to others. The idea that breaking gender rules deems one’s gender

identity invalid plays upon a harmful (temporal) stereotype often attributed to non-cis youth who are thought to be “too young to know” what their gender is. This type of framing produces real impacts in the lives of those who are gender transgressive. Indeed, factors like *age* and *timing* have been found to be a significant barrier to accessing healthcare for non-cis people (Puckett et al. 2018). It’s no wonder then, that temporal gender policing can prove itself an effective strategy in coordinating with other forms of policing (such as *medical gender policing*) to relegate the lives of those who transgress gender rules.

Physical Forms of Gender Policing

Physical gender policing occurs when gendered actors are harassed, intimidated, assaulted, threatened, or their personal safety is otherwise compromised due to their gender transgressions. Specifically, physical gender policing violently imposes categorical- and status-based normativity in the face of gender transgressions. All gendered actors have the potential to enact categorical- or status-based gender transgressions and are, therefore, subject to physical gender policing enforcement.

Participants of all gender categories and statuses recounted instances of physical gender policing. Red (34, white, cisgender woman), Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman), Billy (36, white, cisgender man), and Beau (52, white, genderqueer) all shared about times they were either physically intimidated or assaulted on account of their gender transgressions. For example, Red recounted the physical gender policing she experienced simply walking down the street when she sensed she was being (mis)perceived as a transgender woman: “I remember one guy just spit at me one time. [The spit] didn’t hit me, but I could tell it was meant for me and it wasn’t just accidental. I just remember feeling attacked by that. I just don’t normally feel that level of attack.” Like Red, Chloe also experienced physical gender policing while out in public.

She explained that to some degree being in public feels inherently risky based off of her previous experiences with physical gender policing:

I am much much more cautious in a public setting with men than I am with women. And that's just because I have been thrown up against cars before. Back before I had [gender affirming] surgery and before I was married, there were times when people tried to force their way upon me. So I have become very cautious of my surroundings and who I am talking to.

Like Chloe, Beau's experiences with physical gender policing were also contextualized by spatial gender policing. Beau discussed moving to the southern United States for work and that, regardless of whether they were being correctly read as genderqueer, their said their gender transgressions "immediately marked me as queer. *Immediately*. Like, I think I've never felt more queer, in kind of a scary way, as I did that year in [the southern state they were in]. Beau went on to explain that even though their partner "was certainly verbal about being out and whatnot, she passes very nicely as a [cisgender] woman," and Beau noticed a difference between theirs and their partner's experiences with physical gender policing:

She never once got followed by the pickup truck with a gun rack. I got followed more than once. And I've had "faggot" yelled at me. I've had "dyke" yelled at me. So clearly, the gender confusion, quote unquote... people were reading that. What they were reading too, was this person is also queer.

Although Beau's assailants did not seem to understand Beau's gender, what they understood was that Beau was generally gender transgressive; this was enough to prompt physical gender policing. Beau's gender illegibility (à la Halberstam's *cardinal rule* [1998]) proved reason enough to threaten Beau's personal safety.

Physical gender policing does not exclusively take place in the hands of strangers. For instance, Billy experienced physical gender policing from his classmates at his small, private school growing up. He discussed the potential and actual physical gender policing he experienced as a result of his category transgressions in the following way:

[One could experience physical gender policing for] anything from you being singled out and teased for crying in public, to once people caught wind that you're someone that they can get a reaction out of, you can become a target of property damage or actual physical violence. Like, I remember on a number of occasions, people would kind of throw stuff at me just to get a rise out of me, because I was a pretty sensitive kid, so it was easy to do.

Billy's thought that physical gender policing was "easy to do" is reflective of what Ringrose and Renold call *normative cruelties*, which are "exclusionary and injurious practices" necessary to the production of recognizable gendered subjects (2010:575).

In addition to past instances of physical gender policing, participants also expressed a great deal of concern over the *potential* of physical gender policing in future interactions. For instance, Hunter (36, white, transgender man) explained that he previously identified as a "gay woman," and the physical gender policing he experienced (due to gender category transgressions) before identifying as a transgender man informs his current safety concerns. Specifically, the gender knowledge Hunter possessed gave him the impression that his status transgressions would be policed even more intensely than his prior category transgressions:

I came out of the closet as gay... and got a lot of abuse because of that. So that's something that's always in the back of my head. Because I know how I was treated as a 'gay woman.' I cannot imagine how much worse I would be treated as a trans man. You know?... Other men are who I fear more than anything. I am very much afraid of being, you know, beat up, raped, and murdered [for being gender status transgressive].

Physical gender policing was a common experience and theme among participants of all gender categories and statuses. Attempts at physical gender policing need not be actualized (in the case of Red); based on an accurate perception of the target's gender (in the case of Beau); extraordinary (in the case of Billy); or to have even necessarily occurred yet (in the case of Hunter), in order to incite terror in gender-transgressive actors. No, all that is required for

physical gender policing to take place is that there are, what Kate Bornstein calls, *gender defenders* or *gender terrorists* present in a given interaction. Bornstein explains:

The Gender Defender is someone who actively, or by knowing inaction, defends the status quo of the existing gender system, and thus perpetuates the violence of male privilege and all its social extensions. The gender defender, or gender terrorist, is someone for whom gender forms a cornerstone of their view of the world. Shake gender up for one of these folks, and you're in for trouble (eds. Stryker and Whittle 2006:237).

Gender defenders do not solely enforce gender rules physically, but physical gender policing is notable in its overt and violent insistence of gender compliance. While it's true that *all* gendered actors may be subject to physical gender policing, there is a clear pattern in the literature that shows non-cis people bear a disproportionate burden of gender based violence, and that those who enact physical forms of gender policing “often target gender nonconformity, gender expression or identity, and perceived sexual orientation” (i.e., Wirtz et al. 2020:227).

Discursive Forms of Gender Policing

Discursive gender policing occurs when gendered actors are verbally dismissed, shamed, interrogated, or otherwise disrespected in response to their gender transgressions. Specifically, non-cis participants reported high instances of misgendering, derogatory comments, and invasive/ inappropriate questions related to their gender status transgressions. Cis participants reported experiencing name calling, put downs, and contemptuous interpersonal interactions for being category transgressive.

Misgendering is a primary manifestation of discursive gender policing. stef shuster's (2017) foundational work on *discursive aggression* explores misgendering in detail. Discursive aggression is a term for “communicative acts” that uphold and enforce gender normativity by

policing gender transgressions; ultimately, discursive aggression reinforces the inequality of the gender structure.

All non-cis participants reported being misgendered. Misgendering occurs both intentionally and unintentionally, by complete strangers and within some of our participants' connections. Regardless of the intent or relationship, the impact of discursive gender policing via misgendering was significant. As I have previously mentioned, participants felt the effects of misgendering on visceral terms. Ava (21, white, transgender woman) said of being misgendered, "I feel pain. Like actual physical pain sometimes." Scott (32, white Latinx, transgender man) shared that when he's misgendered it feels "Fucking awful. Like a kick in the nads every time."

Misgendering needn't be intentional to impact participants; Scott went on to describe how he felt about his relative who routinely misgenders him: "Even though I know he's not meaning to do it, he's just, you know, he's super old school; and doesn't always get the harm that [misgendering me] actually causes." Gus (24, Afro Latinx, transgender man) echoed Scott when he explained that even though "It can suck," he feels more equipped to manage his emotional reaction to being misgendered by strangers than when it comes from his family: "It hurts a lot more because it's an easy thing that they could correct." Dylan (23, white, transgender man) affirmed Gus and Scott's assessment that even though others might not mean to do harm by misgendering him, they still do: "I guess it just feels like a little bit of salt in the wound. Like, I understand they weren't [misgendering me] maliciously; but that didn't mean it didn't cause me any sort of annoyance or hurt."

For non-cis participants a single instance of being misgendered was similar to how we've come to think about insect infestations: *for every one you see, there are countless more*. The collective impact of misgendering often left participants feeling emotionally exhausted and

affirmed their othering. Jaime (29, white and Hispanic, trans person) touched on this when he explained that he experiences misgendering in the following way:

It feels shitty. It feels humiliating and it feels like it hits on something that feels really deep and old in terms of having that experience so much, and from a really young age. And, I think it also brings up— even when it's not intentional, it just brings up [the fact that]— A lot of times, when people misgender me [it's] because they did not try enough *to not* misgender me.

As Jaime acknowledged, misgendering as a form of discursive gender policing is often unintentional; however, just because others *didn't mean to hurt* participants by misgendering them, didn't necessarily imply they *meant not to hurt them*. In other instances— such as was the case with Cookie (27, Latinx, queer)— participants reported their requests to be respected were dismissed. Cookie recalled sharing their identity and pronouns with a family member and being outright denied: “I brought up [my pronouns] to her and she really wasn't understanding, and she said she didn't want to change her language. I told her I want to be called they/them pronouns, but she was like, ‘no.’”

Misgendering is not the only discursive strategy gender policing relies on to maintain the gender order. Both cis and non-cis participants recalled instances of being verbally shamed for their gender transgressions. For example, Francis (67, white, cisgender man) recalled his experience of discursive gender policing for the categorical transgression of being a man with long hair: “People would scream and yell at me: ‘Fucking girl!’ ‘Get your hair cut!’” And so there was definite gender shaming for just having long hair.” Aly May (23, Black, cisgender woman) described herself as “boyish” in her youth and said it was challenging dealing discursive gender policing: “Boys were telling me they didn't like me... I was coming up against a lot.”

Other instances with non-cis targets, discursive gender policing proved to be more confrontational and dehumanizing. For instance, Candace (47, Hispanic transgender woman)

recalled being publically shamed when she was minding her business while visiting a hospital: “One time I was at [the hospital] and this loudmouth guy kept tapping his friend to look over. And he [pointed to me and] was just like, ‘Look at *him!* *It’s a her!* *But it’s a he!*’” In a more escalated incident, a stranger used a combination of spatial, physical, discursive gender policing strategies to intimidate Max (27, white), who does not identify as any gender, for using the restroom at a fast food restaurant: “It was more than just the normal talking shit; this guy was pissed. He threw a fit inside this Burger King and everyone could hear it and was looking.” It appears that— those Bornstein calls *gender terrorists* feel particularly emboldened in their discursive gender policing practices when their targets are *non-cis* people like Candace and Max.

In addition to being shamed for their gender transgressions, participants were often asked inappropriate and antagonistic questions about their genders. The most common of these questions was some variation of: “Are you a boy or a girl?” These questions usually surprised participants because they often came from strangers without any prior interaction, or they came from strangers during (what participants thought were) congenial interactions. For example, Xavier (25, white, transgender man) recalled being caught off guard while he was trying to be friendly to a group of strangers:

I remember driving once in my truck and hearing people... I was driving into work. And there were these kids outside of my work, and my window was down. And I smiled at them, and they're like, “Is that a girl or a guy?” And I was like, “What the fuck? Are you kidding me right now?!”

Of my sample, experiences with invasive gender questions seemed to be solely directed at non-cis people. When asked how she knows other perceive her as a transgender woman, Caroline responded: “It might be something offensive that they say, or questions they ask me that I think [cisgender] people don’t tend to get.” When questions are employed as a method of discursive gender policing, they are often linguistically dehumanizing. For example, just as Candace was

referred to as “*it*” in the example above about her being harassed at the hospital, Dorothy (54, white, transgender woman) shared she often “notice[s] a lot of people going, ‘What is *that*?’” when referring to her. Not all invasive questions posed to non-cis people are asked by strangers. Mari (37, mixed Latinx, nonbinary), for instance, recalled some of the inappropriate conversations her colleagues tried to have with her at work after she shared her gender identity and pronouns with them:

There was at least one [colleague] who, when he found out [about my gender], he kind of came up to me on the side and, like, very quietly asked “So, are you gonna, like, go through... are you gonna, like, have an operation? [And he was asking] very personal questions, but also doing so kind of in a laughing way, like he was kind of joking about it. And I felt like: [my gender] is not a joke, you know? Like, [my gender] is not something for you to gossip about, like, [my gender] is not for your amusement, you know?”

Discursive gender policing proved to be an effective way to marginalize and other those who transgressed gender rules. Any gendered actor who enacts gender transgressions could be subject to discursive gender policing but, in particular, it was non-cis participants who seemed to bear a disproportionate amount of these types of interactions compared to their cisgender counterparts. Additionally, it was non-cis individuals who reported more dehumanizing comments and questions about their genders. As I have shown thus far, a given form of gender policing rarely takes place in isolation; a common form of policing that usually accompanies *discursive gender policing* is called *nonverbal gender policing*, which I will explore next.

Nonverbal Forms of Gender Policing

Nonverbal gender policing occurs when gendered actors are nonverbally othered as a consequence of their gender transgressions. Nonverbal policing involves varying strategies. In particular, it includes tactics such as isolation, palpable discomfort, and what I call *the look*,

which is a specific facial expression reserved for those who are status transgressive. Participants of all categories and status reported experiences with nonverbal gender policing; however only non-cis participants experienced *the look*. However subtle it was sometimes, nonverbal gender policing conveyed a wealth of information to participants and about the current gender order, and their failure to abide by it.

Isolation proved to be a key strategy in nonverbal gender policing. Participants of all gender categories and statuses reported times where they faced ostracization as a result of their gender transgressions. Gender transgressive participants were isolated equally by those they knew or strangers. For instance, Wyatt (19, Mexican, genderqueer) recalled an isolating interaction with a stranger on public transportation:

A person came on the bus and asked if the seat was taken next to me so I said “No.” Then they looked down at my [painted] nails, and it’s really hard to describe his facial expression. I don’t want to say *abhor*, but it looked shocked. He subtly shook his head and walked to the back of the bus.

Other participants reported accounts of isolation with those they regularly spent time with at work, school, or in their own households. Vincent (22, white, cisgender man) shared that he faced isolation at home from his parents and siblings as well as at school on account of his categorical gender transgression of having long hair:

Part of the ostracism came from my family. So I have two younger brothers... And they both expressed weird vibes from the hair. My parents also expressed weird vibes from the hair... I would hear from [classmates] in daily interactions that would tell me that the hair was weird, or not normal, and all of that. I think it’s also important to say that the kids I was around in elementary school... when I had my long hair... were not the same kids I was around in middle school. A lot of them ended up going to different middle schools. So it wasn’t like I had this history with them. The same ostracism seemed to carry through even though the people didn’t necessarily carry through.

Many other participants like Vincent were able to pinpoint, track, and connect the isolation they experienced back to their breaking of gender rules. This was the case for participants as they interacted in institutions like family and school, as well as at work.

At work, Kent (29, white, transgender man), Candace (47, Hispanic, transgender woman), and Mari (37, mixed Latinx, nonbinary) all recounted situations where their coworkers stopped interacting with them or acknowledging them as a result of their gender status transgressions. For Kent, this happened once he shared his non-cis status with his coworkers:

I came out while I was working a full time corporate job. And so it was basically me sending an email through HR saying, like, I'm now a he/him. Use he/him pronouns and this new name. And I noticed things like, my normal interactions with people dropped off. Like, people that would normally be like, "Hey, how you doing?" or "How are things going?" Like, those kind of interactions, dropped off and became less frequent.

Mari also shared her non-cis status with longtime coworkers and then experienced backlash in the form of isolation. In her case, she reported feeling good about her professional standing and accomplishments until her coworkers suddenly ostracized her upon learning about her nonbinary status transgression:

I felt very much like, "Oh, finally!" Like, I've made it to like the boys club, you know, like, I'm getting paid what I want. I know how to play this game, like, I can ask for promotion and I know how to get it. And then when I changed my name, though, it just, like, immediately felt like that had all changed. Like, I was no longer part of that group. Or at least, like not to the same extent— Actually, no, I will go ahead and just say I was not really part of that group anymore.

Nonverbal gender policing seemed to carry over through all the varied fields, career paths, and geographic locations participants worked at. When it came to gender status transgressions in the workplace it seemed participants' professional roles came second to their gender roles. Candace simply summarized the experience of many non-cis people at work when she said of her coworkers: "They wouldn't talk to me."

In addition to isolation, *palpable discomfort* was a powerful strategy of nonverbal gender policing that punished gender transgressors for breaking gender rules. Anastasia (75, white, transgender woman) plainly captured the complex and strained interactions between those who transgressed gender rules and those who tried to enforce them when she mused, “You sense how people see you.” Palpable discomfort occurred in “awkward,” or “distant,” interactions where participants understood their gender transgressions were making others “uncomfortable.”

Kent (29, white, transgender man) and Xavier (29, white, transgender man) both reported a feeling of “awkwardness” when interacting with others before they regularly passed as cisgender men. Kent said of his interactions, “I think for some people it's just like a sense of awkwardness, like they just don't know what to do... And sometimes it's more like, obvious discomfort. Like, not meeting your eyes or something like that.” Xavier recalled interacting with those who worked in retail to be particularly strained, “Interactions with cashiers... they were just awkward.”

Aly May (23, Black, cisgender woman) also reported tension with strangers. Aly May had the relatively unique (although not wholly uncommon) experience among my cisgender participants as being occasionally perceived as a transgender woman. In this way, Aly May learned to decode the nonverbal gender policing she was sometimes the target of on account of her “gender status transgression.” She described her experiences receiving a considerable amount of unwanted attention from strangers when out in public, and shared that she was clearly able to tell when others thought she was non-cis based on the nonverbal status policing enforced upon her:

There's a difference. When it's about [others misperceiving me as a transgender woman] people keep distant. It's different from somebody [who is shy but wanting to proposition me if they think I'm a cisgender woman] being like “Oh, I'm trying to get the courage to go up and talk to her” or what have you. There's

kind of a snicker or a whisper to their friends; and, I don't know there's a inquisitive look, and people tend to keep distant until they can figure me out, is how it feels

Kent, Xavier, and Aly May all discussed experiencing palpable discomfort with strangers, but this form of policing occurs throughout *all* relationships. Mari (37, mixed Latinx, nonbinary) experienced it at work after taking action to affirm her nonbinary non-cis identity:

I think when I started to take the hormones, and even when I changed my name—when I started going by [Mari]— I kind of immediately noticed a change. Like, there was definitely like a shift. You know, within a month or two of me changing my name. I felt that I was not taken as seriously at work.

Unlike Mari, Aaron experienced palpable discomfort *before* they took the gender-affirming measure of legally changing their name:

When I told my dad that I was changing my name legally, we were at lunch and the food came, and he didn't eat any of it. He excused himself and went into the restroom, and was clearly crying for some time. And then he drove me to the airport, 'cause I was back visiting him, and he didn't talk for the whole ride. You know, it was just a really extremely uncomfortable situation... So the structural stuff is hard, but for me it's much more of the family issues and recognizing that I can't both be my authentic self in terms of gender and sexuality, and have the same relationship with my parents that I did before.

In many cases, the instances of palpable discomfort I discussed may be imperceptible to others, but they were acknowledged as obvious attempts of gender policing by my participants who received them. Findings from Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn (2017) corroborate the fact that conversational *form* is perhaps even more important than *content* in gauging the group's structural features such as hierarchy. In this way, participants were clearly attuned to the subtext of their various interactions that confirmed their (perceived) gender transgressions were problematic.

One of the most significant ways participants experienced nonverbal gender policing was through a facial expression I refer to as *the look*³³. Unlike *isolation* and *palpable discomfort*, *the look* was a nonverbal gender policing tactic that seemed to be specifically reserved for non-cis participants. Despite my interview guide lacking any such related question about *the look*, it managed to come up in nearly every interview I had with non-cis participants. Although unspoken and relatively brief, this facial expression conveyed a wealth of information to non-cis participants about their social status and personal safety. As such, the ability to perceive *the look* was important to non-cis participants' sense of safety as they navigated social spaces and interactions.

Although non-cis participants were varied in their gender identities, racial identities, class backgrounds, ages, sexual orientations, and geographic locations, their descriptions of *the look* varied only slightly. In general, participants found the look to be comparable to a “stare,” “double-take,” “glare,” and “scowl.” They described it as “questioning,” “uncomfortable,” “confused,” and “sour.” Hunter (36, white, transgender man) described *the look* in the following way: “It's like when a child is telling you something and you can't decide if it's a lie or not. It's a look a parent gives that child like, ‘Do I believe you?’” Grover (29, white, transgender man) explained that the look can happen at any moment, in any setting. He gave the following example of receiving *the look* in public restrooms: “I could be minding my business and washing my hands. I've had people stop in their tracks or stare or give covert glances.” Jackie (34, white, transgender woman) further explained there tends to be a particular corporeal form that accompanies the look:

³³ This term has been previously coined and used as a noun by Ashley Mears (2011) to refer to a cultural product in her work with fashion models exploring status and beauty. I am using this term as a verb to refer to a specific act of gender policing.

When it comes to movement, there's a certain, like, posturing or body language that accompanies that look. There was almost some sort of, like, rigid stillness that—I don't know if it was kind of like a 'predator-prey' type of thing but—they don't make any sudden movements... They're rigid and they're locked on. And they're focused, like, they're about to pounce or something.

Just as Jackie explained that those who give the look are “locked on,” Lilliana (54, transgender woman) shared that she often feels that “people can't take their eyes off me [in public].”

Even though non-cis participants considered that they could just be “paranoid,” or “extra on guard,” they were ultimately confident that the looks they received were inextricably linked to their gender status transgressions. As Max (27, white), who does not identify as any gender, explained:

I always expect the best, so I'll give people the benefit of the doubt. Like, yeah, maybe they're trying to figure out if they know me from somewhere. But, innately, just because of what I've gone through and experienced, I know it's not the case. Especially because I know they've never seen me before. But, I'll give people that excuse all the time.

Like Max, Grover (29, white, transgender man) explained how he came to be particularly attuned to nonverbal gender policing: “I was androgynous before, and people would constantly be [nonverbally] questioning [me]. I got good at reading it on people's faces or body language. I became very in tune to picking it up.” Morgan (23, white, trans-masc nonbinary) echoed Grover's sentiment about learning how to pick up on the gender perceptions of others: “I feel like it's just something you kind of have a radar for after a while of, like, being trans in public.”

Even though she experiences *the look* infrequently, Angel (63, white, transgender woman) explained that when she does, she knows it's because of her non-cis status: “Occasionally I get somebody take a second look, and well, you know, they may suspect that I'm transgender.” Nikki (52, white, transgender woman) simply explained that it was clear to her that

she only received *the look* because of her non-cis gender status: “I attribute it usually to somebody making a value judgement based upon how they perceive my gender.” Hunter (36, transgender man) seemed to think *the look* was almost a glimpse into the mind of those who do it: “You see the question [about my gender status] from the back of their head... You can see the cogs.” Lee (27, androgynous transgender man) explained that the presence of *the look* in a given interaction signals to him he’s been othered on account of his non-cis status: “It’s sort of like: *Okay. I get it. I’m weirding you out.*”

Many non-cis participants also explained that they knew *the look* was about their gender status because they didn’t receive *the look* before they were out/ presenting as their gender, and/ or because they no longer receive *the look* now that they pass as cisgender. Jaume (29, white and Hispanic, trans person) recalled he got *the look* less and less the more he was perceived as a cisgender man by strangers: “It changed once people started more readily using ‘he’ pronouns for me. So there wasn’t as much staring.” Similarly, Leon (38, white, transgender man) echoed Jaume’s point while also discussing the ways that *the look* intersects with spatial gender policing:

It really doesn't happen anymore. So I can only assume that it has something to do with [passing as a cisgender man]. And it depended also, if I was in, like, a city, you know? It would happen less, because there's [gender variance] in cities and it's not weird, but if I'm in, like, a suburb people are like, “What is *that thing*?!”

Beau (52, white, genderqueer) also discussed the ways in which nonverbal and spatial gender policing interacted in liberal settings. They described getting *the look* where they lived in the following way:

It’s almost like a double take and then... Well, in [my liberal city], because people are trying to be politically correct, it’s a double take and then a quick “Oh, I’ve got to hide the fact that I’m nervous about this!” It’s a really weird sequence.

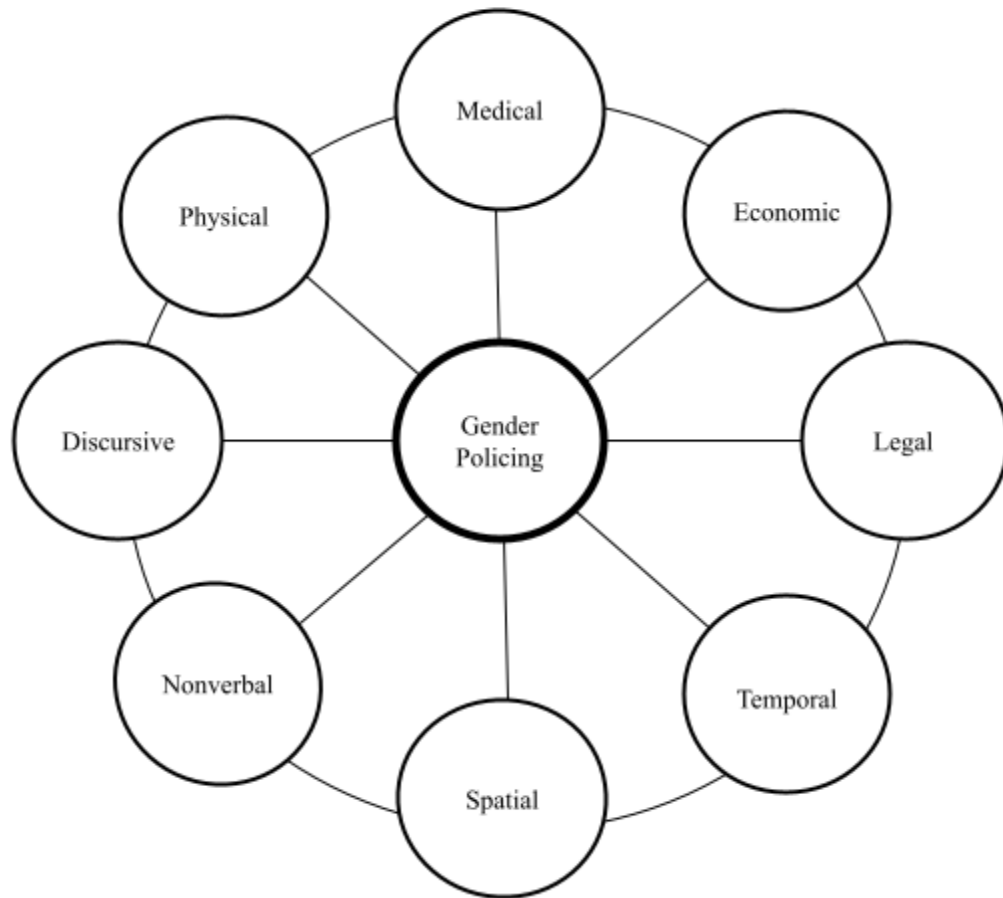
From a gender policing perspective, the primary function of the look was to convey othering to those who are gender status transgressive. *The look* typically only lasted momentarily, and yet it was still able to communicate complex information about structural gendered power dynamics to participants. However brief or subtle, *the look* was effective in demarcating difference between those who are cis and *those who are not*. For example, part of Caroline's (49, white and Native American, transgender woman) enduring sense of transness was informed by being othered through nonverbal gender policing in everyday interactions:

I think the reason that I think that I'll probably always consider myself "transgender" is because I can't image a situation where someone doesn't look at me funny from time to time, and cause me to think about it myself. And so I think there will always be an element of feeling a little different, I guess.

Like *isolation* and *palpable discomfort*, *the look* spotlighted gender transgression in unspoken yet powerful ways. In this way, *the look* was a constant and spontaneous reminder to non-cis participants of their place in the social landscape. In general, *the look* and other tactics of nonverbal gender policing proved to be influential tools in which the gender hierarchy was at once, communicated, enforced, and reproduced.

As I have demonstrated thus far, *gender policing* is both institutional and interactional. It is varied, and highly effective at communicating value-differences and maintaining the subjectivity of those who transgress gender. The various forms of gender policing are not mutually exclusive. In fact, some of the most fear-inducing moments for participants occurred when various forms of gender policing were combined. See figure 3.6 for a visual representation of the different forms of gender policing:

Figure 3.6 The Forms of Gender Policing



Although gender policing is not always *explicitly stated* as such by its perpetrators, it tends to be *explicitly received* by its targets. Anyone of any gender status or category can experience gender policing; however my analysis revealed that non-cis people tended to more frequently report experiences withpolicing in everyday interactions. Gender policing can be perpetuated— and is enforced by— all gendered actors, which I will explore below when I discuss the *arbiters of gender policing*.

Arbiters of Gender Policing

I have demonstrated that acts of gender policing are ubiquitous; they are deeply institutional and occur across all imaginable social interactions. If gender policing is a major defining feature of this society, the question then becomes: *who does it?* The arbiters of gender policing are just as varied as the gender transgressions they seek to correct. My analysis ultimately revealed that just as all gendered actors *do* gender transgressions, all gendered actors also *do* gender policing. Gender policing does not all look the same, though. As I have outlined above, the forms of gender policing are multitudinous, and as such the arbiters of gender policing rely on different strategies in patterned ways.

A key finding of my work on gender policing is that it is *highly gendered*. Although it's true that *any* gendered actor can perpetuate *every* form of gender policing, my analysis revealed that men and women tend to employ stereotypic gendered approaches when enforcing the current gender order. This finding was almost uncomfortable in how it seemed to feed off of common stereotypes about men as aggressive and physical, and women as passive and emotional. Nonetheless, I did note significant differences between the ways that men and women police gender.

Men generally police gender through overt degradation. I've covered numerous examples the ways men respond to gender transgressions in particularly hostile ways, such as Thomas' football coach threatening to "shove" a "cone up [Thomas'] ass" for being a "little faggot;" strangers "throw[ing]" Chloe "up against cars" because she is non-cis; or a man spitting at Red because she was (mis)percieved as a transgender woman.

Participants reported the significance of this style of masculine gender policing. For instance, Francis (67, cisgender man) recalled his "[Masculine] training" included excessive

hostility and degradation from other men: “It’s communicated through physical or overt aggression, especially when you are younger.” Sam (34, white, cisgender woman) also felt particularly impacted by the gender policing she received from men. She explained the following experience in response to her categorical transgression of being a woman who wore “baggy” clothing:

In my junior high years, it was the boys at the school... I developed early. Right around that age, it was just kind of like ‘boom’ overnight. And I was always comfortable wearing the grunge rock clothes and the baggy jeans and stuff, and not really showing femininity. And I got called “dyke,” “butch”—just ugly names. And I wasn’t any of those things. So, it was just these jerk boys, to put it nicely (laughs). Just these horrible little monsters that would harass me to the point that I was extremely depressed.

Sam’s comment about physically ‘developing’ secondary sex characteristics is particularly salient in the larger context of how men police gender transgressions. Participants who were ultimately seen by others as “assigned female” (*whether or not they actually identified as women*) reported experiences of men policing their gender transgressions based on what Hoskin calls the *masculine right of access*, where “Femininity is thought to be done for the purpose of attracting a masculine or male other across sexual and gender configurations” (Hoskin 2019:6). Mickey (28, white, nonbinary) spoke directly to this power dynamic when they explained the mental preparation they need to go through if they decide to present more stereotypically feminine and expect to be (mis)read as a cisgender woman on a given day:

I think the very first thing that comes to my mind is—definitely being perceived [as a feminine cisgender woman]—the way I present myself to cis heterosexual men... Like, when I’m [presenting] very feminine, I definitely am more approached more or catcalled more. When I’m in my all-feminine clothes... this feels like a very serious or heavy thing to say— but it feels like you’re giving yourself over, almost. It’s like, “Today, I’m going to expect that [sexual harassment] is gonna be part of my experience.” Not necessarily like that’s a choice, not like, that’s [what I’m saying I want] on purpose. It’s just part of what I know to expect on those [feminine presenting] days.

Like Mickey, Aly May (23, Black, cisgender woman) explained going through a similar mental process knowing that she would be subjected the masculine right of access as soon as she entered public sphere: “I have a hard time walking outside. So, if I wanna go outside I’m definitely thinking about: how am I gonna get somewhere? Do I wanna go through [being sexually harassed] today?”

Other participants thought to be “female-assigned” reported problems with similar types of experiences. Ollie (21, Black, gender nonconforming) and Jaume (29, white and Hispanic, trans person) both explained they were targets gender policing from men who implied a *masculine right of access* to their bodies. For example, Ollie explained their experiences of *discursive gender policing* with men who responded to Ollie’s status transgression of being a non-cis person in the following way:

And with men, it’s more like, “Gosh, you’re so undesirable. Why are you making yourself so undesirable? You’re such a pretty lady.” So it’s like, “What a waste [that I am not sexually available to them],” basically.

Even though Jaume doesn’t identify this way, he regularly passes as a (cisgender) man; but before he passed, he was subjected to *nonverbal gender policing* (in the form of *palpable discomfort*) for his gender transgressions by men who asserted the *masculine right to access*:

And I perceived there to be a deep discomfort around not knowing how to engage with me as someone who was not attractive to them, because I was not feminine—how they wanted women to be.

Although the masculine right to access does happen frequently when men are strangers to those they believe to be assigned “female,” this approach to gender policing is also perpetuated by those who participants have close relationships with. For instance, Axel (58, transgender man) shared that his friend often responds to Axel’s status transgression of being a transgender man in

the following way: “He has trouble with my transition. He’ll be like, ‘I liked you better when you were...’ or, ‘You very pretty before.’”

In addition to the *masculine right to access*, Hoskin also conceptualized the *feminine joke* as a tactic of discursive gender policing wherein “The subordinated status of femininity is maintained through trivialization as well as its use as an insult or a comedic device” (2019:6). Indeed, *joking* turned out to be a particularly masculine approach to policing gender transgressions. For instance, even though at “5’4” he’s “not, like, extraordinarily short,” Dylan (23, white, transgender man) notes that other men will often “jokingly” point out his categorical transgression of being a short man. Dorothy (54, white, transgender woman) shared that a man that she works with will make “jokes” about the category and status transgressions he observes in others he encounters outside of their suburban setting:

He makes a joke about it. Sometimes he and one or two of my other colleagues, they’ll go into [the nearest major city] for a full day, and they’ll march around the town. They’ll go and look at different places and after they come back, they sort of say, “Oh, did you see all the trannies around at the late night bar?” And he said things like, “Well, I guess drag queens need to eat sometimes.” So, they have this very stereotypical [masculine] view on [gender transgression].

Although women rarely conducted gender policing by making jokes or outright degradation, they did rely heavily on other discursive tactics to enforce the current gender order. For example one of the key approaches women used in policing gender was through selective compliments or brief observations. For example, I’ve previously discussed Luna (25, Mexican American, cisgender woman), Kate (18, Asian American, cisgender woman), and Yuri (24, white Asian, cisgender woman) reporting they receive what feels like overcompensatory compliments from other women specifically only when they are presenting themselves in gender-compliant ways. While compliments are used to encourage gender norms, participants noted that women

will often use observations that something is “interesting” to discourage gender transgression. Both Kate and Adelaide (20, white, cisgender woman) spoke directly to this type of commentary. Adelaide mentioned of her woman friends: “They would be surprised if I broke gender rules and they would be more likely to comment something like, ‘Oh, you’re wearing *that* today, that’s interesting.’” Similarly when Kate presents less femininely she receives comments from other women such as: “Oh, that’s an interesting outfit today.” However brief and subtle these compliments and comments were, they proved impactful as a tactic of discursive gender policing that communicated to participants that they had broken gender rules.

While compliments and comments served to highlight differences, sometimes women used another discursive tactic to invisibilize them. In particular, non-cis participants reported that women enforced gender rules by invisibilizing the status differences that existed between them, effectively rendering non-cis identities illegitimate. Previously, I discussed the ways Dominic (25, white, transgender man) and Amoxтли (20, femme/masc) experienced this approach to gender status policing from women by being treated like “one of their girlfriends,” or by being inappropriately included in “ladies’ night” outings. Grover reported a similar experience where “[A woman], after I came out to her as trans, invited me to a ‘girls’ night out’ thing. She was like, ‘You’re still a woman for now, so you can come.’” Although, on the surface, these examples centered around something ‘positive’ (i.e., social inclusion), in practice they resulted in participants feeling othered and disrespected. Ultimately, these types of interactions policed non-cis participants by invalidating their identities.

Beyond subtle comments and invisibilization, women were also unique in that they sometimes outsourced more aggressive gender policing to men. As I mentioned earlier, men’s approach to gender policing was generally more intimidating and just because women did not

police gender in this didn't mean they wouldn't try to harness it for their own purposes. For instance, Leon (38, white, transgender man) recalled a particular woman who had an issue with his non-cis status who, he said, "didn't threaten me personally but she incited other people to want to commit violence against me, and the other people were men."

In another instance, Dorothy (54, white, transgender woman) explained that although she was out as a transgender woman to her wife, her wife was unsupportive and outright told Dorothy not to present as a woman. On one occasion Dorothy's wife was planning to go on a trip and Dorothy wanted to host a 'ladies' night' with her cisgender woman neighbors while her wife was away. She sought her wife's permission for this event and said her wife consented on the conditions that Dorothy not "go dressed as a woman," and that the neighbors' husbands were also present. Dorothy did not really know these men but obliged to her wife's request:

[My wife] said, "No, if you're going to invite the girls around, you need to invite the men around." But I know the girls better than the men. The ladies usually have a lot of social events. I've seen them in the street. Whereas the men, I rarely see them. And it's just, "How are you doing?" Whereas I can chat away with the women because we see them on a more regular basis. But I agreed to have the men around, but I thought, "Okay, that's fine. I'd rather not, but that's part of the compromise."

When I asked Dorothy if she had any idea why her wife may have insisted she invite men, with whom she didn't have a relationship with, to the 'ladies' night' she said:

I think that [my wife] probably thought that having the men there would make it a little bit more... I don't want to say *deliberately difficult* but, it might temper any excesses I might enjoy. I.e., I would have no problem in getting completely dolled up in my finest dresses if it was just the wives there. But if the guys are there, I would certainly tone it down a lot. And I think that's maybe why [my wife] wanted them there. At the very least, it would be harder for me to be more girly, to share more girly stuff [if men were there].

In both Leon’s and Dorothy’s examples, we see women outsourcing some of their gender policing to men who they believed would be more effective in policing non-cis gender transgressors into submission.

When it comes to *gendered* gender policing, participants of all gender categories and statuses experienced the hostile and overt approaches to gender policing performed by men. Whereas men tended to be more aggressive in their manner of gender policing, participants reported women were less direct and more subtle in their enforcement of gender rules. It should be noted, though, that for however differently men and women approach gender policing, the difference between them was purely qualitative; in other words, men and women *equally* policed gender at comparable rates. It is also notable that *gendered* gender policing should not be taken as an absolute about all men and all women— but it did emerge among my participants and should be noted nonetheless. Leon (38, white, transgender man) summarized the stereotypic nature of *gendered* gender policing said: “Men are the more likely to violate a physical boundary and women are likely to violate a mental boundary.”

Others are not the only arbiters of gender policing; one of the most common ways that gender was policed was by *oneself*. Self-policing was a common theme among participants of all gender categories and statuses. In general, all participants policed themselves by feeling “self-conscious” or “hyper-aware” of their gender category and status transgressions. Self-policing often prompted participants to enact *interpersonal status transgressions*— or to take inauthentic actions for the purposes of self preservation. Self-preservation was a major driving force in self-policing, as participants often felt their safety, access to resources, and relationships depended on it.

Participants of all gender categories and statuses identified the presence of *cisgender men* as a primary motivating factor for their self policing. Miles (23, white, transgender man) explained his non-cis status feels most salient if he's around "a group of cis men" and that in those situations he "feel[s] more aware of being trans." Nova (23, Latinx transgender woman) similarly explained that she usually feels relatively relaxed around various gendered actors and doesn't "feel the need to police myself as much as I would for maybe a group of cis men." Elliot (23, white, cisgender man) explained that he self-polices around his speech patterns and "tend[s]to speak differently" if he's around "straight cisgender men." Loren (36, white, nonbinary) also noticed they self-police more around cisgender men, explaining:

I feel like all of a sudden, I'm like, "I need to make myself match this masculinity that they think I am." And I suddenly become aware that I don't fit in, like, as much I pretend I do all day long. Like when it comes down to it, in that moment, I'm like, "Ughhh, I'm such a pussy." In that moment, it's not happening.

While participants certainly reported more self-policing thoughts and behaviors around cisgender men, they also expressed similar concerns around *cisgender women*. For example, Rachel (22, white, cisgender woman) discussed the self-policing she engages with romantic/sexual partners:

I've dated a lot of people, and I'm pansexual, so I do feel more of a need to present as feminine if I'm dating someone who's cis. There's a bigger pressure with cis men, but even with cis women I feel like I need to [possess normative categorical attributes] for that attraction aspect.

Similarly, Alex (23, transgender man) said he becomes more self-conscious about being non-cis around cisgender people: "Well, usually I don't really think about it unless, like I said before, I'm in a social setting with a lot of different people, and the majority are cisgender. I tend to feel it more then."

Beyond the mere presence of cisgender others in a given situation, participants also reported self-policing as a response to the various forms of gender policing I've discussed above. For instance, Kate (18, Asian American, cisgender woman) explained her self-policing is informed by the *discursive gender policing* she's received: "It's more small remarks that kind of remind me like, 'Oh, maybe I should wear this outfit more often' or 'Maybe I shouldn't wear this because it makes me look masculine.'" Similarly Nathan (24, white, cisgender man) discussed his tendency to self-police and suppress his emotions due to the *discursive gender policing* he received from his father growing up.

In other instances non-binary participants like Ollie (21, Black, gender nonconforming) discussed the *situational docility* (Bender-Baird 2016) as a self-policing strategy motivated by *spatial gender policing*. Wyatt (19, Mexican, genderqueer) was also impacted by the *spatial gender policing* of binary restrooms and it has informed his decision-making around restroom use altogether:

I don't go to the bathroom that often because I avoided it for so many years since I didn't like going to the bathroom at school since I felt uncomfortable. I didn't think about it much when I was younger and assumed it was because bathrooms were gross, but I think I've realized that I was uncomfortable entering men's restrooms, so that's definitely affected me physically.

It should be clear from these examples that intrapersonal self-policing can be just as effective as the various forms of interpersonal gender policing. Self-policing produces a sort of gender panopticism in participants. Self-policing and gender policing have a somewhat symbiotic relationship and, in combination, have proved quite effective in maintaining the current gender order.

Conclusion

Gender policing is a critical feature of everyday social life and interactions. Gender policing has previously been discussed as though it were a hypernym, but I argue that it should be typified to reflect the three key components of the gender structure it serves to protect. As such, I've conceptualized *gender status policing*, which protects the cisgender status; *gender binary policing*, which protects the gender binary; and *gender category policing*, which protects normative (cis)gendered attributes.

As I have demonstrated, gender policing takes myriad forms and occurs both institutionally and interactionally, ranging from the mundane to the extreme. I have outlined the ways gender policing enforces normativity through legal, economic, medical, spatial, physical, temporal, discursive, and nonverbal processes. These forms work in seemingly endless permutations, and are able to convey complex messages about the gender hierarchy in brief interactions with targets. In this way, gender policing can be expressed anywhere from *silently* with a look, to outright *violently*; and in its most extreme forms it has taken the lives of those who transgress the current gender order.

In our highly gendered society, all gendered actors are subject to gender policing and all gendered actors perform it. In general, gender policing itself is *gendered* and often perpetuates stereotypes about the aggression of men and passivity of women. Finally, one of the most effective arbiters of gender policing is the *self*. The various and constant forms of gender policing that are normalized in our society have created amenable conditions for a sort of gender panopticism that all participants (regardless of gender category or status) experienced.

However impactful, gender policing is not necessarily always accurate and sometimes makes 'errors' in its enforcement. For instance, some of my cisgender participants were policed

for *gender status transgressions* they could not technically commit due to their normative cisgender status. Where gender policing shines, however, is in its ability to give gendered actors permission to take *mere perceptions* of gender category, status, and transgression and treat them as though they were absolute. Indeed, our social and institutional interactions are all contextualized by our gender perceptions. In this way, in order to understand the full social impact and structuring of gender category, status, transgression, and policing we must look to the mechanics of *gender perception*.

Chapter 4: Gender Perception

There will never be sufficient information for a definite gender attribution to be made.

Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978:13)

Gender knowledge is based on cultural information about *gender category* and *gender status*. The concept of *gender transgression* reinforces the boundaries within and between gender categories and statuses; and *gender policing* is a reaction to various category- and status-based transgressions. *Gender perception*, then, is the deployment of gender knowledge in a given interaction. Gender perception relies on information about gender category, status, and transgression as a framework of recognition whereby social actors may be understood as “cisgender men,” “transgender women,” and “nonbinary people,” etc. Gender perception is a key element of the current gender order in that it is the result of unfettered gender knowledge— it allows us to identify others, determine whether we are taken as members of our respective gender categories, and assess how others are interpreting our respective gender statuses.

The distinction of gendered groups is the basis of our hierarchical gender system. It is in this way that *gender perception* is the ability to harness gender knowledge to *know* one’s “place” in society and sense that others *know* it, too. As such, the relationship between gender knowledge and gender perception must be analyzed with an express focus on their role in the conferral and denial of power to entire gendered groups.

Given the relationship between gender perception and knowledge, my objective in this chapter is threefold: I will (i) lay out the mechanics of *gender legibility* via discussion around the concepts of *passing* and *recognition*; I will then (ii) demonstrate the power of gender perception

by exploring how *passing* tempers social outcomes; and finally, I will (iii) present an analysis of the gender order by examining *gendered threat perceptions*. For each of my stated endeavors, I will show the ways in which gender perception and gender knowledge are mutually-informative, inextricably linked, and ultimately serve to maintain the current gender order.

Gender Legibility

People say I look pretty now, and that's fine; but, I didn't ever do this to be pretty. All I ever wanted to do was pass.

-Angel, 63 year old white transgender woman

If all gendered actors produce gender attributions in others (Speer 2005), how does one come to be known as a *man* or *woman*? As *nonbinary*? As *cisgender* or *non-cisgender*? The sociology of *gender perception* and *determination* (see: Schilt and Westbrook 2014; Friedman 2013) explores the interactive factors present in the social pursuit of 'having a gender' that is legible to others. *Passing* (see: Goffman 1963 and Garfinkel 1967) and *recognition* (see: Connell 2009) are critical parts of social life and directly informed by gender perception. Whereas *passing* is focused on (cis)normative determination, Connell's conception of *recognition* treats the doing of gender as an "active invitation" to perceive gender beyond the frame of dominant social narratives about what gender *must* be (2009:108). When it comes to *passing*, the only acceptable answer is cisnormative category perception, whereas in a *recognition* framework, non-normative category *and* status may both be acceptable gendered assessments. For my purposes of analyzing the gender structure and its ideological underpinnings, I see both *passing* and *recognition* as distinct yet falling under a larger conceptual framing I call *gender legibility*.

Gender legibility is the obligation, process, and outcome by which gendered actors are understood as members of their given gender categories and/or gender statuses. In order to understand gender legibility on a deeper level we must first question what, exactly, it means to “pass”³⁴ as a given gender. In the context of gender scholarship, the term *passing* is most often used and understood as a status-based endeavor; and as such, the term passing is typically deployed to mean *being perceived as a cisgender* member of one’s respective gender category (Billard 2019). In this way transgender men and transgender women, for example, will fail “to pass” exactly at the point that others become aware of their non-cis status.

In many ways the concept of *passing* is counterintuitive to what we know to be true of the social construction of gender. Decades of social scientific work endeavored to disentangle *sex* and *gender* from one another, but the underlying logic of passing enforces the opposite dynamic: wherein the body (i.e., “sex”) is taken as the ultimate truth of one’s identity (i.e., gender). Further, recent work has examined the ways in which a binary framing is insufficient in understanding gender (as well as sex); yet, despite this acknowledgment, nonbinary identities continue to be routinely invisibilized in everyday interaction as well as in social scientific inquiry (Darwin 2020). Ultimately, Lorber’s observation from decades ago still stands today: “Whatever a ‘woman’ is has to be ‘female’; whatever a ‘man’ is has to be ‘male’” (1993:569).

In great contrast to passing, *recognition* provides a useful intervention to the inherently limited problem of passing where attributions may not necessarily reflect of the actual identities of the gendered actors in question. In other words, recognition is *only* capable of doing what passing never could: imparting autonomy onto gendered actors. Just because the mechanisms of *passing* are restrictive and unreflective of actual gendered experiences, though, does not mean

³⁴ The term *passing* is largely used regarding racial identity and most commonly refers to being perceived by others as white when one would otherwise be barred from accessing whiteness.

our social interactions aren't framed by it. In fact, I found that most participants interacted (and expected to interact) with others through the lens of *passing*, rather than *recognition*. However outdated and insufficient *passing* may be, I will ultimately show it is still a primary criteria in the process of gender legibility.

Although conversations of passing and recognition among gender scholars have disproportionately focused on non-cis people as exemplars of the social construction of gender, these concepts do not *only* apply to non-cis people. Per West and Zimmerman (1987), we all *do gender* and, in so doing, we all endeavor gender legibility. Kade confirms, "...all people present and exchange information about their gender(s) (e.g., embodiments of dress, sounds, mannerisms), whereas others read this information and draw on certain cues to determine and recognize their gender" (2021:3). In a society that demands gender accountability from *all* social actors, cisgender people are as equally beholden to *gender legibility* as their non-cis counterparts. Passing and recognition are central aspects of social interaction— and of social life more generally— but there has not yet been a dedicated inquiry into the ways in which we *know* that our attempts at gender legibility are successful or not. Further, there has not yet been an inquiry examining the underlying social mechanisms of *gender legibility*.

Gender legibility ultimately occurs by way of perception; and because different gender categories and statuses are constructed by different aspects of *gender knowledge*, they are not all assessed through the same social expectations. As I will detail below, *perceiving the perceptions of others* is only achievable with a complex and compulsive awareness of our gender hierarchy. By exploring the underlying social processes which make it possible to determine others as *men*, *women*, *nonbinary*, *cis*, and *non-cis*, I will demonstrate that— for however different our gendered experiences may be— we all share and interact in response to the same *gender knowledge*.

Perceiving (Cis) Men

All of the men-identified participants in my study endeavored to be perceived as men by others. In other words, both cis and non-cis men sought *gender legibility as men* and assessed whether they were successful in their pursuit. In terms of binary participants, men were not distinct from women in that *cisnormative beliefs* about their bodies, *language*, and *social treatment* informed how they interpreted others' perceptions.

Regardless of gender status, men-identified participants tended to believe that others perceived them *as men* because there simply was no other option given their bodily attributes. Indeed, *cisnormative beliefs about the body* led the majority of the men I spoke with to the conclusion that they “didn’t need to do anything” in order to pass. As Lane (30, Pilipino, cisgender man) explained, “I guess I don’t really have to do anything [to pass]... I think I would step out the door and the world would see me as [a cisgender man].” These men believed their gender categories were made evident by their physical characteristics such as facial hair, height, and voice. For example, Nathan (24, white, cisgender man) explained that he “assumes” others know he’s a cisgender man “everywhere” he goes “Because of the fact that [he’s], like, 6’2.” Similarly, Leon (38, white, transgender man) passes as a cisgender man and felt confident that others read him as such because he has facial hair:

My entire life up until [hormone replacement therapy] was people being unsure about my gender and, I would say after about maybe seven to nine months taking testosterone, once I was able to grow facial hair I don't think anyone's questioning that anymore.

Edward (36, African American, cisgender man) exemplified the sentiments of many other cis and non-cis men-identified participants when he shared:

You're not gonna get me confused with anything other than [a cis man]. My hairline is receded. My voice is deep. I've got a five o'clock shadow— so you're not gonna have any confusion about me being a cisgender man.

In addition to cisnormative beliefs about their bodies, *language* was a relatively straightforward vehicle that participants used to assess their gender legibility. For many men-identified participants, the use of masculine pronouns (i.e., he, him, and his) signified confirmation that others saw them *as men*. For instance, Thomas (21, Mexican Irish, cisgender man) explained the importance of language and gender perception when he said he knows others see him as a man “Just by the simple fact that they always use *he, him, his* pronouns [to refer to me] without me asking them to.” Another salient clue for participants that others were seeing them as men were both the formal honorifics and informal nicknames bestowed upon them by strangers. In particular, men reported being referred to as “sir” often and especially in customer service settings. Lane (30, Pilipino, cisgender man) explained that he could tell others saw him as a man in such instances by “Being referred to as ‘sir’ if I’m in a place in which someone is assisting or serving me. Like, if they are in a service position, they’ll use ‘sir’ in those moments.” Axel (58, transgender man) similarly shared, “I don’t really get misgendered that often,” and went on to explain “I mean, I even got a traffic ticket the other day and the officer addressed me as ‘sir.’” Participants’ gender legibility was not only confirmed through the language of those working in service positions— gender determination was equally conveyed by patrons to staff members in these settings. For example, Mitchell (25, Native Hawaiian, Asian, and white, cisgender man) explained he knows his gender is legible in the following way: “I work in retail. And probably two dozen times a day, or more than that, someone [will say] ‘Thank you sir’ or something along those lines.”

Beyond the use of pronouns and honorifics, participants discussed their gender legibility as men being confirmed through less formal language such as nicknames and small talk. For instance, Elliot (23, white, cisgender man) explained he knows others determine he is a man because of how they speak to him, “I’ve been out with friends at bars and met some person who didn’t even know me, but the first thing he called me was ‘bro.’” Brian (22, transgender man) confirmed this type of experience with nicknames and shared that he only experienced it after passing as a cisgender man:

I can tell a difference in how people talk to me since starting to pass consistently; and it’s even... just in, like, the little nicknames people use when you’re at a restaurant or things like that. So, they might not be pronouns necessarily, but, typically in conversation, the first one that comes to mind is just being called “boss” when I order food or something.

Miles (23, white, transgender man) also experienced gender legibility through others’ use of language. In Miles’ case, his gender as a man was at once determined and discursively policed due to his height. He explained that he knows others know he is a (categorically-transgressive short) man in the following way:

It’s just, like, a connotation of the words that they use. Like, I definitely get called “buddy” a lot more than like a six-foot-four man would be— not in an aggressive way— but just like, “Oh, hey, buddy” (laughs). It’s words like that. And I’m reminded of how short I am [for a cisgender man] because people [say things like this] to me every day.

Men were also alerted to the fact that others saw them as such due to the nature of smalltalk they engaged with strangers. For example, Dylan understood others saw him as a man based on questions he was asked about the young children he was with during a recent outing:

A lot of it is gendered words that clue me in [that others see me as a cisgender man]; but, yeah, you know, there’s also conversational things where like they just assume I’ve been [a cisgender man] my whole life or something, you know? ...sometimes it’s things like at the State Fair some guy thought that my little cousins were my kids, you know? There wasn’t any question of my fatherhood or, you know, my ability to father children. That happened like three times that day.

Similarly, Lane (30, Pilipino, cisgender man) sensed that the students he worked with saw him as a cisgender man based on heteronormative questions they posed about his personal life:

It takes about 20 minutes for a student— for a kid— to get really comfortable with you. And then they will start asking you really intrusive questions like, “Are you married?” “Who’s your wife?” “How long have you and your wife been together?”

One of the key ways that men sensed they were *passing* was through their social treatment. In general, *feeling valued* emerged as a major affirming theme for men that others saw them as such. Men-identified participants reported feeling valued in three distinct ways: *deference*; *sexual autonomy*; and inclusion into the *boys’ club*.

Regardless of gender status, many of those who *passed* as men reported privileged interactions where their perspectives and voices were centered and uplifted by others. Particularly, participants recalled feeling that others often deferred to them and even “imparted leadership” (Vincent, white, 22 cisgender man) onto them when they weren’t seeking those roles. Vincent explained, “The role of *the leader* is thrust upon me by some force out there, and I just find myself in leadership positions... and I feel like I’m the leader so often, that I don’t want to be the leader all the time.” Brian, a 22 year old white transgender man, similarly reported that he knows he’s passing as a cisgender man when he “can tell people look to [him] to lead when [he’s] in a group of women or feminine people.” Bowie, a 30 year old white cisgender man, also experienced an unsolicited sense of *deference* that he believed was— in large part— contingent upon his sustained gender legibility as a categorically-normative white cisgender man:

I’m tall, I’m blue-eyed, I’m white, I’m broad shouldered. People seemingly want to listen to me and give me opportunities. It’s strange. And I think it kinda fucked with me for a while, ‘cause I couldn’t tell *what was actually me*, and what was this filter that people see me through. So yeah, it’s this weird perverse gaslighting, in that... there are times in which I’ve made mistakes and felt like I really ought to

have been brought to accountability [but never was]. And it's just a floating-in-space feeling. And that makes me distrust the moral sense of the world. It's like, "Okay, what actually is true and what actually is right?" And I don't want [to be given special treatment], but.. I don't know how to move through the world without increasing suffering. I don't know how to move and act on ambitions and things that I want in a way that doesn't trample on others. That's something I've been struggling with for a while now. And... I think I developed a really bad faith relationship with myself because there was a feeling that... I didn't know if I could be successful without the privilege that I have. And that also, I think, kept me in the box of not wanting to explore further what a more gender-variant identity would look like.

Even though Lazarus (31, white and Latino, nonbinary) *is not cisgender nor a man*, they still understood they passed as such and shared similar experiences as Vincent, Brian, and Bowie, explaining:

This is just sort of a comparison looking back [to before I passed]... It's a little different in that I used to be spoken to... I don't want to say that *now I'm treated with more respect*— but it's sort of, like, [others] let me talk without interrupting.

Kent (29, white, transgender man) and Thomas (21, Mexican Irish, cisgender man) experienced the social veneration described by other participants and also pointed out the interactional physical component of *passing* as a cisgender man. Kent shared that after he started *passing* and began a new job, he experienced the status boost that Schilt (2010) described in her work on trans men in the workplace and noticed social *and* physical deference that he never experienced up until that point:

I changed jobs midway through transition and, like, going from a place that had seen me previously as a woman into [my new job] that only [saw] me as a [cisgender] man, I noticed my voice was valued more and people deferred to me in conversation more; and even just, like, walking down the streets— people give you space in a way that they don't give women.

Although Thomas had only ever been perceived as a cisgender man and did not have the comparative perspective of Kent, he similarly explained:

When I talk, people generally listen to me and give me their full attention; and when I'm walking, people very clearly move out of my way. And I know this is about my gender 'cause when I see other people [of different genders], they don't always get the same response or treatment.

Like Lazarus, Beau (52, white, genderqueer) is not cis or a man, yet they experienced *passing* enough of the time to name the physical deference that Kent and Thomas spoke of:

If [other men] perceive me as a [cis] man, they don't invade my physical space the way they do if they perceive me as a woman. And there's definitely a way you can just sit back and watch the way people interact with you [depending on their perception]. The way they touch you lightly... They might not do that with another [cisgender] guy.

The social expectation of *sexual autonomy* was related to *physical deferral*, yet it emerged as distinct cue in being perceived as a cisgender man. Sexual autonomy emerged as a theme whereby participants expected to have their sexual boundaries and subjectivity respected by others. This phenomenon was particularly salient among *passing* transgender men who had previously experienced being read as "women," but it was also reported by cisgender men as well. Many transgender men shared that they were often targets of sexual harassment and violence before *passing*, and a major way they knew others were seeing them as *cisgender men* was through their newfound social treatment of being sexually respected³⁵. For instance, Leon (38, white, transgender man) explained:

People don't touch me unsolicited or things like that anymore. Like, there's a lot less violation of my personal space now [that I pass as a cisgender man] which, you know, before I transitioned, I had no idea that was why I was being treated like that— because I was being perceived as a woman. I didn't realize that until after I was full of testosterone and didn't look like [a woman] anymore. And I was like, "Oh, I see, that's why [others have been violating my personal space]."

³⁵ Even though *sexual autonomy* emerged as a confirmation of passing for men, it should not be mistakenly interpreted as evidence that men evade all experiences of sexual harassment and violence. Men absolutely face sexual harassment and violence; further, it should be noted that the sexual harassment and violence men face is often underreported due to gender stigma.

Gross.” Every interaction I have with a stranger now is like being handed free money compared to before.

Grover (29, white, transgender man) shared Leon’s general experience, saying he knows others see him as a cisgender man now because “There’s an absence of these harassing things and there’s more of [others] being deferential to me.” These experiences can be best understood through concepts like *patriarchal dividends* (Connell 2005) and *masculine capital* (de Visser, Smith, and McDonnell 2009) where even those who ‘fail’ to perform, or are excluded from accessing, traditional masculinity reap some benefits from the hierarchical gender order that privileges the gender category “man” above others.

Men did not need to have a non-cis status in order to know that interactional *sexual autonomy* was a telltale sign that others were reading them as men. Cisgender men also sensed they *passed*, in part, because they didn’t experience others insisting on the *masculine right of access* (Hoskin 2019) to their bodies. For instance, Francis (67, white, cisgender man) and Gael (20, Latinx, cisgender man) each noted they felt they were being seen as men due to the notable absence of their sexual subjugation. Francis simply stated, “I think that being seen as a [cisgender man], I am free from a lot of sexual taunts and aggression.” Gael sensed that others perceived him as a cisgender man through both *language* and *sexual autonomy*:

I know that [others] know I’m a cis man through pronoun use.. or If it's a guy, they are not looking at me in a creepy way like some guys do. Sometimes, when I talk to my girlfriend, she tells me she can tell when guys are checking her out.

Billy (36, white, cisgender man) summarized the experiences of many men-identified participants when he explained that he largely experiences *sexual autonomy* in his everyday interactions due to passing as a cisgender man:

No one ever harasses me sexually on the street... I've also never witnessed street harassment. I'm sure it happens. I hear a lot of women complain about it. But I've never seen it, because it doesn't happen when I'm around.

In addition to *deference* and *sexual autonomy*, those perceived as cis men sensed they were *passing* based on their inclusion in the *boys' club*. The *boys' club* is a reference to the *old boys club* which affords white men access to professional networking opportunities (McDonald 2011). Although the *boys' club* does feature a networking component, it additionally grants access to what Schilt (2010) has previously referred to as "guy talk," which includes conversations that are exclusively reserved for men. For example, Xavier (25, white, transgender man) shared that he knows he *passes* because other men will engage him in *guy talk*, which he described as a "More jocular" way of relating. He went on to explain these exchanges tended to lack a feeling of accountability, "It's like they're saying, 'Hey I'm joking around. Everything I say is cool, right?'" Similarly, Grover (29, transgender man) explained that he knew he passed when he began to receive "Displays of overt friendliness from guys that I never got before"

When it came to the networking component of the *boys' club*, Hunter (36, white, transgender man) explained that part of the way he knows he's passing is by feeling less professionally limited:

I think now [since passing] there's more [professional] options for me across the board. I mean, male privilege is definitely a thing. It's always been something I've experienced growing up in the south. I knew immediately, I wouldn't be considered for certain opportunities because I was a *quote-unquote* girl. And that always really bothered me.

Even though Max (27, white) doesn't identify as any gender, Max³⁶ similarly experienced passing as a cisgender man; Max understood Max was passing as a cis man as a result of being included into the *boys' club* as well as experiencing *deference*. Max explained: "I get more

³⁶ Max uses "Max" and "Max's" as pronouns.

handshakes [when passing]. And more invitations to things. Events, meetings, dinners. My opinion— what I have to say— is worth more.” Like Max, Lazarus (31, white and Latino, nonbinary) does not identify as a man, but that does not stop them from *passing* as such and gaining access to the *boys’ club*. They said the following of sensing that others are reading them as a cisgender man: “Other men are more chummy and kind of taking me into the fold of whatever is going on. It’s always like job opportunities or things like that.”

In addition to *guy talk* and professional networking opportunities, the *boys’ club* included bringing those perceived to be men into conversations they would otherwise be barred from. For example, Gus (24, Afro Latinx, transgender man) stated that he knows he is passing because he noticed men are more willing to invite him to socialize and offer favors to him:

[Other men] are much faster and eager to just, like, include me in things. Like, in the past, it used to be that women would want to immediately include me into their social groups or social situations right away. And now it's the men that are going like, “Hey, do you want to go and get lunch with us?” Or they'll just be like, “I'm getting this, you need anything?”

Hunter (36, white, transgender man) and Scott (32, white Latinx, transgender man) similarly noticed that they were passing because other men had accepted them into the *boys’ club*. Both men discussed being included in exclusive conversations with other men, as Hunter explained:

I think it's when other, like, cis men have conversations with me that they would never have in the presence of a woman. Like *guy talk*. That's when I really feel, like— I'm you know— I don't think it necesarrily makes me feel like a man, but it's making me recognize that *they're seeing me as a [cis] man*.

Scott’s experiences mirrored Hunter’s in letting him know he *passed*— with the added cue of *sexual autonomy*:

It's just kind of like just the guys talking to me about stuff that you talk about with your buddies. You know, like, that wasn't an interaction that I would have had

prior to transitioning [and passing]. You know, and there's not, like, a weird sexual overtone to it. It's just a bunch of straight guys hanging out drinking beer and watching the game.

Inclusion into the *boys' club* did not always take place through overt or prolonged displays in a given interaction. Grayson (26, white, cisgender man) “Wouldn’t necessarily say it’s a big thing,” but he also experienced feeling seen as a man by his inclusion in “guy talk” discussing topics such as “Who we find attractive, or experiences with relationships.” Mitchell (25, cisgender man) worked in a retail setting and spoke about “brief” exchanges with customers that gave him clues about their perception of his gender category and status. For example, along with traces of *deference*, he noticed an almost instant bonding attempt from other men at work through their style of speech and commentary about women:

It’s the way that they reference women, where they sort of use a tone of voice or way of speaking that puts he and I in the same sort of group, and the women in another. There’s sort of familiarity in their voice when they speak that way, or something along those lines. I’ve had older fellows come up to me [at work] and ask me “Why none of the women knew where anything was,” and then be like, “I know *you’ll* know where it is.”

Social treatment proved to be an effective measure of whether one passed as a cisgender man or not; it included interactional exchanges related to *deference*, *sexual autonomy*, and inclusion in the *boys' club*. These cues informed gendered actors that others perceived their *statuses* as *cisgender* and their *categories* as *men*.

As I have demonstrated, it doesn’t matter if participants weren’t *actually cisgender* (such as trans men) or *even identified as men* (such as nonbinary individuals). *Passing* is ultimately in the eye of the beholder— and if others thought they were interacting with a cisgender man then venerative exchanges, a lack of sexual subjugation, and/or access to exclusive men-only networks and interactions were *all but inevitable*.

Perceiving (Cis) Women

Regardless of gender status, *all* of the women in my study endeavored to *pass* and be perceived as women. In other words, both cis and non-cis women sought to be seen as women and assessed interactions to determine whether they were successful in their pursuit. Like men, women affirmed that *cisnormative beliefs* about their bodies, *language*, and *social treatment* informed how they thought others perceived them.

Women-identified participants frequently reported that cisnormative beliefs about their bodies made them confident that others perceived them as women. Both cis and non-cis women held cisnormative beliefs about their bodies. When asked “what they needed to do for others to see them as women,” most participants responded in some variation of *not having to do anything*, that their bodies provided the ultimate evidence of their womanhood.

Women-identified participants such as Sadie (25, white, cisgender), Jackie (34, white, transgender), and Lucy (36, Latina, cisgender) often mentioned the curvature of their bodies or breasts as “proof” that they passed as cisgender women. As such, many woman-identified participants discussed their certainty of *passing* as cisgender women regardless of the clothes or makeup they did (or didn’t) wear. For instance Jackie explained, “I have makeup, but I don’t necessarily need it [to pass].” Similarly, Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman) shared:

I don’t have to do anything out of the ordinary [to pass], anymore... My daughter told me when I was transitioning, she said, “I don’t think anybody is gonna be able to recognize that you were not born a female.”

Similarly, Marie (60, white, transgender woman) and Sam (34, white, cisgender woman) both felt their cis womanhood was unquestioned by others, and whether they were categorically

adherent (Marie) or transgressive (Sam) made no difference in them being read as cis women. In Marie's case, she explained that others "Seem to perceive me as a [cis] woman right from the get go... and they seem to accept that I am a [cis] woman at face value." Similarly, Sam explained that there was no question as to whether others saw her as a cisgender woman: "As far as my gender [category as a woman and status as cis] goes, no, that's never questioned... As far as me being a [cis] woman goes."

Like Sam, Kate (18, Asian American, cisgender woman) discussed the fact that has engaged in categorical gender transgression and even faced discursive gender policing as a result, but that her category as a *woman* and her status as *cis* was ultimately never questioned. As Sam explained, others will often police her category transgressions discursively by making disparaging comments about her clothes but, "It's never like they say, 'Hey, I think what you're wearing makes you less of a [cis] woman.'" Rachel (22, white, cisgender woman) explained that despite transgressing her gender category and facing gender policing as a result, at the end of the day her cis womanhood remains unquestioned due to her fundamental cisnormative adherence: "Rather than *not* viewing me as a [cis] woman, they just view me in a negative light of a [cis] woman." Participants' cisnormative beliefs about their bodies provided a framework of confidence for *passing*, and they often went into interactions expecting to be perceived as cisgender women— regardless of their gender statuses— as long as their bodies tended toward cisnormative expectations. Once engaged in interactions, however, participants relied on additional cues such as *language* and *social treatment* to confirm that they were *passing* in the eyes of others.

Language proved to be a simple, yet powerful, tool in communicating whether a participant was *passing* or not. For many women-identified participants, the use of feminine

pronouns (i.e., she, her, and hers) signified confirmation that others saw them *as women*. For example, Jackie (34, white, transgender woman) summarized the experience of all *passing* women-identified participants when she shared she knew others saw her as a cis woman based on their pronoun use: “I mean, I get referred to as she/ her all the time.” Some participants were further clued into the ways others perceive them by the notable absence of discussing pronouns with them. For instance, Beatriz (22, Latina/ mixed-race, cisgender woman) explained that others “Just know” that she’s a cisgender woman “Cause they call me ‘she’ without asking me [for my pronouns.]” Similarly, Adelaide (20, white, cisgender woman) knew others saw her as a cis woman “By referring to me with she/ her [pronouns]... I guess most of that is by the fact that they *don’t* usually ask my pronouns or gender or act like they are confused by it.” In addition to pronoun use or the absence of asking for pronouns, participants also knew they were passing by being called ‘feminine’ nicknames. Marie spoke to this when she said, “Occasionally, [others will] use a feminine word to refer to me, a word like ‘Dear’ or ‘Hun,’ which you would not say to a man.” Participants did not just evaluate their passing on an interaction-to-interaction basis, they tended to share narratives of their observations of referential language *over time*. Chloe (59, transgender woman) explained that she knows she passes not just because of the interactions she has with certain individuals, but through the sum of her interactions across settings and time: “I haven’t had anybody call me anything other than “Ma’am” or “Miss” in years.”

Language and their own bodily perceptions were not the only ways that women understood they were being taken *as women*. One of the primary ways that women understood they were *passing* was through their social treatment. In particular, themes of feeling as though participants were the *objects of sexual entitlement* and generally *feeling devalued* emerged as interactional cues that signaled perceived cis womanhood.

Participants sensed that others perceived them as women because others often sought access to their bodies. In particular, women-identified participants knew they were *passing* because it was not uncommon for others to approach them, proposition them, sexualize them, and/ or cross their physical boundaries. Participants generally associated being sexually harassed as a major indicator *that others perceived them as cisgender women*. As such, participants provided countless examples of street and other forms of sexual harassment that confirmed to them that they passed as cis women. This interplay is best understood by Hoskin's *masculine right of access*, in which “Femininity is thought to signify masculine right of access, which undermines feminine subjectivity” (2019:691). In the case of the woman-identified participants I interviewed, the “femininity” in question was their assumed cis womanhood.

Feeling like an *object of sexual entitlement* was a major theme that emerged for woman-identified participants in reading others’ perceptions. A number of participants shared that their experiences with men, in particular, gave them clues as to how their gender was being perceived. A majority of woman-identified participants reported that frequent unwanted attention from men gave them the impression they were being read as cisgender women. For instance, Aly May (23, cisgender woman) explained that she is often engaged beyond the point of her own desire or comfort while using public transit:

[Men] will definitely sit on the bus while I’m trying to read a book and have a conversation with me even past the point of me saying “Okay I can’t talk anymore.” They’ll still press the issue. But yeah, people coming up to me to talk is pretty standard.

Similarly, Sadie (25, white, cisgender woman) discussed being reminded of her cis womanhood based on the “extra attempts” men make to engage with her on the street since her body had recently changed:

I had surgery recently and I lost 70 pounds in the last 4 months. Very rapid weight loss, and very rapid change in the way that men treat me. It's something that I've been noticing more of... I know for a fact that some of them are hitting on me, and want romantic and/ or sexual attention from me... And I am very uncomfortable with that kind of attention from cis men.

Like Sadie, Jackie (34, white, transgender woman) also expressed discomfort with being propositioned by men. She understood in those moments that she was *passing* as a cisgender woman and also had to navigate maintaining her safety both *as a woman* and *as someone who is not cis*:

I would try to limit the amount of words I say [around strangers who are men]. I think only because I feel like when I start talking a lot— I feel like that's what can sort of give me away [as non-cis], or maybe cause a flag in their mind— by my voice. So, I try to, like, limit the amount of words I say. If they're hitting on me, I make sure, like, they know I'm not interested *at all*. Like, I won't turn towards them. I won't let them buy me a drink. I use one word answers. Be as succinct as possible. I've never been assertive enough to tell them to go away or leave me alone. But yeah, I just try to, like, play it cool and just play like that quiet shy girl.

Participants understood the unwanted attention they received from men as a byproduct of *passing* as a cis woman; and as such, their expectations of sexual autonomy in everyday interactions were routinely diminished. Indeed, Fleetwood has discussed the “everydayness” of street harassment, for example (2019:1710). Experiences of diminished sexual autonomy were not uncommon and many participants, like Jackie, had strategies for trying to temper these kinds of interactions. Many woman-identified participants felt that the harassment they faced went hand-in-hand with being perceived as a cisgender woman; in general, participants reported that being read as a cisgender woman— to a certain extent— meant being treated like an *object of sexual entitlement*. Anna (29, white, cisgender woman) spoke to this when she said, “I think that’s the assumption— that because I’m [being read as a cis woman], and because [men] are attracted to me, is that I owe my attention to them.” Riley (27, white, cisgender woman) likened

the dynamic Anna described to gambling— where instead of money, the ‘prize’ is access to cisgender women’s time, attention, and/ or bodies: “Men will give compliments [to those they think are cis women]... and I feel like it’s like they’re putting a coin in the slot machine, hoping to get something out.”

Unfortunately, many other woman-identified participants experienced similar kinds of harassment to one another and felt as though they were *objects of sexual entitlement* in their everyday interactions with men. In many ways, this type of harassment was simply part and parcel when it came to being read as “a woman”— indeed, in her work on public harassment Carol Gardner (1995) found that of the 293 women she interviewed, all had experienced harassment at least once, regardless of race, age, or other axes of identity. In their recountings, participants would sometimes reference culturally-expected “roles” or heteronormative “assumptions” to explain these experiences. For instance, Sarah (38, white, cisgender woman) shared:

[Men] are just trying to talk to you *because you are a woman*, and *they want to talk to women*. So you are already in this role. I mean, the last time that this happened to me was when I was on [public transit]... It’s like he didn’t get that I didn’t want to talk to him. And it got to the point where I was like... I mean, it was uncomfortable to begin with— and then it gets to a point where you’re kind of [wondering], “Is this person crazy?” “Are they going to attack me?”... But he’s, like, running on a cultural script. And on this script, I, *as a woman*, am *supposed to engage him*. I am *supposed to be nice*, I am *supposed to talk to him*, I am *supposed to be somehow accessible*.

Beatriz (22, Latina/ mixed-race, cisgender woman) further explained the mechanics of the “roles” Sarah mentioned. She shared that one of the ways she knows others see her as a cis woman was by comparing her social treatment to that she observes to be the social treatment of men:

It's by the way that [men] talk to me. They wouldn't talk to me the same way they would talk to other men. And also [when I am] just walking on the streets, like, the way that men look at me... sometimes they look at me a certain way, or sometimes they harass me... It's disturbing. It feels like a dominance type of a thing, but very sexual, too... They look at me as if they had power over me; like, [power] over my body, or they could do whatever they wanted. So, it's like they don't respect me... And I think that's all because I'm a [cis] woman and because I'm seen as such.

The sexual social treatment of those thought to be cisgender men compared to those thought to be cisgender women makes Beatriz's point painstakingly clear; when it comes to gender legibility, those perceived to be cis men experienced *sexual autonomy*, whereas those perceived to be cis women experienced *sexual objectification and entitlement over their bodies*.

Sexual social treatment was not the only way women inversely mirrored men's experiences with gender legibility. An additional major point of *passing* perception for woman-identified participants was through *feeling devalued*. Whereas those perceived to be cisgender men acknowledged the palpability of their social value in interactions, those perceived to be cisgender women experienced diminished social inclusion and respect.

Those who *passed* as women understood that others perceived them as such, in part, through the dismissal, belittlement, or presumed incompetence they experienced in everyday interactions. Participants were reminded that others saw them as cisgender women, particularly through feeling devalued in professional settings. For example, Nikki (52, white, transgender woman) shared that she is treated differently at work depending on whether others perceive her as a cisgender man or a cisgender woman, and that she knows she's *passing* when she feels devalued in her interactions with others:

If I am perceived as a [cis woman], ideas aren't listened to as well in meetings, I will more often be interrupted. There's a whole different dynamic, especially in

dealing with a group of men over certain topics... And over the phone, voice-wise, a lot of time I'm [mis]read as [a cis man], so I tend to be taken a lot more seriously over the phone... or with technical issues. I work in a highly technical field. So depending on how people perceive me, depends on how much credibility they give me for my confidence and my ability at work.

Caroline (49, transgender woman) corroborated Nikki's experience with her observations of her own workplace:

I mentioned that I work in the software industry. It's mostly men. I've been pretty fortunate to be in companies that have good [gender inclusion] policies where people are generally treated well; But, I have observed many, many times where women will make a point, and a guy will make the same point later, and that will get heard. But it won't necessarily get heard when a woman says it, it won't resonate as often.

Despite frequently feeling devalued at work, those perceived as cis women often felt they had little recourse in meaningfully addressing these situations. Sam (34, white, cisgender woman) described being reminded of her cis womanhood through a diminishing interaction at work, and feeling obligated to just accept her colleague's "insult[ing]" comments:

I went to a job site with one of our technicians so I could learn more about the stuff that we do. And he was having an issue with something, and I made a suggestion to him. And he was like, "Oh, *you* know that stuff? *Did you learn that from your husband?*" And I was like, "No, I taught myself this stuff." It was just kind of like an insult, but I had to roll with the punches on it... I very much felt like I was being reminded I'm a [cis] woman. Kind of almost being put in my place.

Aly May (23, Black, cisgender woman) experienced similar dismissal in her business dealings with her family. She attributed being excluded from meetings and conversations by her brother specifically because of her gender:

Me and my family, we do a lot of business together and I'm more a person who stays organized and keeps schedules and takes notes and things like that. But my brother, he will not work with me— he will not— if there's a meeting or anything like that, he's like, "You definitely can't go." And it's just a complete dismissal... I can't do any of the planning or organizing or be part of that, whereas that's where my real skill is. So, it's kind of a dismissal and a[s though he is saying] "We'll put you in this place." And it's expected I'm gonna be in this [other role I'm overqualified for] because he needs me to be there, but he's not gonna utilize my skills.

Just as Sam and Aly May described being 'put in their place' due to being read as cisgender women, Luna (25, Mexican American, cisgender woman) similarly experienced being dismissed and belittled by her family members, primarily because of their perception of her gender category and status:

[My father] would say it sometimes— straight up: "That's your job as a [cis] woman, that you clean and you know how to cook." [My family members] would make this joke that once I knew how to cook, I could get married... With my dad, if I raise my voice or come off as "more dominant" in his terms, he tells me that I "Try to wear the pants in the relationship," or just [that I'm] "Wearing pants" in general when I shouldn't... He just exploded because he said I was trying to control things and that it doesn't suit me well.

In all of these instances, participants are keenly aware that their socially-devalued treatment is directly connected to their being perceived as cisgender women by others.

It is important to remember that gender perception is not always accurate and it is not uncommon for gendered actors to pass and experience the social treatment of categories and/ or statuses they don't hold. Just as those *merely perceived as cis men* reported interactions that foregrounded *feeling valued*, participants did not actually need to be *cisgender* or *women* to be perceived as such and treated accordingly. Although Max (27, white) doesn't identify as any

gender, Max³⁷ will *pass* for a cis man or cis woman in any given interaction. Previously, I discussed Max's experience of feeling valued at work when Max was passing as a cis man. Max has also had the experience of passing as a cis woman at work and recounted an interaction that ultimately led to Max quitting:

I had a particular incident happen to me recently with somebody. With a lead of mine, and so I quit. And he pretty much let me know, "You're a [cis] woman, keep your mouth shut." I would speak about this with other women [colleagues] and they would tell me they experience this all the time, like my mentor. She works and does a beautiful job [in her area of specialization]. Her boss, who's a man, actually made her take a paycut because he wasn't going to come in and make the same as she was. Like, these are constant reminders [of being seen as a cis woman]. It's even called "The Good Old Boys Club." They would refer to themselves as the *Good Old Boys*... These were actually things that I have heard and have been told about.

As was the case with passing as cis men, it doesn't matter if participants weren't actually *cisgender* (such as trans women), or even whether they actually identified as *women* (such as nonbinary individuals). *Gender legibility* ultimately falls under the purview of others, and it is up to the gendered actor to determine how others perceive them. In the case of those thought to be cisgender women, experiences of sexual subjugation and generally feeling devalued in interactions with others were *nearly gauranteed*.

Perceiving Nonbinary People

Unlike those identified as men and women in my study, nonbinary participants did not have expectations or report experiences of immediately being taken as nonbinary by others. As I previously mentioned, there is not yet a framework allowing for nonbinary *passing* in the same way that there is a model of cisnormative development making possible the ready-perception of

³⁷ Max uses "Max" and "Max's" as pronouns.

cisgender men and cisgender women. As such, nonbinary participants most often reported that they could tell that others did not initially perceive their gender categories and/or statuses. Consequently, nonbinary individuals were frequently misgendered and (mis)perceived as either cis men or cis women. In fact, as a group, those who were nonbinary experienced the lowest level of *gender legibility* and faced the highest instances of misgendering and misperception out of any other gendered group I interviewed.

Most nonbinary participants discussed being misread as either cisgender men or cisgender women. As such, their nonbinary (and non-cis) identities were erased in most social interactions. Jaume (29, white and Hispanic) spoke to this when explaining that his actual gender identity as a trans person is rarely immediately perceived by others, and instead he is often misperceived as a cisgender man:

People perceive my gender variance, but don't know that it's around transness.... So, I think in some ways, people are perceiving it pretty often, but they don't realize that [I'm a trans person]... People perceive me to be a cis man a lot more than before; and I think that people don't necessarily see me as trans, but they're seeing me as gender-variant in some way. And I think for a lot of people, that means that they think I'm a *gay cis man*— but I know that part of that gender variance for me is that I'm trans... I'm really used to not being seen as a trans person because there isn't enough space for trans people to exist within the social constructs of gender that currently exist... [But I do feel like] I deserve to be seen just like all the cis people.

As Jaume explained, his gender variance (read: transgression) is still perceived— but not in a way that accurately acknowledges his gender category or status. Indeed, other nonbinary participants reported that others attributed non-normative sexualities and/or gender category transgressions to them instead of nonbinaryness and/ or non-cisness. For example Loren (36, white, nonbinary) explained that others rarely perceive them as nonbinary but, depending on

their geographic location, they know they will likely be seen as either a categorically-transgressive cis man or a categorically-transgressive cis woman:

In places where things are really binary [such as more conservative cities]... I'm just read as a [cis] guy. 'Cause people don't have a reference point for nonbinary... so depending on where I am, [others] are looking at me like, "Why's this dude acting so weird?" Or they're looking at me as, like, a super butch [cis woman] or something like that."

Nonbinary participants were necessarily foreclosed upon the prospect of *passing* because it is a multi-step process that requires a *binary* 'starting' and 'ending' point. That didn't mean, however, that nonbinary participants were barred from *gender legibility* altogether. Although technically there was no way for nonbinary participants to *pass* as nonbinary, they could still experience *recognition* (Connell 2009).

Whereas *passing* requires the gendered actor to ultimately be perceived through a (cis) binary lens— first at birth and then later socially— *recognition* disempowers "sex" from prescribing gender. *Passing* uses a cisnormative framework to 'place' gendered actors without them confirming their category and/ or status— thus, the 'options' for passing are constrained to either "cisgender man" or "cisgender woman." Recognition, on the other hand is more expansive than passing, but requires gendered actors to specify their gendered existence, rather than just have it stamped upon them. In this way, *recognition* allows for the affirmation of non-normative (and nonbinary) categories *and* statuses.

I found that *gender legibility* was a potentially attainable by way of *recognition* for nonbinary participants— so long as they explicitly disclosed their gender categories and statuses to others. In order to share their gender categories and statuses, though, participants needed to make educated guesses as to whether that information would be taken seriously and treated with respect. For example Ajpu (35, Afro-Mestizx, gender non-conforming) and Lazarus (31, white

and Latino, nonbinary) both discussed a ‘vetting’ process where they determined, on a case-by-case basis, if it would be in their best interests to share their gender identities. As Ajpu explained, “I think that conversation [about my gender category and status] can only truly happen is if I perceive someone as being open and receptive.” Lazarus further explained that sharing their identity could prove futile if they don’t think the person they’re considering telling is genuinely receptive or understanding of what it means to be nonbinary:

I only tell people [that I’m nonbinary] who I feel like would be open to the idea or familiar with it already. Because I think if it was someone who couldn’t grasp it to begin with, they’re just not going to see me that way anyway.

Sharing their identities with others was not a guarantee of *recognition*, though it did allow for the possibility. Ultimately, even after ‘coming out,’ many nonbinary participants continued to experience misnaming, misgendering, and being generally disrespected through various acts of *gender binary policing* (which I have discussed at length in the previous chapter.)

I asked *all* participants if and how they could perceive whether others were nonbinary. Unlike the data I collected for counterpart questions about perceiving men and women, participants provided inconsistent answers regarding what they considered to be nonbinary cues. Although participants were disjointed in the attributes they relied on to determine whether or not someone was nonbinary, themes of *gender transgression*, *age*, and *body modifications* came up. In particular, participants of various categories and statuses noted that “Gender neutrality” (Dylan, 23, white, transgender man); “Not being clearly stereotypically ‘one or the other’” (Beatriz, 22, Latina/ mixed-race, cisgender woman); being “detached from stereotypical masculine or feminine attire” (Nathan, 24, white, cisgender man); “Mixed messages” (Lililanna, 54, transgender woman); being of a “younger generation (Axel, 58, white, transgender man); and/ or

“Colored hair, piercings, and tattoos” (Dominic, 25, white, transgender man) signaled that someone may identify as nonbinary and/or be non-cis.

There was not a consensus among participants about stereotypic nonbinary cues. As Morgan (23, white, trans-masculine nonbinary person) explained: “There's no real way to, like, cue somebody that you're nonbinary; because nonbinary people look like anything.” In this case, the “cuing” Morgan referred to would be a sex assignment that nonbinary could ‘correspond’ to in the way that cis men and cis women correspond to “males” and “females,” respectively.

My analysis revealed that being immediately perceived— or *passing*— as nonbinary in a given interaction is unlikely. Despite not holding a cisgender status or identifying with a binary gender category, nonbinary participants were far more likely to be presumed as cisgender men or women than they were to be acknowledged as nonbinary and/ or non-cis. Some nonbinary participants experienced *gender legibility* via *recognition*, but even *recognition* tended to be an inconsistent occurrence.

Nonbinary participants sometimes knew that others *did* perceive their gender transgressions and even so, their gender identities remained invisibilized. Others often misattributed nonbinary participants’ gender transgressions in such a way resulted participants being seen as *non-heterosexual cis men and cis women*, instead of *non-cis* and *nonbinary*. As such, nonbinary individuals were highly likely to report many of the same interactional experiences that men- and women-identified participants shared regarding being read as (cis) men and (cis) women, respectively.

Gender Legibility through the Lens of Race

Gender legibility is not only informed by gendered attributes. My analysis revealed that gender perception is impacted by simultaneous racial perception. The relationship between gender and racial perception was made particularly clear in the case variable *passing* for non-cis participants. Some non-cis participants of color described experiencing passing more or less frequently depending on the racial and ethnic identities of those who were interpreting them.

Gus, a 24 year old Afro Latinx transgender man, and Lee, a 27 year old Asian androgynous transgender man³⁸, both noticed that they tended to *pass* as cisgender men more frequently with white people compared to other people of color. For example, Lee explained the he knew he did not always *pass* with other Asian people:

I think people who are not my race are more likely to just see me as a [cis] guy. People who are, like, close to my race or, like, you know, other Asian people are more half-and-half about it. I think it's mostly, like, white people... I know usually white people just see me as a [cis] guy.

Gus similarly experienced *passing* as a cis man more frequently with white people. He explained that part of the way he knew he passed less with other people of color was because he was more likely to experience *the look* from them:

It's generally white people, I've noticed... when I first started passing a lot more, it was mostly white people who [would read me as a cisgender man]. And then people who are people of color were a little bit more, like, nuanced about it. Like, they would look at me a little bit longer. And then they would [eventually gender me correctly], but they weren't 100% sure all the time about it. Because [other people of color] were looking at me, and they were *seeing me*; they weren't just seeing, like, a person of color.

Lee and Gus' experiences with variable *passing* highlight the way that gendered perception is tempered by racial perception. Further, their experiences speak to Bonilla-Silva and Embrick's

³⁸ All gender and racial descriptors are presented verbatim from participants' write-in answers from the study presurvey.

concept of *white habitus*, whereby white people experience non-white others through a matrix of perception reinforcing “deep cultural conditioning” and racial stereotypes that ultimately contribute to “white hypersegregation” from Black people in particular, and other non-Black people of color more generally (2006:233-234).

The notable absence of white participants’ discussion of racialized gender perceptions speaks to the way that gender categories and statuses are centered upon white ideals. Indeed, it has been found that white non-cis people believed that their social classes and sexualities—*rather than their race*— played a significant role on how their genders are perceived (de Vries 2012). As de Vries further explains:

Transitioning genders is not a simple process of moving along a continuum of woman to man or vice versa. Dominant cultural narratives such as whiteness influence an individual’s perceived gender (2012:60).

Further, as Ridgeway and Correll note, white-informed cultural beliefs about gender become the default rules of gender (2004). In this way, it makes sense that white people would not afford Lee or Gus the same refined gendered perception that other people of color did. It appeared that white people read Lee and Gus *primarily as non-white*, and then proceeded to perceive their genders in the most reductive possible terms, allowing both Lee and Gus to *pass* with relative ease.

As I previously discussed, nonbinary individuals rarely, if ever, *pass* as their gender categories and statuses; they are, instead, often (mis)read as either cisgender men or cisgender women. Ollie, a 21 year old Black gender non-conforming person, experienced this type of misperception in the context of racial profiling and police brutality when they and their friends were improperly stopped and assaulted by white police officers. Ollie’s three friends in this

scenario were also Black and no one in the group identified as a man. This did not stop the police officers, however, from perceiving Ollie and their friends as Black men:

They [stopped us] because they think we're four Black men, you know? And they're afraid of Black men. It's so deep because I'm getting that violence, even though the violence that Black women face is so different. But it is was in that moment, I felt like a Black man, really, truly. These people are not afraid to kill me. But it gets really extreme for my other friend. She ends up getting tackled by three police officers— three men. They push her to the ground, and three men are on top of her and choking her. And I'm videotaping all of this. And in the back of my mind, I'm like, "I'm next, I'm next." You should have seen how three men just tackle her and handcuff her. They lift her up, literally and carrying her by the handcuffs. You can hear her scream. And I think it was a really important moment for me, 'cause I'm like, "Wow, the genderless black body." You know, all you have is a Black body here. They don't care if they're brutalizing it, it doesn't matter. Whatever, it doesn't matter. You're *just* Black. And you need to be like, thrown in the back of a police car, and that's what they did. She's screaming, her wrists are bleeding. You know, they just choked her, and threw her in the back of the police car. Then that's the end of that... I'll never forget that moment because like I said, they thought we were four Black men. And they kept calling my friend "sir." And it was just a really traumatic, violent experience. And you know, I just think... Black lesbians, Black [people who are] masculine of center, are also seen as Black men.

This does not mean that Black men— or those perceived to be— are the only victims of state violence (Crenshaw et al. 2015), but Ollie's experience with racialized gender (mis)perception resulting in they and their friends all being read as Black men speaks to the same reductive process whereby Lee and Gus easily *passed* as cis men to white strangers. In Ollie's case, however, this instance of *passing* occurred within a frame where Blackness is (hyper)masculinized (i.e., Collins 2009) in what Embrick describes as the United States' "long fascination with Black bodies," whereby "Black and brown bodies have been controlled and put on display as an affirmation of white superiority" (2015:838).

Because hegemonic cultural conceptions of gender necessarily refer to white gendered actors, gender is necessarily “raced” through a white lens (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). As such, non-white gendered actors may be more likely to report experiencing the perception of their gender categories in reductive ways when interacting with white strangers. In some instances, such as those described by Lee and Gus, passing becomes more likely *because race is forefronted*; and in other instances, such as that described by Ollie, white violence becomes more likely *because race is forefronted*. Collectively, Ollie, Gus, and Lee’s experiences with gender perception provide yet another example of the ways in which gender legibility is both constructed and tempered through the lens of race and in particular, whiteness.

The Power of Perception

It's like being part of a secret club, or something that I never saw before.

Hunter, 36 year old white transgender man

Gender is a primary relational frame that organizes social interaction (Ridgeway 2009) and, for that reason, *gender legibility* is a key factor in maintaining and reproducing social hierarchies. My analysis revealed that the primacy of *gender legibility* was made particularly salient for participants who experienced being perceived as both men *and* women at various points in their lives. Those who reported being alternately read as a man and as a woman reported significant differences in their social interactions with others depending on how they were perceived. These differences were so pronounced that participants essentially described experiencing two distinct social realities. Most commonly, it was non-cis *men* and non-cis

women (particularly transgender men and transgender women) who recounted these kinds of observations, but some nonbinary participants shared similar experiences as well.

Those who were previously perceived as women but currently passed as men reported experiences consistent with my prior description of *perceiving (cis) men*. In general, they reported feeling more valued in their experiences being read as men compared to when they were read as women. In particular, participants commented on being perceived as funnier, treated with more respect, gaining more sexual autonomy, and being seen as a threat.

As I discussed in cases of *perceiving (cis) men*, participants did not necessarily need to identify *as a man*, in order to experience the being read as one. For example, Lazarus (31, white and Latino, nonbinary), explained that even though they are not a man, others treat them as though they are funnier now simply because they *pass* as a cis man: “I’m funnier than I was [when I was being read as a woman]. And I sort of think that has to do with [others] looking at me and thinking, ‘Ah, this is a [cisgender man], and this is how to respond to one.’” In addition to being treated as more humorous, those read as men were simultaneously taken more seriously compared to when they were perceived as women. Kent (29, white, transgender man) shared, “Other men don’t second guess my expertise on things anymore,” commenting on the new ways he’s noticed other men orient to him. Those perceived as men also noted a significant differences in the ways sexuality contextualizes their interactions with others now compared to when they were perceived as women. Xavier (25, transgender man) explained: “It always felt like a weird sexual thing with men interacting with me before as a woman; and so now, it’s different. That sexual tension is not really there.” Miles (23, white, transgender man) is a runner and shared that despite *passing* as a cis man “100% of the time... over the past several years,” he had been misgendered recently and consequently faced street harassment while he was out for a

run. This incident made him reflect on his prior experiences being (mis)read and sexualized as a woman:

I had forgotten how much more security I feel any time I'm being perceived now. Like, I used to not go for runs during the daytime, because I would— like, *every single time*— I would get catcalled or just have, you know, some sort of remark, or stare, or whatever. So, I would just run at night [to avoid being seen and harassed]... I'd forgotten how [being the target of street harassment] feels.

Being perceived as men meant participants began to experience sexual autonomy in everyday interactions; it also meant that participants began to sense that others saw them as a potential threat. Indeed, nearly all who experienced being ‘suddenly’ perceived as a man recounted instances of becoming aware that they elicit fear in others. For example, Hunter (36, white, transgender man) recalled one of the primary ways he knew he was *passing* was by being perceived as a threat:

Actually, the hardest part of my transition is that now I am a privileged white man. And I have to behave as such; like, the first time I noticed it is when I got on an elevator after work hours. There was no one else in the office but me and this other woman. And we're both in the elevator together *and I just feel how uncomfortable she was*. And I didn't understand why. And then it finally dawned on me: “Oh, she's afraid because she's alone in this place with a man!” I was like, “Okay, I have to realize I'm now a threat to other women.” Whereas before, I never was. That's something I've had to realize. Like, if I'm walking down the street, and if I've been walking behind the same woman for an extended period of time, she's probably freaked out thinking I'm following her. I need to, like, hang back some more, or go, “Hey,” and pass her, or do something [to appear less threatening]. I've noticed that “*stranger-danger*” fear for the first time in my life from other women, and I've never had before. And that's one way I know that they're perceiving me as [a cisgender man] because they're perceiving me as a threat for the first time.

Many other non-cis men and nonbinary participants reported similar experiences as Hunter; but *women* were not the only people who seemingly felt uncomfortable around those they perceived as (heterosexual) cis men. Leon (38, white, transgender man) described sensing fear from gay

men on the street in a predominately gay neighborhood in a major city where he'd spent a lot of time before consistently *passing*:

When I'm in a place like [predominately gay neighborhood in a major city], which is a gay area... it's a very weird sensation for me; because while it's validating [to *pass*], it's also really depressing... and I feel bad because— now if I'm in a place where there's gay people— guys that are holding hands will see me and they'll stop holding hands. Like, they're scared that I'm gonna, like, you know, call them a name or do something to them. I guess I look that much like a fucking straight white guy now. I remember the first time it happened, I was really sad.

Hunter and Leon's experiences were not unique among participants who had been previously perceived as women but were now perceived as men. Further, their experiences reflected a palpable embodiment of Connell's *hegemonic masculinity* that sees white, heterosexual men at the top of a social hierarchy which subordinates women and those with "marginalized" masculinities such as gay men (1987).

In sum, the experience of being perceived *as a woman and then as a man* gave participants a unique perspective highlighting some of the key consequences of the current gender order. In general, participants experienced more social value, were perceived as funnier, were treated with more respect, became more sexually autonomous, and wielded the ability to threaten others through their mere presence. Although all who *passed* as cis men— *including actual cis men*— displayed varying levels of awareness of their social realities, non-cis men tended to most clearly report surprise and were more likely to be highly cognizant of just how different social life is from being perceived as a woman compared to being perceived as a man. Xavier (25, white, transgender man) summed up the experience of nearly all *passing* non-cis men when he explained how his everyday interactions have changed since *passing* as a cis man:

People laugh at everything I say now, like I'm entertaining them. They listen to me (laughs). So dark. It's like the reality of a sexist world. People listen to me. People laugh at the things I say. People are quiet and assume that I'm gonna speak first. All the time. Another part that's also kind of the flipside of that is that: if I'm

walking at night and a woman is walking by me, she'll walk across the street and won't walk next to me. I'm perceived as a threat sometimes. And people assume I'm straight. People listen to my opinions. They let me take charge, and if I do, I'm not questioned. Yeah. It's totally real. It's a complete 180 [from being perceived as a woman].

Those who were previously perceived as men but currently *passed* as women reported experiences consistent with my prior description of *perceiving (cis) women*. In general, they reported feeling less valued in their experiences being read as women compared to when they were read as men. In particular, participants commented on being taken less seriously, being dismissed, being treated as though they needed help in moments when they actually did not, and noticing that other women seem more open and comfortable around them.

Ava (21, white, transgender woman) shared that one of the key moments that she realized she was *passing* included her being dismissed in a way she had not previously experienced when she was (mis)perceived as a man:

When I went into a group project in math class, I experienced sexism. Actually, I was directly ignored on purpose. When I had the right answers, it wasn't right *because it wasn't what the guys thought*. And, at first, it was very much a shock, because I've never experienced that before. But then I went home, and I kind of thought about it and realized that's probably what it was. And I'm like, "Okay, so yes, I know that people *do* perceive me as [a cis woman]."

Nikki (52, white, transgender woman) similarly noted her realization that, since being perceived as a cis woman, others were less likely to listen to her ideas, and more likely to interrupt her and treat her as though she needed extra assistance with tasks she felt capable of completing by herself. In particular, she noticed an onslaught of extra attention in stereotypically "men's" retail spaces since *passing*, "I get asked four to five times if I need help finding something in Home Depot... or auto parts stores— same sort of thing."

Participants who were previously thought to be men also noticed a significant difference in the way women interacted with them once they were perceived as women. For example, Marie (60, white, transgender woman) explained that since *passing*, women relate to her in a new way:

I can't believe how friendly women are. When I'm walking through a mall... if I glance over at some woman walking toward me and make eye contact, I'll get a little nod and smile. Men avoid eye contact like it was a deadly plague or something. And women are so open with each other. I go into [a Women's clothing store] and not only do the sales ladies talk to me, but other customers will come up and give feedback on whatever clothes I'm looking for and make suggestions. It's amazing. I never knew this until I [passed as a cis woman].

Similarly, Chloe (59, Native American, transgender woman) shared that since passing, women now treat her "as another girl," explaining that:

Women— when they're talking to other women— are different than when they're talking to a man. Because... when they're talking with women, they're much much more relaxed. They're much much more open about their personal lives. And that's the way I found cis women to be... that's the way that they would talk to me: very open about their personal lives and their relationships and stuff. They would not open up like that to [someone they perceived as a cis man].

That the same person can have such variable social experiences depending on if they were read as a man or woman highlights the power of gender perception. Participants occupied entirely different social worlds based on their *gender legibility*. In general, the experiences of those perceived as cis women were the inverse to those perceived as cis men. In terms of the current gender order, the power of perception is nowhere more evident than through an examination of the experiences of transgender men and women before and after *passing*.

The Perception of Power

It's different when a gay [cis] man is nice to me on the street [versus] a straight cis man; 'cause I don't think a gay [cis] man wants to rape me, or fuck me, or anything like that.

Beatriz, 22 year old Latina/ mixed-race cisgender woman

Because *gender knowledge* refers to cultural information that allows us to relate to ourselves and others through a gendered system of difference, I found it is often used to inform impressions of personal safety among gendered actors. My analysis revealed that regardless of gender, all participants frequently perceived the *categories, statuses, and transgressions of other gendered actors* in order to assess potential threats and ensure their personal safety. Gender perception is the deployment of *gender knowledge* in a given interaction. Gendered perceptions and interactions are of particular sociological interest because they are major sites where the gender hierarchy reproduces itself. As Kate Bornstein reminds us with her work on “gender defenders” and “gender terrorists,” the gender hierarchy is (often violently) enforced both ideologically and materially (eds. Stryker and Whittle 2006). Gendered violence is a material outcome of the current gender order, in which those in the category *women* and with *non-cis* statuses are particularly impacted.

That gendered actors navigated social interactions to avoid gender-based violence is not new information; to the contrary— Gill Valentine’s work on the “geography of fear” is a prime example of fear of gendered violence and has been highly cited since it was first published in 1989. Valentine’s work generated one of several major threads of inquiry into the intersection of gender, interaction, and power. As Valentine demonstrated, “Women are pressuri[z]ed into a restricted use and occupation of public space” in navigating the current gender order (1989:386), but what is the source of that pressure and are “women” the only gendered actors who feel it?

Much of the work around assessing threats based on gendered violence focuses specifically on the experiences of *cisgender women* although, a brief look into the literature clearly demonstrates that while cis women absolutely do face gendered violence, they are not the sole targets of gender based violence (i.e., Jauk 2013). Indeed, other gendered actors who transgress gender category- and status-based norms of the social order face heightened instances of *physical gender policing* (Flores et al 2021; Pascoe 2012; National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs 2017).

Connell's (1987) conception of *hegemonic masculinity* helps us understand the deployment of violence against non-hegemonic gendered actors in our current gender system. When paired with *hegemonic masculinity*, Valentine's work illuminates the gendered *perception of power* wherein *all gendered actors* who are not read as cisgender, heterosexual, men understand themselves as potential targets of gendered violence. As such, I found that all participants viewed cis heterosexual men as the likely enforcers of the gender order— including participants who themselves were cis, heterosexual men.

Hegemonic masculinity posits that all gendered actors are understood through the context of their relation to cultural ideals of (cisgender, heterosexual, and white) masculinity; for this reason, participants reported unique concerns in assessing their risk of gendered violence around those they perceived to be cisgender heterosexual men. These assessments were directly related to a given participant's approximation of cis, heterosexual, masculinity. In particular, I found that *cis women* assessed interactions with those they perceived to be cis, heterosexual men for threats of sexual and/ or physical violence due to their gender category and status as cis women; *non-cis men and women* assessed interactions with those they perceived to be cis, heterosexual men for threats of *gender status policing, gender category policing*, and sexual violence; *cis men*

assessed interactions with those they perceived to be cis, heterosexual men for threats of *gender category policing*; finally, nonbinary individuals did not expect to be read as such and thus assessed interactions with those they perceived to be cis, heterosexual men for threats of the same *gender category policing* and sexual violence that cis men and women feared.

My findings further confirmed that which has been undeniably-established: that those in the gender category and status of *cisgender women* hold significant concerns about sexual and physical violence in their everyday interactions. In particular, cis woman participants discussed feeling generally uncomfortable around those they perceived to be cisgender, heterosexual men. My analysis revealed that *all* cis women participants reported feeling fearful of those they perceived to be cisgender heterosexual men and many participants took various measures to avoid them. Aly May (23, Black, cisgender woman) recounted numerous threatening interactions with cisgender, heterosexual men and shared, “I think I’m a lot more weary of men. I’m more cautious. I have a lot more prejudice towards men, cis hetero men.” Riley (27, cisgender woman) described a similar *weariness*, explaining that having professional or personal relationships with cisgender heterosexual men does not necessarily mitigate their potential threat:

I’m very reserved and cautious... I’m always extremely weary of cisgender men in power positions and interacting with them, because I’ve had a lot of issues with, like, people crossing the line that are older than me and have more power than me, like teachers and professors. So, I’m very reserved when it comes to interacting with authority figures that are cisgender men. I also, I would say I’m more reserved *in general* with men in any scenario. I’m always hyper-aware of the fact that cisgender men have been socialized to see me in a certain way with a certain use value. *No matter who they are, it doesn’t matter, even my partner has been socialized like this.* I’m always very aware of the fact that they can, with fragile masculinity, flip and hurt me because they’re bigger than me, too. So yeah, any interaction with a strange man, I’m always very delicate about it. I don’t insult strange men, I don’t get aggressive with strange men. I’m frightened of them, actually.

As I have previously shown, participants do not need to actually be *cisgender* or even identify as *a woman* to be perceived as a cis woman. Those perceived as cis women reported similar sentiments as cis women who generally felt fearful of cis, heterosexual men. Even though Jackie (34, white) is a transgender woman and also expressed concerns that her non-cis status would become known and policed, she explained she knows she regularly *passes*; as such, she experiences Valentine's "geography of fear" *as a (cis-passing) woman* and expressed an aversion to places with high populations of cis, heterosexual men: "I would sort of avoid— I don't know— a golf range or, like, any sports stadium. Not that they would misinterpret my gender or misgender me per se— but I just I feel like those are *high risk zones*." Indeed, many woman-perceived participants were highly aware of the sexual and gendered violence they could face simply navigating everyday social life. For instance Mickey (28, white, nonbinary) stated "I'm just always generally worried about harassment from that group of people," referring to cis, heterosexual men. Rachel (22, white, cisgender woman) summarized cis-perceived women's general approach to the possibility of interacting with those read as cisgender, heterosexual men:

I tend to be more guarded, particularly with cis men since there are so many factors like sexual assault and catcalling that have put me in danger. *It's not that it wouldn't happen with people of different genders*, but I feel more of a need to protect myself around cis men. I feel more of the idea that sexual assault is perpetrated by cis men a lot.

As I previously discussed, all gendered actors are read through a cisnormative, binary, and *passing-oriented* lens that tends to prompt others to identify them as either *cis men* or *cis women* regardless of their actual gender categories and statuses. I found that non-cis participants were often ultimately read as either cis men or cis women; however, there were also many instances where non-cis participants knew they were being seen specifically as *non-cis*. In those

situations, non-cis participants expressed particular concerns of being *seen as transgender* by those they perceived to be cis— particularly cisgender heterosexual men.

In recent years the disproportionate *physical gender status policing* non-cis people experience has been increasingly highlighted in the media and explored in the literature. Just this year it's been found that trans people are more than four times more likely to experience violent victimization compared to their cisgender counterparts (Flores et al. 2021). Specifically, transgender women of color have been targets of hate violence unknown to their cis, white, and men-identified counterparts (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs 2017).

Apprehension, then, was a common theme among non-cis participants interacting with those they perceived as cis, heterosexual men; specifically, participants reported being concerned that their *non-cis status* would become forefronted in interactions and they would face *physical gender status policing* as a result. Non-cis participants very clearly felt it was a necessary measure of safety to take caution in interacting with those they perceived to be heterosexual, cis men. For instance, Marie (60, white, transgender woman) explained:

I know that being transgender— even in [the liberal state she lives in]— is not a completely safe thing. There are a lot of transphobic people out there. And although I don't go looking for trouble, I'm more on my guard with cis men than I would be with cis women.

Chloe (59, transgender woman) echoed Marie's sentiments when she explained, "I'm a very, very open, very caring, very loving person; but I am much more cautious when talking to a cisgender man than I am anyone else."

Non-cis men and women went on to explain that what they feared in interacting with those they perceived to be cis, heterosexual men was *physical gender status policing*— specifically, anti-transgender violence. Levi (25, white, transgender man) expressed hesitations about his non-cis status being perceived by cis, heterosexual men: "I'm just concerned that they

would find out [I'm trans] and, you know, say some not great things or, you know, like, make fun of me. I guess there's always— in the back of the mind— that worries about, like, physical violence.” Dorothy (54, white, transgender woman) also expressed concern of physical violence and described her own experience with the *geography of fear* when she shared: “There are times [of day] and places where I would not go. Like, if there was a group of guys and I was walking past a football stadium— let's just say I wouldn't do that 'cause I might expect to get followed or beaten up.” Alex (23, Mexican American, transgender man) shared his fear of anti-trans violence escalating to homicide:

If [cis, heterosexual men] dislike transgender people, I'd feel like my life would be in danger and I don't like that feeling. Especially since I've seen other people in the media, or by word of mouth, you know people being harassed physically or verbally. So, I feel very fearful around cisgender men.

Although non-cis participants also experienced other forms of *gender category policing*, their apprehension around those they perceived as cis, heterosexual men was primarily informed by their concerns of *physical gender status policing*. Hunter summarized non-cis participants' fear of the extreme— yet *not uncommon*— forms that physical status policing can take when he said, “Other men is who I fear more than anything. I am very much afraid of being, you know, beat up, raped, and murdered.” The specific forms of violence Hunter describes are best understood through Bettcher's (2007:58) claim that:

Opposition to transphobic violence must be embedded within larger feminist... politics... given the fact that [trans women] who pass as women and [trans men] who are regarded as “really women” are similarly vulnerable to violence against women... because the central mechanism that grounds any transphobic violence in the first place is fundamentally implicated in such broader oppressions.

This is not to say that *physical gender status policing* is really just about violence against (cis) women; but it is to say that in a patriarchal society that violently insists on a hierarchical gender binary, non-cis people— and, in Bettcher's example, particularly trans women *and* trans men—

face a special type of hostility for their implicit association with the gender category “woman” *as well as* for their gender status transgressions. Unfortunately, this specific combination of gender associations and transgressions position non-cis people to face particularly brutal and heightened instances of violence. This is not hyperbole— since 2018, *every consequential year* has been named the “deadliest” for trans and nonbinary people murdered for their status transgressions (Powell 2021).

Findings from the 2015 United States Transgender Survey revealed that nearly 1 in 10 non-cis respondents reported being physically attacked *specifically for being transgender* (James et al. 2016). The majority of non-cis participants indicated a hyper-awareness of the potential *physical gender status policing* they could face for their transgressions. Participants tended to understand their need to be hypervigilant in assessing and navigating everyday interactions to ensure their safety as non-cis people. Specifically, participants who currently *pass* like Axel (58, transgender man), shared he had previously experienced physical gender status policing before passing. He felt like if his non-cis status were to become known, he could be seen as a “threat” to cis, heterosexual men; and that he could, once again, become a target of their violence:

I'm just afraid of getting my butt kicked and getting into an altercation. I mean, I had a fracture back a few years ago. I just feel like [cis, heterosexual men] would like— if they questioned [my non-cis gender status]— they might like, feel a threat to their masculinity. And then they might want to kick my ass, and then I'd have to be in that situation— where I would I have to physically fight.

Scholars have noted that violent gender status policing serves to “reinforce a dichotomous social order and to control the public display of alternate genders,” (Doan 2006: 28); further, it’s been noted that violent gender status policing is “tolerated or even normalized,” and flourishes in environments characterized by the “social and legal marginalization” of non-cis people (Wirtz et al. 2020:234). Indeed, the majority of non-cis participants were so used to

experiencing threats to their personal safety for being read as non-cis that they were often struck by the *absence of hostility* in interactions once they started *passing*. Jackie (34, white, transgender woman) explained the shift in her interactions with cis people once she understood they were perceiving her as a cisgender woman:

Oh, they seem so much more relaxed. They don't seem startled; or they [treat me] like I'm just a normal person, you know? Like, they're not seeing me as different anymore. They'll even smile or laugh, you know? Like, there's no weird deceiving threat here, you know?

Jackie's reference to *deception* is not merely a random choice in words; the framing of non-cis people as “deceivers” is well-known stereotype that at once *promotes and excuses* violent gender status policing (Bettcher 2007). Indeed stereotypes are part of the cultural information that comprises the *gender knowledge* that ends up framing interactions through a hierarchical gendered system of difference. It is in this way that non-cis people generally understood that because they are culturally understood as ‘deceptive,’ their sense of personal safety could ‘justifiably’ be undermined in the harshest possible terms in any given interaction.

Up until this point I've discussed the *perception of power* among gendered actors who are specifically perceived as cis women, or perceived generally as non-cis; but, identifying as a cis man or *passing* as one did not preclude participants from having safety concerns about others they similarly perceived to be cisgender (heterosexual) men. For example, both Billy (36, cisgender man) and Bowie (30, white, cisgender man) discussed “not trusting” other cis men. Nearly all cis men *as well as those who passed as cis men* discussed feeling socially and/ or physically threatened by cis, heterosexual men.

Participants expressed concerns about being subjected to harassment or violence from cis, heterosexual men based on category policing. As such, many participants *perceived as cis men*—regardless of their actual category and/or status—discussed *self policing* to appear more

normatively masculine around other cis, heterosexual men. This often included self-policing to simultaneously suppress any gender transgressions while also attempting to “match” the masculinity of others who participants perceived to be cis, heterosexual men. For example, Aaron (31, white, nonbinary) explained: “If I perceive someone as a cis man... then I probably mimic his behavior. And do a little bit more of masculine type of behavior be more assertive and confident.” Wyatt (19, Mexican, genderqueer) explained feeling the need to downplay his femininity around others he perceived as (heterosexual) cis men “for his own comfort and safety” in the following way:

I’ll definitely avoid [cis] men to a certain extent. Especially if they seem very masculine. In part since I can’t relate to them, but also a fear of an uncomfortable situation... and I would probably be cautious about the situation and try not to be as outwardly feminine. I will automatically lower my voice, or not be flamboyant and things like that.

Like Wyatt, Elliot (23, white, cisgender man) and Dylan (23, white, transgender man) also discussed adjusting their speech and vocal pitch around cis men. For instance, Elliot described a particular voice reserves specifically for those he perceived to be cis, heterosexual men:

I’m a little different when I’m around women and my gay friends; I tend to speak in a voice that’s more high pitched. When I’m around all my straight [cis man-identified] friends, I would speak in a deeper voice and try to avoid advertent displays of emotions.

Dylan further explained the need to self-police his voice and speech in the presence of cis, heterosexual men so as to not appear “weak”:

I think traditionally, masculinity is more called into question around men. You know, trying to weed out weak stock or whatever. So around [cis, heterosexual men] I could see myself wanting to kind of keep things briefer, you know? I’d be a little more terse with my speech; and remove some of the inflections or, you know, the highs out of my speech patterns to appear a little more traditionally

masculine... but, you know, there's only so much you can do before you just put it on caricature and people start thinking making fun of them (laughs).

I found that both *man-identified and -perceived* participants were just as aware of potential threats from cis, heterosexual men as *woman-identified and -perceived* participants. Although each group faced a unique set of concerns, they both ultimately discussed feeling apprehensive around those they perceived as cisgender, heterosexual men, and took measures to mitigate risk. For instance, Vincent (22, white, cisgender man) discussed a vetting process he undertakes when interacting with those he perceives to be cis, heterosexual men:

In the first thirty seconds to a minute of my interaction with another man [assumed to be cis and heterosexual], it'll be a lot more of an over-performance of masculine identity. It'll be like, I am very conscious of myself as [a cis man], my performance is [that of a normative cis man], and my voice, and everything—and then as time goes on and I kind of gauge how masculine-presenting they are. How do they interact? if they are, like, stoic and cold and not friendly at all, then I probably won't warm up very much. But if they express some more friendliness and some warm social interaction, and communicate things either in their voice or body language or their words, mostly in the prior two, then I will kind of let loose a little bit more.

That *self-identified* and *other-perceived* cis men view cis, heterosexual men as potential threats can be best understood through Pascoe's work on *fag discourse* (2012). Specifically, Pascoe has shown how the "specter of the fag" is a disciplinary mechanism for *category policing* those seen as men. As I have shown, participants who were read as men reported approaching interactions with normative cis men through the lens of damage control to mitigate the risk of becoming the *specter of the fag*—regardless of their actual gender categories, statuses, or sexual orientations.

Even if they actually held other gender and sexual identities, participants self-policed to be more normatively masculine; and at the same time, they also expressed being highly aware of the threat their *perceived* cis masculine normativity could present to others. For example,

although she does not identify as such, Mari (37, mixed Latinx, nonbinary) reported *being (mis)perceived* as a cis man and discussed her discomfort around cis, heterosexual men *as well as* her discomfort with being (mis)read as one:

I'm a lot more comfortable with cis women than cis men. Immediately, I will feel a sense of, like, *I can relax*. I don't have to be worried about safety. I don't have to worry. I think, you know, the only worry so to speak, would be, like, I want to make sure that [cis women] know [about my gender and sexuality]— *that I'm not a threat to them*.

Like Mari, others perceived as cis, heterosexual men shared the *gender knowledge* that being seen as such could elicit fear in others. As I've discussed earlier in *the power of perception*, one of the major ways participants knew they were *passing* as cis men was through sensing the fear of other gendered actors. This phenomena was particularly salient for those who identified as transgender men— many of whom discussed knowing how uncomfortable it feels to have been (mis)perceived as a cis woman around cis men, such as Lee (27, Asian, androgynous transgender man) who explained his rationale for making sure he gives those he perceives as women more space:

'Cause I know it sucks! And knowing what it's like when people like get weird. It's usually [cisnormative masculine] presenting people that aren't really aware of their space. So, it's kind of that perspective, and being aware of that why I would want to give [others I perceive as women] more space.

Like Lee and nearly all other non-cis participants who *passed* as cis men, Hunter (36, white, transgender man) and Scott (32, white Latinx, transgender man) expressed being cognizant of the space they took up around those they perceived as women. Hunter explained:

I would be aware of my behavior [around others I perceive as women]. So that they would feel safe. I would want to make sure they know that I was not a threat and I... would value their space and their safety.

Like Hunter, Scott knows he nearly always *passes* as a cis man and similarly explained:

I do try to be conscious [around others I perceive as women] and make sure that I'm not doing anything that's threatening or taking up too much space or, you know, just generally not constructive.

Xavier and Nathan both referenced the ways their own uncomfortability *as men* with cis- and heterosexual-perceived men informing how they approach interactions with others. Xavier (25, white, transgender man) shared:

I think that's why I also interact the way I do with people who I perceive to be cis women. I don't want them to perceive me *as I perceive cis [men]*. So I take it upon myself to... lighten my voice up a little bit to take out that element of threat, if that makes sense.

Nathan (24, white, cisgender man) similarly explained:

I try to remember that, the way that *I feel* about cis men, like, [non-cis men others] are probably feeling *towards me*. In that, like, I have the ability to make someone super uncomfortable really fast because of my presence, and stature, and just me physically being in a space... like, I can make people cautious about how they interact with me, and I try to be very wary of that. Because *I'm* weary of that with other cis men, so I can't really sell myself off of like "Oh, well, *I'm the exception. I'm a good cis man.*" Like, I don't think that exists; and as much as I would love that to exist—I just know for a fact that it doesn't. And, I don't get to pick and choose how people feel about their interaction with me, so I think I always enter into new situations under the presumption that the way *I* think about other cis men, [others] are thinking about *me*. So, I'll be cautious of how I'm interacting, and the presence of space I'm taking up.

Beyond the concern of how they would be impacting others, some men-perceived participants expressed concern of facing consequences for being seen as a threat. Although both cis and non-cis men (as well as nonbinary individuals) explained changing their behavior due to not wanting to make others uncomfortable, it was only participants who specifically identified as

cisgender men who expressed being more focused on *how they might be impacted* if others perceived them as a threat. For instance, Billy (36, white, cisgender man) explained:

Generally, I'm concerned about being perceived as a predator. That's actually a really concrete thing, I think, associated with masculinity. So, *men are creeps and sexual predators. They're always interested in pursuing. Or, men can't really be friends with women. We're really after sex or some sort of relationship all the time*, which is stereotypical. But hey, it's really there. So yeah, I can occasionally get self-conscious about whether I'm being perceived that way.

Edward (36, African American, cisgender man) expanded on Billy's sentiments and explained how he alters his behavior around those he perceives as cis women:

Yes [I alter my behavior around others], especially when dealing with [cis women]. Of course— we're in the age of *Me Too* and there have been heterosexual [men] treating women badly in the past, and they are getting caught now and they're losing their jobs or going to jail. So, *as a heterosexual [man]*, I have to be more careful with what I say. *As a heterosexual [man]*, the first thing we are supposed to know is never compliment a woman's appearance because that could be taken the wrong way. *As a heterosexual [man]*, I just don't say anything about a woman's appearance. I don't give any compliments on their appearance at all. Just to be safe, and to be safe in the workplace as well.

Unlike examples I've shared from their counterparts, who were also perceived as cis men, Billy and Edward's sentiments about "concern" and "safety" were *self-* rather than *other-focused*. This may be understood through Pascoe and Hollander's conception of "mobilizing rape" wherein men:

[C]an both engage in rape culture and attempt to distance themselves from it, all the while using rape as a "masculinity resource" in a way that undergirds gendered inequality by setting up hierarchical relations between men and women and men and men (2016:75).

Regardless of motivation, however, it appeared that those perceived as cis men shared the *gender knowledge* that sees cis, heterosexual men as threats to gendered others insofar as they are seen as enforcers of the current gender order.

My analysis reveals that perceived gender transgression seems to immediately neutralize any sense of threat gendered actors feel with cisgender, heterosexual men. In other words, the less hegemonically-masculine another seemed, the more at ease participants reported feeling around that person. I noted this interview after interview where participants of all gender categories and statuses expressed feeling “relaxed,” “comfortable,” or “excited” around those they perceived to be non-cis, non-heterosexual, and/ or non-men.

Participants were generally highly cognizant of the gendered power dynamics they experienced in everyday interactions. When it came to threat assessment and feeling safe, there was a strong pattern across all gendered groups fearing those they perceived as cis, heterosexual men. Participants noted, however, that altering that perception across a single dimension (i.e., perceiving a cis man to be gay, rather than heterosexual; or perceiving a man to be trans, rather than cis) transformed their senses of safety in the interaction. Beatriz (22, Latina/ mixed-race, cisgender woman) spoke to this phenomena directly when she stated: “It’s different when a gay [cis] man is nice to me on the street [versus] a straight cis man; ‘cause I don’t think a gay [cis] man wants to rape me, or fuck me, or anything like that.”

Jaume and Jackie further elaborated the experience of diminished hesitancy once men-perceived others are thought to be either non-cis or non-heterosexual. Jackie (34, white, transgender woman) explained her reasoning in not feeling threatened with transgender men in the same way she feels threatened with cisgender men:

Because I think there's just some sort of camaraderie between us, and I think we can all relate with how we've been oppressed. How we've been harassed and ridiculed and bullied and stuff. And, I think that sort of helps... And I have been in a group of trans men before, and it feels different [than a group of cis men]. So, I mean, it's just— I don't feel threatened, or I don't feel like I'm in danger in a group of [trans men]. It's just because, like, we, we can relate and we have experiences that we both share. And I think there's like an empathy there. And,

you know, it's almost like we're brother and sister, you know? Versus, like, if you're with a group of cis men— I'm not saying like they could they can't empathize, but— the default is, like, they probably never interacted with a[n out] transgender person before and you don't know how they're going to react. And that's just the uncertainty of it is what makes it more uncomfortable and more dangerous, versus, you know, a trans man. [Trans men] most likely have interacted with another trans man or a trans woman.

Jaume, a 29 year old white and Hispanic trans person, explained he has concerns of “being attacked, or harassed, or assaulted” by those he perceives to be cis, heterosexual men but feels “less shut off” if he notices their gender transgressions or other non-hegemonic qualities:

It depends on how I perceive them in their genders and other identities. I mean, it depends on how I perceive a cis man to be— even in terms of his own gender expression and gender identity, and sexual orientation. And so, when it's someone who I perceive to be either a cis gay man or more effeminate— or even less hypermasculine— I already feel warmer towards him. I also feel warmer and less shut off when it's someone who I perceive to have other experiences of oppression. Like, if I perceive them to be a man of color, then I feel like there's... some kind of solidarity there— even if I don't necessarily think that he views that in me. When it's someone that I perceive to be, like, a cis, straight, white man, with all the privileges and who's hypermasculine, I feel like I immediately feel defensive and shut down, and don't trust them.

For Jaume, “oppression” and “privilege” served as indicators of a given gendered actor's capacity for solidarity and trustworthiness. Similarly, Riley (27, white, cisgender woman) further explained that she sees gendered actors' relative position to power inform their ability to question the gender system:

I mean, *any* cisgender person is not questioned, but there's a danger with cisgender men that isn't presented with [cis] women or trans folks. Folks that have questioned gender and questioned the dichotomy that we've been forced into are safer than people who have always had a dominant position.

In their own ways, Jaume and Riley are each suggesting that one's relative proximity to hegemonic masculinity informs one's likelihood of allegiance to— and enforcement of— the

gender structure. Gendered actors who were necessarily in a position to question our social hierarchies (due to their own experiences of gender or racial subjugation) appeared safer to participants than gendered actors who may never been prompted to questioned the social order due to their privilege.

Participants generally reported feeling more threatened by those they perceived as cisgender, heterosexual men compared to any other gendered group. Although the majority of participants felt that perceived gender category and status transgressions such as being gay or trans could make “men” safer, others continued to feel weary of *any* man-identified gendered actor. For example, Max (27, white) who does not identify as any gender explained feeling equally hesitant with trans men as cis men:

It’s because— and it feels weird to say this out loud, but— *you felt the need to identify as a man*; and all the men in our society are not all the same, but they’re similar. And you are trying to be what the rest of them are trying to be. I would expect you to be just as hard, or aggressive, or dominating as the rest. I would expect you to act the exact same way. It’s what has been modeled for you.

Indeed, Rubin has found that transgender men may enact masculinity by upholding and enforcing the current gender order (2003). Ollie (21, Black, gender nonconforming) expressed a similar hesitation to Max in finding gendered threats from trans and cis men as significantly distinct:

I definitely feel that a trans man would also throw me under the bus in a group of cisgender men. ‘Cause it’s their chance to assert their manhood. So, definitely nonbinary people get thrown under the bus.

Ollie’s concern is best understood by Connell’s *patriarchal dividend*, whereby all men— regardless of their successful approximation of normativity— benefit from the overall subordination of other, non-men gendered actors (2005:79).

The ability to perceive and respond to power via *gender legibility* is an important self-preservative tactic that all participants used to navigate our gendered social landscape. *The perception of power* is not always informed by first hand experiences, though. Participants of all gendered groups clearly named those they believed to be cis, heterosexual men as threatening, but that didn't mean they arrived at those conclusions based on their personal experiences.

I found that participants did not necessarily need to have had threatening experiences with cis, heterosexual men in order to hold and operate in the context of the *gender knowledge* that they constituted a threat. For example, despite feeling “hesitant” around others she perceived to be cis, heterosexual men, Morgan (23, white, trans-masculine nonbinary person) explained: “Even coming from a background where I've never been through any sort of gender-based violence— nothing like that has ever happened to me— but still I have stories from, you know, [cis women] friends and coworkers about bad stuff that happened to them. So there's always that sort of hesitation.” Even though Morgan does not identify as a cis woman, she also understands she is often perceived as one. In this case, Morgan feels the *power of perception* invisibilizes her nonbinary identity and puts her at risk for a particular form of gendered violence that's actually ‘intended’ for a different gendered group.

Thomas (21, Mexican Irish, cisgender man) shared his concerns around cis, heterosexual men “pursuing some kind of physical altercation” with him if they perceived him “as being less than masculine;” even though he went on to explain, “I haven't had that happen to me. It's just more of a fear of mine.” Lane (30, Pilipino, cisgender man), a drag performer, says he's “heard enough stories” about cis, heterosexual men “not liking [gender transgressions], and wanting to cause some sort of violence.” Even though “It's never been the case that [Lane has] been accosted,” he explained that “for safety” he only takes rideshares, instead of walking, when he's

out dressed in drag. Lane went on to describe the someone who he imagined would enact *physical gender policing* against him as “Probably someone who’s a cis [man], straight, probably married, probably religious.” In these instances Thomas and Lane didn’t need to experience *physical gender category policing* to know their potential (mis)approximations of normative masculinity could subject them to it at any moment.

Participants like Morgan, Thomas, and Lane all suggested the fact that they hadn’t experienced some form of *physical gender policing* by cis, heterosexual men was more of a matter of *beating* the odds, rather than *succumbing* to them. Despite being “nervous” and “on guard” around cisgender men, Marie (60, white, transgender woman) shared there are times she knows she hasn’t *passed* and others have read her as transgender; but, she explained, “I have been remarkably lucky in this transition. I have yet to have a single unpleasant encounter with somebody.” Indeed, Marie referred to herself as “lucky” *multiple times* during our interview when she informed me she hadn’t experienced *physical gender status policing* in her interactions with cis men.

Taken together, on some level, participants of *all* genders seemed to believe gender-based violence (performed specifically by cis, heterosexual men) is an enduring and inevitable feature of social life. Hollander touches on this seemingly shared belief in her analysis on gendered conversations about violence where she argues “...widely shared conceptions of gender associate... masculinity with dangerousness” (2001:84). The *perception of power* is as much about one’s own gender category, status, and transgressions as it is about those of others, because *perceiving power* is relative to one’s own position in the gendered social hierarchy. As such, individuals of various gendered groups expressed unique sets of concerns, depending on how closely they approximated normative gendered expectations. In this way, the gendered

perception of power is highly interactional. It is informed by cultural ideals such as hegemonic masculinity as a form of *gender knowledge* that we all use to navigate everyday gendered interactions as safely as possible.

Conclusion

Gender knowledge is not just a critical component of doing gender, *it is its precursor*. Without deeply-ingrained gender knowledge of the fundamental building blocks of our gender system (i.e., *categories* and *statuses*) we would be unable to identify transgression. Without the concept of *gender transgression*, we lose any basis for drawing gendered boundaries. In absence of boundaries, there is no justification for *gender policing*; and, of course, without gender discipline, we ultimately foreclose any possibility of gender roles and their subsequent hierarchies— which are required in order to *do gender*.

Knowing gender is required for doing gender, but what constitutes gender knowledge? Sociologists have yet to comprehensively delineate the structure and contents of gender knowledge. In order to understand the full thrust of gender knowledge, it is necessary to examine the major arena where it is most relevant: *gender perception*.

Perceiving gender is not as simple as objectively identifying mutually-exclusive attributes that distinguish knowable groups, though. It is well-established that gender is socially constructed and there are no actual clean, consistent, or enduring divisions between gendered groups. Just as West and Zimmerman claim that we “accomplish” *doing gender* through performance, I suggest that *perceiving gender* is an *accomplishment* made possible through the possession of *gender knowledge*.

Gender perception has many lessons for those interested in the study of power and subordination at an interactive level. As I have demonstrated, gender perception is a near-constant and guiding feature of everyday social life: it tells us how others see us by way of *gender legibility*; it shows us just how arbitrary and permeable our gender hierarchy is through *the power of perception*; and it ultimately reinforces our respective places in the current gender order via *the perception of power*. *Gender perception*, then, is what allows us to act on *gender knowledge* in a given interaction. We are socially organized around the distinction of gendered groups, and *gender perception* affords us the possibility to harness gender knowledge to *know* one's "place" in society and sense that others *know* it, too.

Conclusion

I guess sometimes you feel like all that's possible is what you see around you.

Loren, 36 year old white nonbinary person

As a primary way of relating, gender runs in the background of everyday social experiences. As a major vector of power, gender takes form in identities, institutions, and ideology. As social scientists, we readily recognize gender's import in social location and the larger social structure but, up until this point, we've not yet delved into the intricacies of *gender knowledge* that frame our interactions.

Gender is not a unidimensional concept, practice, or structure. My qualitative analysis revealed that "gender" must be conceptually understood through a lens of both category *and* status in order to adequately discuss and understand gender transgression, policing, and perception. Our reliance on a binary, mutually exclusive cis-gender classification system to interact with and identify one another leaves plentiful room for 'error,' and as such gender transgressions are abundant.

Gender is transgressed through both category and status. Gender status transgressions occur on account of an individual being non-cisgender. Gender status transgressions are either binary or nonbinary. Gender category transgressions occur either intrapersonally or interpersonally; and each type breaks distinct normative expectations around gender category. *Intrapersonal category transgressions* defy normative expectations of masculinity and/or femininity. *Interpersonal category transgressions* occur when the gendered actor denies some aspect of their specific gender identity. All gendered actors *do* gender transgressions; and, as I

have demonstrated, gender transgressions are quite functional for the universal interactional needs of feeling like a whole person and self-preservation.

Although gender transgressions are ubiquitous and functional, they are not enacted without consequence. I have found that the logic of gender policing upholds the current gender order in three distinct ways: protecting the cisgender status; protecting the gender binary; and protecting normative categorical attributes (masculinity and femininity). Gender policing takes multiple forms and occurs both interactionally and institutionally. Specifically, gender policing can take form legally, economically, medically, spatially, temporally, physically, discursively, and nonverbally. All gendered actors are equally eligible to uphold the current gender order. I found that men and women tend to *do* gender policing differently from one another. I also found that self-policing is a major strategy in self-preservation under the current gender order.

Gender policing can only take place through the perception of gendered actors and their transgressions. I outlined the processes of gender legibility for those thought to be cis men, cis women, and nonbinary. Those who passed as either men or women cited language and their own cisnormative beliefs about their bodies as evidence that others saw them as such. Further, those who passed as cis men understood they were being read as such through their interactive experiences with deference, sexual autonomy, and access to exclusive networks. Those who passed as cis women generally understood they were being read as such because they experienced the inverse of what cis men reported; in the case of those thought to be cis women that meant experiences with feeling devalued and a lack of sexual autonomy in everyday interactions. Nonbinary individuals were unable to pass as such, and often reported being taken as either cis men or cis women by others. Gender legibility is bound up with other axes of social

identity. Specifically, I found that gender attribution is tempered by the racial identities of both the gendered actor being perceived as well as the gendered actor doing the perceiving.

Gender perception is sociologically significant because it is a major site where we can witness the conferral of and response to power dynamics that occur in everyday interaction. As such, my findings confirmed insights from Schilt's (2010) work that the power of perceiving the same gendered actor as either a man or a woman transforms their social experience. Non-cis individuals who had the social experience of being read as both a man and a woman provided invaluable insights into the power of gender perception. In addition to showing the significance of the power of perception, I also demonstrated how power is perceived. In the perception of power, I discussed my findings that showed participants of all gendered groups reported feeling threatened and hypervigilant around those they perceived to be cis heterosexual men. My analysis of gender perception demonstrated that our gender hierarchy is deeply ingrained across all gendered groups as a part of the collective *gender knowledge*, which reflects back structures of inequality, that we use to interact with others and move through social institutions.

Key Contributions

All participants *do* gender based on deeply internalized gender knowledge about category, status, transgression, policing, and perception, but many struggled to articulate what gender actually is. Most participants initially faced difficulties, and some even became noticeably flustered, when asked the warm-up question to simply define *gender*. One would think that because we are all obliged to be *some* (binary) gender (Lucal 1999), that we might at least have an easy answer for *what gender is*; however this was not the case for participants of varying statuses and categories. KC (67, white, questioning) enjoyed learning about gender

variation in his spare time but explained, “Despite the fact that I read about it all the time, I honestly don’t know. I feel like a dunce, at my age not being able to come up with a ready answer for that.” Despite being a *gender studies major*, Kate (18, Asian American, cisgender woman) explains getting “so frazzled” when tasked to provide a definition for gender and its attributes: “It’s [hard] because it’s just something I’ve always identified as... it’s not something I’ve consciously had to think about.” Although Hiroshi (42, Japanese American, cisgender man) identifies *as a man* he noted, “If I hear someone say, ‘He’s very masculine’ I don’t know—I guess I wonder what they mean by that.” Hiroshi is not alone in his sense of wonder, though; as Connell explains, defining masculinity is nearly impossible: “‘Masculinity’ is not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced” (2005:67). Additionally, participants’ difficulty coherently defining gender and its related concepts speaks to the “Extensive naturalization work that goes into legitimating the current sex/ gender/sexuality system” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014:44). In this way, gender knowledge is much like Garfinkel’s (1967) *background*— always structuring our interactions, but rarely forefronted in them; but even when it eludes consistent description, gender knowledge does not run neutrally in the background of everyday life, it is a constant reflection of the ways our social structures are built around the cis-normative gender binary which is coconstructed through a lens of whiteness, ability, and class.

Another commonality for all participants was that regardless of their gender status or category, they *lacked language* to adequately or consistently talk about their gendered experiences. Red (34, white, cisgender woman) drew a blank when asked to talk about masculinity and femininity, “I feel like I know it when I see it, but I don’t have an articulate definition for one or the other. And it also gets played with a lot and there’s more to it than what

people think.” Max (27, white) who does not identify as any gender, understood terms like masculinity and femininity as inadequate, but lacked alternatives to describe gendered attributes: “I use those terms because those are the terms we have.” Beau (52, white, genderqueer) further problematized the limits of language:

I think that part of my problem is I’m stuck with our vocabulary. I think that often, masculinity is what we think of as ways of being a man, and femininity is ways of being a woman. Although, then you get stuck back in a gender binary. Yeah, the words are very problematic. I struggle with it all the time.

Participants found gendered language simultaneously limiting and vague as it manifests nearly exclusively in binary framing. Additionally, gendered language was insufficient, because as Red explained, people “play” with gender, making a fixed sense of it elusive. Indeed, as my analysis showed, participants across all statuses and categories enacted gender transgressions, experienced various forms of gender policing as a result of their transgressions, and typically understood themselves outside of the normative bounds of *their self-identified* genders. Without saying as much, participants often discussed the ways their ideological gender knowledge did not include language to actually describe their own and other-observed gendered experiences. This is because gender knowledge is a reflection of the the normative cis-binary, which all participants— in some way or another— failed to be completely accountable to.

Regardless of whether they had language for it or not, participants of all gender categories and statuses referred to complex, nuanced, and contested experiences with gender; and although they didn’t use discipline-specific terms, all participants eventually articulated a clear and consistent sense of the quality content of both *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity*. Even when participants stated their exclusion from, rejection of, or disdain for such

stereotypic gendered norms, they still maintained an interactive awareness of these framings and consequently read others —*and expected to be read by others*— through these scripts.

Even as my sample was primarily white (62.7%) and between the ages of 18-34 years old (64%) I found that *all* participants regardless of race or age (as well as other demographic markers of difference such as gender category, gender status, and sexual orientation, etc.) articulated shared understandings of normative white masculinity and femininity in the larger context of a cis-binary gender system. In other words, *gender knowledge* (comprised of ideological framings of cisness, binaryness, and white gendered normativity) was possessed by all participants, whether or not the ideals and rules of that gender knowledge actually spoke to their lived experiences. For example, even when (both cis and non-cis) participants were unfamiliar with the term “cisgender” they still easily referred to its definitional content; or even when non-white participants were asked to discuss masculinity and femininity in general, they did so using normative (white) framings. Further, my analysis revealed that although normative gendered expectations change over time, the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity still appear to be very influential and enduring among my participants, at least when it comes to everyday understandings of gender and the gender knowledge we rely on to interact with one another.

My qualitative data analysis identified previously unexamined implications and interpersonal understandings of gender category, status, transgression, policing and perception. Major themes of *gender transgressions* arose, in one way or another, across all gender groups. Given the previous framing of non-cis people being as inherently gender transgressive, this discovery ultimately leads me to question the seemingly rigid boundaries between gender

statuses. In other words, if all gendered actors are *necesarrily gender transgressive*, how does the enactment of overlapping gender transgressions performed by cis and non-cis participants impact the parameters previously thought to separate gender statuses?

Although non-cis identities are usually framed as *especially* “complicated” (see: Teich 2012), my analysis reveals there is no qualitative difference between various gendered actors tasked with negotiating masculinity and femininity. In other words, there is nothing inherently more complex about the process of *doing* non-cisgender than there is in the process of *doing* cisgender. Further, while many, like Cookie’s mother, experienced trouble conceptualizing *non-binary* (“She was so locked into the gender binary that she couldn’t get past which restrooms people with they/them pronouns would use”), it’s a relative wonder that we are so easily able to accept a gender binary that promises distinction while eluding its (cis and non-cis) constituents of meaning (i.e., Red, Kate, Luna, Hiroshi, Alex, etc.) In the same way, there is nothing inherently more complex about being nonbinary than there is about being binary; to the contrary, while *all* binary participants reported needing to enact intrapersonal transgressions to feel like whole people, nonbinary participants experienced a gender category and status that was accommodating to the gender dynamism reported by all of my participants.

It seems, then, that we might gain additional insights by interrogating the previously-accepted distinctions between various gender identity categories and statuses. By suggesting this, in no way do I mean to diminish the elevated rates of violence and marginalization that non-cis people face (James et al. 2016); instead, I question a social structure that easily accommodates *quality content* (à la Schippers 2007) gender transgressions from some social actors, but not others.

Various gender categories and statuses are commonly accepted as mutually exclusive options but, in reality, they bear little qualitative difference from one another. The very dichotomy between *cisgender* and *non-cisgender* should be examined with urgency. I was pressed to find a single cisgender participant who *did not* enact gender transgressions regularly, and who would be truly successful at fully residing within the bounds of their gender category. Although my sample (which is primarily white and relatively young) is a major limitation of my work, I understand this finding was more reflective of the socially constructed nature of gender and its related concepts, than of the particular people I spoke with about it. In other words, there is no actual “pure” form of gender; and gender transgression of socially constructed identities and positions is inevitable for every person who endeavors to do gender. In this way, I am certain that upon close enough examination— with the (normative cis-binary) gender rules we are all subjected to— we all will eventually prove to be gender transgressors.

My analysis revealed that the cisgender status, in its normative conception, is more myth than reality. As non-cis people³⁹ continue to face genocidal rates of murder, interpersonal and systemic violence, poverty, stigma, and homelessness, we social scientists would be wise to question what it is about the *cisgender status* that affords relative safety and humanization to its possessors.⁴⁰ After all, cisgender participants routinely described category transgressions and gender self-policing experiences that were essentially *indistinguishable* from those of their

³⁹ Of course, there is no such monolithic *non-cis people*, as the intersection of race, class, and ability, and gender identity category with gender status, tempers one’s gendered experience (e.g., Krell 2017).

⁴⁰ This does not mean, of course, that cis people don’t also face violence and diminished life chances— as we know to be the case with cis women; but it does mean that the particular social problems cis women face are not in response to their *gender status* in the same way non-cis people face transphobia, enbyphobia, and cisexism in response to their gender statuses. The violence that cis women face, for example, should be understood through their gender category as “women” which is inherently devalued and also intersects with a host of other salient social identities such as race, class, and *gender status*, etc.

non-cis counterparts. Indeed, gender transgressions are something all gendered actors do, as they allow us all to understand ourselves as whole people, move beyond negative stereotypes, and otherwise survive in a society that, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, violently insists that there are “two and only two.”

Asking what it means to transgress gender requires a close examination of *gender normativity* as much as it does *gender deviation*. Social scientists have tended to discuss the concept of gender transgressions disproportionately through a lens of deviation— as behaviors that breach gender roles based on sex assignment at birth. The common understanding of gender transgressions is cisnormative in that it is built upon a foundational conception of gender that centralizes the cisgender experience. *Gender transgressions*, then, have been primarily understood as actions, performances, preferences, and embodiments that push beyond the boundaries of how cisgender men and women are expected to be. Indeed, a cisnormative understanding gender transgressions has been widely accepted among various empirical projects stemming from multiple disciplines. Take for instance, the explorations of gender transgressions in social institutions such as schools (Pascoe 2012), extracurricular settings (McGuffey and Rich 1999), media (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003), or sport (McGrath and Chananie-Hill. 2009; Laberge and Albert 1999). These select works represent the current overarching approach to the study of gender transgressions in multiple fields, where cisness goes unmarked and where gender transgressions are generally defined as gender variant behaviors (Ansara and Quick 2016; Horvath 2009) without further reference to the category/ status distinction. But when we say “gender variance,” what are we ‘varying’ from? Is it a variation from a sex assignment at birth (status transgressions), a variation from one’s gender identity (category transgressions), a variation from the gender binary itself, or all of the above?

Given that gender transgressions largely refer to crossing the boundaries of cisgender manhood or cisgender womanhood, and that those very statuses socially constructed and tempered by time and place (e.g., Connell 1987), the logistical difficulties of adequately describing and tracking gender transgressions based solely on sex assigned at birth become quite clear. First, we must delineate the sex-assigned classification of *males* and *females* into types, and then we must similarly delineate the binary cisgender roles thought to arise from those assignments into types (i.e., cisgender man and cisgender woman). This is no easy task given that the criteria for establishing sex assigned at birth and definitions for binary cisgender roles are constantly in flux (Laqueur 2003). In other words, we must first appropriately define the object in its most essential form before we can track its variations. Unsurprisingly this work hasn't been done because, presumably, *it's quite literally impossible*.

In a two-sex model imposed on a species where variation is more common than homogeneity, the issues with a theoretical understanding of gender transgressions based on sex assignment at birth seem never-ending. But this doesn't mean that *gender transgressions* are completely unintelligible, that we are somehow unable to recognize them, and that there aren't consequences for those understood to perpetrate them. In this way, *gender transgressions*, as they have been understood, are akin to Supreme Court Justice Stewart's (1964) infamous sentiment in talking about obscenity: we generally recognize certain kinds of behaviors done by certain kinds of people as gender transgressive, and although we may not succeed in coherently naming the exact kinds of people or behaviors we mean, *we know them when we see them*.

But where do we draw the line between being gender-transgressive *or not*? Without a clear understanding of gender category and status, non-cis people are the obvious candidates for

those who might be labeled as enacting gender transgressions, and consequently prime candidates for gender policing. For it is not *fundamental* to the non-cis experience to reject one's sex assignment at birth?⁴¹ Indeed, the state of being non-cis is frequently understood as *gender variance based on sex assigned at birth* (Williams 2014).

Unsurprisingly for nearly half a century, those who've been studied as "gender transgressors" have overwhelmingly been non-cis. This does not mean that cis people haven't *also* been studied for breaking gender rules, but it's a mistake to ignore that the *mere existence* non-cis— and, particularly *transgender*— people has been disproportionately referenced in the literature to 'prove' that sex and gender are socially constructed. This framing is inherently cisnormative and concretizes gender transgression through a lens of sex assignment at birth. But what are the possibilities for gender transgressions among gendered actors that move past an arbitrary and binary (Fausto-Sterling 1993, Lorber 1994; Blackless et al. 2000) sex assignment at birth? Indeed, it's not that some behaviors are transgressive and others aren't; a major contribution of my work is the finding that *gender transgressions* must be understood through a typification of *who* is doing them.

The previous framing of gender transgressions is problematic because although *gender transgression* has been frequently used as a concept that describes behavior for *all* people (in that *all* gender transgressors will be held accountable), this is not what actually happens. In their cisnormative framing, gender transgressions are treated in the literature as though they are merely *episodic* for cisgender people, yet a *necessary condition* for non-cis people. In this way,

⁴¹ As well as the consequential expectation of a cisgender identity.

non-cis people are gender transgressive *in the essence of their very being* because, by merit of their non-cis status, they completely foreclose the possibility of holding a cisgender status. Meanwhile, cisgender people may be categorically gender transgressive to varying degrees so long as they ultimately maintain their cisgender status.

Up until this point, the current model of gender transgression (gender variant behaviors based on sex assignment at birth) make it so the possibility for gender transgression is not held as a constant for cisgender people in the same way it is an *absolute given* for non-cis people. Understanding gender transgressions in this way is limiting, imposing a barrier to truly understanding the phenomenon; consider for example the many transgender people who, despite their status transgression, are completely gender-adherent (Prosser 1998:32). Indeed, the very idea of “passing” is far more closely tied to *passing as cisgender* than it is to actually passing as a “man” or “woman” (Prosser 1998: 130; Billard 2019). As Stone (1992) asserts, *to pass* is to be read as a “natural” (read: cisgender) member of one’s gender category, which has historically informed the widely popularized “wrong body” discourse.

As Joan Riviere pointed out, gender⁴² is a “mask” that gives the illusion of a one-dimensional being whose “masquerade” may spare them of the social repercussions of being *simultaneously* “masculine” and “feminine” (1929:38). Further, posing gender transgressions solely around sex-assigned at birth presupposes an objectivity about the body which lacks proof

⁴² Of course Riviere specifically refers to “womanliness”, however, I am extending this claim to its logical conclusion and using “gender” instead.

of concept (Lorber 1994). And, as social scientists⁴³, we can't objectively 'know' whether sex assignments at birth were valid and reliable; we can, however, undoubtedly take gender self-identification and self-reports of gender transgressions at face value. I therefore propose typifying gender transgressions through a lense of both gender category and gender status. My rationale in conceiving gender transgressions with this distinction is based on the current gender social order that privileges being normatively cisgender over all other gendered forms.

Although sex assignment at birth may be useful in understanding the *status* of being cisgender or non-cis⁴⁴, as well as accounting for the social consequences of such statuses, it is not necessarily useful for accurately and comprehensively understanding *gender transgression* and *gender policing* as social phenomena. I have demonstrated that gender category is a major site of contestation, privilege, and subjugation of gendered actors. By forefronting the distinction between (and perception of) gender category and status as critical scaffolding for understanding gendered interactions, I was able to explore the shared gender knowledge of *all* gendered actors.

Another advantage to breaking down gender transgressions typologically is the potential to corroborate gender transgressions with our current societal understandings of binary gender roles. In a gender category/ status-based framing, the cisgender *man* who likes wearing makeup would be understood as categorically (but not status) transgressive, and the transgender *woman*

⁴³ And also as biologists and physicians, quite frankly (see: Fausto-Sterling 1993; 2000)

⁴⁴Here I include binary and non-binary transgender identities.

who likes wearing makeup would be understood as *staus* (but not categorically) *transgressive*.⁴⁵ My typological framing of gender transgressions is contextualized by the societal roles that all men and women are subjected to on a routine basis— regardless of their sex assignment at birth. On that note, it must be stated that this work is not an effort to further enforce or reformulate the gender binary and rigid gender roles, rather it is a call to more accurately understand the types of judgments we are held accountable to, the logic behind particular forms of gender policing, and, the gender knowledge we organize our social hierarchy around.

As I've emphasized, the distinction between *types* of gender transgressions is important because the gender policing people face for their perceived transgressions are not equivalent. Likewise, the reasons for engaging in various gender transgressions are motivated by factors that go beyond gender identity expression alone. In addition to self-expression, gender transgressions are functional in matters of self-preservation and ensuring personal safety, rejecting negative gender stereotypes, and maintaining social connections.

My analysis allows for new qualitative understandings regarding the nature and functionality of everyday gender interactions that are marked by countless instances of gender (*category and status*) perceptions, transgressions, and policing. I ultimately argue that it is most analytically useful and accurate to frame “gender transgressions” based on one’s relation to the critical components of our current gender order: cisness, binaryness, and normative masculinity/femininity. Additionally, a key finding of my analysis is that non-cis people face a degree of

⁴⁵ This work is not an effort to further enforce or reformulate the gender binary and rigid gender roles, rather it is a call to more accurately understand the types of judgments we are held accountable to and, in many ways, organize our lives around.

gender policing unknown to their cis counterparts, despite both groups being gender transgressive; by showcasing evidence of the common and wide array of gender-transgressive behaviors enacted by *cisgender people* in everyday life, I am able to offer theoretical framing to better explain their socially normative, routinely unquestioned and unmarked position in the social landscape.

My typifications of gender category, status, transgression, and policing all provide a new way to understand the experiences of, and interrogate the supposed clear division between, cisgender and non-cisgender people. My hope is that my contributions will have special purchase in the social sciences as a new way to analytically engage gender variation, in a way that allows us to scrutinize the gender binary as it exists between men and women, but also as it exists between cisgender and non-cis people. Indeed, non-cis people face chilling rates of violence disproportionate to their cisgender counterparts (James et al. 2016), but why is this, when in reality there is little qualitative difference between the ways in which they *do gender*?

My theoretical understanding of gender holds the potential to reframe conversations about gender variation as it is commonly discussed in the literature. While non-cis people have served as ‘ideal subjects’ for research about the social construction of gender, I wonder about the largely unexamined gender-performers who have existed quietly among us all this time: cisgender people. Instead of finding transnormative⁴⁶ evidence about the ways non-cis people are *just like* cisgender people, we might instead begin to understand the ways in which the everyday

⁴⁶ See Vipond 2015.

experiences of cisgender people are actually *more similar to those of non-cis people* than previously assumed.

Limitations

There are considerable limitations to my work. In particular, my recruitment program was split into two phases based on different requirements I was meeting for my doctoral work. As such nearly half of the data was collected between 2015-2016 whereas the remaining data was collected between 2019-2020. Although I did not note any major distinctions between the data from the first round compared to the second, conversations of non-cis gender experiences have been rapidly developing among the general public over the last few years, which could have impacted the data in ways I am unaware of.

Another noteworthy limitation of this work is that my sample is skewed as a result of geographic location (most participants resided in California at the time of our interview); as well as the general level of education of my participants, of which the majority were college-educated. It should also be noted that my sample was predominantly white and under the age of 34 years old, and as such I had particularly limited data from transgender women under the age of 40 years old and from nonbinary individuals over the age of 40 years old.

Suggestions for Future Research

My findings on gender category, status, transgression, policing, and perception have yielded numerous opportunities future study. I've shown that gender status is either a major site of privilege or subjugation (depending on perceived transgression) and as such, bears further

exploration. In particular, the idea of passing as cisgender— for all gendered actors— should continue to be examined in depth.

A major opportunity for further inquiry is looking into the interplay between simultaneous racial and gender perceptions. As I demonstrated by analyzing the gender perception experiences of non-cis participants of color, it appears that one's perceived proximity to whiteness may temper gender *passing*. The field will benefit from inquiries laying out the interactional processes that go into gender perception in the context of white supremacy, and the implications thereof. Additionally, because race and gender are co-constructed and mutually informative under white supremacy, further study is needed to better understand the specific experiences of the forms of gender policing experienced by those in Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian communities.

Another key area of development in the sociology of gender would be looking into the potential normative formation of nonbinary genders. Both masculinity and femininity have become idealized— what about nonbinaryness? There is no sex assignment to 'cisgenderize' nonbinary identities in the way that "male" and "female" assignments make cisness an option for men and women, respectively; but as nonbinary identification and representation continues to increase and become institutionally acknowledged, what are the possibilities for a culturally-imposed ideal of nonbinaryhood and its consequential policing? How would our shared gender knowledge need to be transformed in order for nonbinary people to *pass* the way men and women of both cis and non-cis statuses also and already *pass*?

Finally, my work on gender policing and threats also present opportunities for further generative conversations. I did not intend to write a dissertation that, in large part, discussed a ubiquitous and pervasive discomfort felt around those perceived as cis, heterosexual men— but

that finding was an undeniable theme across all gendered groups, including cisgender men themselves. What all gendered groups had in common was the impression that cis, heterosexual men were the likely arbiters of *physical gender policing*. For that reason, it may be beneficial to further explore how gendered perceptions temper participation in social life for those who exist outside of normative expectations of gender and sexuality.

Parting Words

What is gender? Many in society understand gender as a personal identity and stop there; however, sociologists are less interested in gender as an individual social property and more focused on it as a societal-level interactive process. For example, some analysts consider gender to be a product of social interaction in that it must be “done” or performed (West and Zimmerman 1987), an institution in that it is present in every arena of social life (Lober 1993), or a primary frame in that it is impossible to engage in social interaction without *gender knowledge* of the self and of others (Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

Sociologists who study gender must understand its multiple dimensions, ubiquity in everyday life, and socially constructed nature. Gender structure organizes social interaction and, in turn, is organized by social interaction. Gender cannot exist without hierarchy and so, in many ways, the study of gender is truly the study of power.

The interplay between structure and identity, then, is crucial in understanding gender as an organizational feature of society. In her work *Gender and Power*, Connell discusses the concept of *cathexis*, or emotional investment in something, in this case, gender identities. Cathexis emphasizes the ways in which the social structure depends on individuals’ investment in their gender identities, but also the way in which individuals rely on social structures which

constrain practices. Similarly, Butler argues that you may “own” your gender, but you don’t own the terms that make it possible— those are the property of society (2004). Butler highlights the relationship between gender and society by defining gender as a “practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint,” in that it is always within a social context, and never outside of ideology (2004).

This dissertation has been a deep dive into some of the key components of gender knowledge that structure our everyday lives. For however different our gendered experiences and beliefs may be, it seems that we all share a sort of *cathexis* that makes our understandings of status, category, transgression, policing, and perception of gender more or less consistent across gendered groups. In this way, my study on gender identity and perception has shown implicit knowledge about cisness, binaryness, and/or normative categorical attributes occur across all gendered groups— even when those ideals don’t apply to them. The terms that make our gendered experiences possible may not belong to us— as Butler (2004) explained— but as I’ve shown, those same terms constitute a *gender knowledge* that we are all deeply aware of.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Participant Descriptive Characteristics (N=75)

Sex assignment	n (%)	Gender status	n (%)
“Female”	42 (56%)	Cisgender	30 (40%)
“Male”	33 (44%)	Non-cisgender	45 (60%)
Gender category	n (%)	Race	n (%)
Man	29 (38.7%)	Asian	4 (5.3%)
Woman	30 (40%)	Black	3 (4%)
Nonbinary	13 (17.3%)	Latino/a/x/e	10 (13.3%)
No gender identity	1 (1.3%)	Multiracial	10 (13.3%)
Questioning	2 (2.7%)	Native American	1 (1.3%)
		White	47 (62.7%)
Sexual orientation	n (%)	Age	n (%)
Asexual	3 (4%)	18-25	29 (38.7%)
Bisexual	10 (13.3%)	26-34	19 (25.3%)
Gay	7 (9.3%)	35-43	10 (13.3%)
Heterosexual	20 (26.7%)	44-52	6 (8%)
Lesbian	6 (8%)	53+	11 (14.7%)
Pansexual	11 (14.7%)		
No sexual orientation	3 (4%)		
Queer	12 (20%)		

Table 2: Participant Demographics⁴⁷

Pseudonym, Age/ Racial identity/ Sex assignment/ Gender identity/ Sexual orientation/ Pronouns

Aaron, 31/ *White/ “Female”/ Nonbinary; genderfluid/ Queer/ They*

Adelaide, 20/ *White/ “Female”/ Female/ Straight/ She*

Ajpu, 35/ *Afro-Mestizx/ “Female”/ Gender non-conforming/ Pansexual/ They*

Alex, 23/ *Mexican American/ “Female”/ Male/ Polysexual/ He*

Aly May, 23/ *Black/ “Female”/ Woman/ Heterosexual/ She*

Amoxtli, 20/ *Xicanx/ “Female”/ Femme/Masc/ Queer/ They*

Anastasia, 75/ *White/ “Male”/ Transgender woman/ Bisexual/ She*

Angel, 63/ *Caucasian/ “Male”/ Female/ Bisexual/ She*

Anna, 29/ *White/ “Female”/ Female/ Pansexual / She*

Ava, 21/ *Caucasian/ “Male”/ Female/ Asexual / She*

Axel, 58/ *Caucasion - Non-Hispanic/ “Female”/ Male/ Gay/ He*

Beatriz, 22/ *Latina/ Mixed-race/ “Female”/ Woman/ Lesbian/ She*

Beau, 52/ *White/ “Female”/ Nonbinary/ Genderqueer/ Queer/ They*

Billy, 36/ *White/ “Male”/ Male/ Straight/ He*

Bowie, 30/ *White/ “Male”/ Mostly masculine/ Queer/ He*

Brian, 22/ *White/ “Female”/ Male/ Bisexual/ He*

Candace, 47/ *Hispanic/ “Male”/ Female/ Bi/ She*

Caroline, 49/ *Caucasian and Native American/ “Male”/ Transgender Female/ Pansexual/ She*

Chloe, 59/ *Native American/ “Male”/ Female/ Pan/ She*

Cookie, 27/ *Latinx/ “Female”/ Queer/ Pansexual/ They*

Dominic, 25/ *White/ “Female”/ Transgender Male/ Heterosexual/ He*

Dorothy, 54/ *Caucasian/ “Male”/ Female/ Heterosexual/ She*

Dylan, 23/ *White/ “Female”/ Male/Trans Man/ Bisexual/ He*

⁴⁷ All demographics are raw data that come directly from participants’ self-identifications.

Edward, 36/ *African American*/ “Male”/ Male/ Heterosexual/ He

Elliot, 23/ *White*/ “Male”/ Cis Male/ Pansexual/ He

Erich, 64/ *Caucasion* / “Male”/ Male/ Gay/ He

Francis, 67/ *White*/ “Male”/ Male/ Straight/ He

Gael, 20/ *Latinx*/ “Male”/ Male/ Straight/ He

Grayson, 26/ *White*/ “Male”/ Male/ Straight/ He

Grover, 29/ *White*/ “Female”/ Male/ Mostly straight/ He

Gus, 24/ *Afro Latinx*/ “Female”/ transgender man, w/ a hint of genderqueerness/ Pansexual/ He/they

Hiroshi, 42/ *Japanese American*/ “Male”/ Male/ Heterosexual/ He

Hunter, 36/ *White*/ “Female”/ Male/ Queer/ He

Jackie, 34/ *White*/ “Male”/ Woman/ Straight/ She

Jaume, 29/ *White and Hispanic*/ “Female”/ Dandy/ Queer/ He

Jos, 26/ *White*/ “Male”/ Questioning, Trans femme/ Primarily women-attracted

Kate, 18/ *Asian American*/ “Female”/ Female/ Queer/ She

KC, 67/ *White*/ “Male”/ Questioning/ Heterosexual/ He

Kent, 29/ *White*/ “Female”/ Male/ trans man/ Bi / He

Lane, 30/ *Pilipino*/ “Male”/ Male/ Gay/ He

Lazarus, 31/ *White and Latino*/ “Female”/ Nonbinary/ Pansexual/ They

Lee, 27/ *Asian* / “Female”/ Trans guy/androgynous/ Mostly gay (attracted to other men/mascs)/ He

Leon, 38/ *White* / “Female”/ Male/ Insolent. I do what I want / He

Levi, 25/ *White* / “Female”/ Trans Man/ Queer / He

Liliana, 54/ *Hispanic*/ “Male”/ Female/ Women-attracted/ She

Lisa, 44/ *Caucasian*/ “Male”/ Female/ Bisexual/ She

Loren, 36/ *White*/ “Female”/ Nonbinary/ Queer/ They

Lucy, 36/ *Latina*/ “Female”/ Female/ Lesbian/ She

Luna, 25/ *Mexican American*/ “Female”/ Female/ Heterosexual/ She

Mari, 37/ *Mixed Latinx*/ “Male”/ Nonbinary/ Gay/ She

Marie, 60/ *Caucasian*/ “Male”/ Female/ Bisexual/ She

Max, 27/ *White*/ “Female”/ Does not identify/ Does not identify/ Name

Maya, 20/ *White/ "Female"/ Female/ Heterosexual/ She*
Mickey, 28/ *White/ "Female"/ Woman; nonbinary/ Queer/ She/they*
Miles, 23/ *White / "Female"/ Male/ Bisexual / He*
Morgan, 23/ *White/ "Female"/ Transmasc nonbinary/ Asexual/ She*
Mitchell, 25/ *Mixed: Native Hawaiian/Asian/Caucasian / "Male"/ Male/ Straight/ He*
Nathan, 24/ *Caucasian/ "Male"/ Male/ Pansexual/ He*
Nikki, 52/ *White/ "Male"/ Female/ Heteroflexible/ She*
Nova, 23/ *Latinx/ "Male"/ Trans/ Femme/ Queer/ She*
Ollie, 21/ *Black/ "Female"/ GNC/ Lesbian/ They*
Pearl, 45/ *Caucasian/ "Male"/ Female/ Lesbian/ She*
Rachel, 22/ *White/ "Female"/ Cisgender female/ Bisexual/ She*
Red, 34/ *White/ "Female"/ Gender non-conforming woman/ Queer/ She*
Riley, 27/ *White/ "Female"/ Woman/ Straight/ She*
Sadie, 25/ *Caucasian/ "Female"/ Female/ Queer/ She*
Sam, 34/ *White/ "Female"/ Female/ Pansexual/ She*
Sarah, 38/ *White/ "Female"/ Woman/ Straight/ She*
Scott, 32/ *White Latinx / "Female"/ Man, trans man/ Straight / He*
Thomas, 21/ *Mexican/Irish / "Male"/ Male/ Gay/ He*
Victoria, 71/ *Caucasian/ "Male"/ Female/ Lesbian/ She*
Vincent, 22/ *White/ "Male"/ Male/ Queer/ He*
Wyatt, 19/ *Mexican/ "Male"/ Genderqueer male/ Queer/ He*
Xavier, 25/ *White/ "Female"/ Transguy/ Gay/ He*
Yuri, 24/ *Mixed race (White Asian)/ "Female"/ Female/ Asexual/ She*

Appendix B

GENDER IDENTITY STUDY INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Can you tell me a little about your background and growing up?

DEFINITIONS

- How do you define gender?
- How do you define bio sex?
- How do you define masculinity & femininity?
- Are the expectations for masculinity and femininity the same for all races, classes, sexual orientations, etc.?

GENDER IDENTITY

- How do you describe your gender identity?
- What are your pronouns?
- Can you explain what it means to be ___?
- How often do you feel like you embody ___?
- How often do other people make you consciously aware that you are ___?
- Is it important to you that other people see you as ___?

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

- What do you need to do in order to make sure people see you as ___?
- Does anything about your appearance impact other people seeing you as ___?
- Have you ever changed/altered/enhanced your appearance in order to make sure other people see you as ___?
- Does anything about your behavior impact other people seeing you as ___?
- Have you ever changed/altered/ enhanced your behavior in order to make sure other people see you as ___?
- If you feel others are unsure that you are ___, how do you handle the situation?
- How does it feel to be misgendered?
- When you meet a new person, do they perceive you as ___ ?
- How can you tell that they perceive you as ___?
- When someone doesn't perceive your gender correctly initially, how long does it take them to realize that you are ___?

SOCIAL CONTEXT

- Do people know that you are ___ everywhere you go?
- Are there any situations or places where you feel like people see you as ___ more or less often?
- Can you describe the last encounter you had with a stranger in a setting like a shopping center? Was this encounter pretty typical?
- Can you describe the last encounter you had with a stranger in a public restroom? Was this encounter pretty typical?

OTHERS

- Do you usually know another person's gender without them telling you directly?
- What genders do you typically see when you're out and about? Is this everywhere you go, or are there any places where you see some genders more than others?
- How can you tell that these strangers you encounter are ___?
- Does your perception of someone's gender have any bearing on how you interact with them?
- What would you anticipate knowing you were going to interact with:
 - 1 cis man/ a group of cis men
 - 1 trans man/ a group of trans men
 - 1 cis woman/ a group of cis women
 - 1 trans woman/ a group of trans women
 - GNB person/ a group of GNB people

CLOSE

Is there anything you'd like to add or say more about?

Appendix C

Glossary of Terms

Binary status transgressions Take place because the gendered actor in question rejects their assigned sex as a blueprint for their social identity; being a transgender man or a transgender woman is an example of a binary status transgression.

Cisgender status A binary gender status that marks the acceptance of the expected social role and identity based on sex assignment at birth (i.e., man or woman).

Discursive gender policing Occurs when gendered actors are verbally dismissed, shamed, interrogated, or otherwise disrespected in response to their gender transgressions.

Economic gender policing Occurs when gendered actors lose or are denied access to material resources as a consequence of gender transgressions.

Gender binary policing A punitive response to perceived binary transgressions wherein all nonbinary people are targeted. Gender status policing is an attempt to uphold the current gender order by protecting the gender binary.

Gender category Gender identity options such as: men, women, nonbinary etc.

Gender category policing A punitive response to perceived intrapersonal category transgressions wherein all men and women are targeted. Gender category policing is an attempt to uphold the current gender order by protecting hierarchically normative gendered attributes.

Gender category transgressions Generally fall into one of two types: (i) those which break normative gender rules (i.e., men with “feminine” attributes or women with “masculine” attributes), or (ii) those which negate gender category (i.e., a nonbinary person may *not* correct someone who misgenders them).

Gender identity (i.e., man, woman, genderqueer, etc.) Gender category is distinct from gender status. For instance, a cisgender man and transgender man are both a part of the same gender category: man, even though they are of different gender statuses.

Gender knowledge Cultural information about gender category, status, transgression, and policing that allow us to relate to ourselves and others through a gendered system of difference.

Gender legibility the obligation, process, and outcome by which gendered actors are able to be understood as a member of a given gender category and/or gender status.

Gender perception The deployment of gender knowledge in a given interaction

Gender status The position of being cisgender (i.e., cisgender man or woman) or non-cisgender (i.e., transgender man, transgender woman, nonbinary, etc). Gender status is based upon two factors: one's acceptance or rejection of the expected social role and identity based on sex assignment at birth.

Gender status policing A punitive response to perceived status transgressions wherein all non-cis people are targeted. Gender status policing is an attempt to uphold the current gender order by protecting the cisgender status.

Gender status transgressions Take place because the gendered actor in question rejects their assigned sex as a blueprint for their social identity; in other words, status transgressions refer to the state of being non-cisgender. All non-cis people are status-transgressive.

Gender transgressions A hypernym that describes the various ways in which the current gender social order is subverted. Gender transgressions are a response to the current gender social order that privileges those who are cisgender, binary, and present normative masculine/ feminine attributes.

Interpersonal category transgressions Enactments wherein a gendered actor denies, suppresses, downplays or otherwise negates their gender identity.

Intrapersonal category transgressions Enactments wherein a gendered actor somehow defies the stereotypic 'limits' of their gender identity.

Legal gender policing Occurs when the validity of gendered actors is subject to unequally-imposed legal processes. This occurs through laws or other legal processes (such as name and gender marker change requirements) that exist to relegate those who enact gender transgressions.

Medical gender policing Occurs when gendered actors face barriers to accessing healthcare as a consequence of their gender transgressions.

Nonbinary status transgressions Take place because the gendered actor in question rejects their assigned sex as a blueprint for their social identity; being nonbinary is an example of a binary status transgression.

Non-cisgender status A gender status that marks the rejection of the expected social role and identity based on sex assignment at birth. Those who hold non-cis statuses may be binary (such as transgender men and transgender women) or nonbinary (such as nonbinary or genderqueer individuals, etc.).

Nonverbal gender policing Occurs when gendered actors are nonverbally othered as a consequence of their gender transgressions.

Physical gender policing Occurs when gendered actors are harassed, intimidated, assaulted, threatened, or their personal safety is otherwise compromised due to their gender transgressions.

Spatial gender policing Occurs when the safety, respect, or inclusion of gendered actors in a given space is compromised in response to their gender transgressions

Temporal gender policing Othering that necessarily frames gender transgressors as chronologically-deficit or undeveloped.