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The *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies* (*BATS*) is the leading venue for academic research addressing the social, cultural, and political issues facing transgender and gender minority communities across the globe. The journal offers a platinum open access forum for research of all theoretical and methodological approaches oriented toward the identification, analysis, and improvement of the material conditions of transgender life.

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## About the Center

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Trans Research Ethics: Challenges and Recommendations for Change

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The field of research that includes transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse (collectively, trans) people is expanding. In early research, trans people were often the objects of study. As trans studies evolves, community members are turning a critical eye to research practices. In this paper we join others in presenting a call for changes at each stage of the research process. Grounded in specific examples, nine core challenges are identified. Related to research focus and study design there are problems linked to: 1) centering a cisnormative world view, 2) conducting research not identified as a priority by trans communities, and 3) lack of accountability in research design decisions. Regarding data collection and analysis, concerns include: 4) reinforcing gender binaries, 5) collapsing gender and sexual

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diversity, and 6) misrepresenting trans experiences through data manipulation. In terms of reporting and publishing practices, challenges are identified related to: 7) misgendering, 8) informational erasure in reporting research results, and 9) under-attention to complex informed consent dynamics. Linking the trans research ethics literature with concrete documentation of the ways researchers discuss and represent trans people and their personal information in peer-reviewed publications, this manuscript contributes to new dialogues about improving research processes with communities invested in accountability.

**KEYWORDS** research ethics; accountability; trans studies; research design; gender identity

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Research with transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse (collectively, trans) participants is on the rise. As this field of research grows, tensions are also becoming more evident, including questions related to who has the right to conduct research with trans people, the extent of community collaboration, how to carry out ethical recruitment, the protection of participant confidentiality, and how trans people are represented in research findings (Adams et al. 2017; Bouman et al. 2018; Rosenberg and Tilley 2020; Veale 2022; Vincent 2018).

Several groups have started to develop guidelines to help researchers navigate potential ethical challenges in carrying out research with trans people and communicating their results. For example, the European Association for Transgender Health (EPATH) and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) outline recommended linguistic practices for abstract submission to their academic conferences (Bouman et al. 2017). These guidelines include a commitment to "respect, dignity, and equality for transgender, transsexual, and gender variant people in all cultural settings" (Bouman et al. 2017, 2), de-psychopathologization, and specific attention to avoid stigmatizing or pathologizing gender and bodily diversity, misgendering language, and reporting or advocating for clinical practices or interventions that are inconsistent with human rights. In addition, some of the recommendations move beyond discussion of language to address confidentiality, consent, and respect in relation to videos, photos, or other visual representations. WPATH guidelines specifically suggest that researchers should collaborate with trans individuals and communities with regard to selecting "language and terminology that is relevant and meaningful to a target population" (Bouman et al. 2017, 5). The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health (CPATH) released a similar set of national guidelines for research involving trans individuals and communities (Bauer et al. 2019).

These new guidelines echo calls for greater attention to sexual and gender diversity in study design, data collection and analysis, and research reporting. As this field evolves, many authors have focused on sampling and measurement, including the development of more inclusive questions and optimal question formats (e.g., Reisner et al. 2016; Saperstein and Westbrook 2021). Others have identified the need for more nuanced approaches to data analysis (Ansara and Hegarty 2014; Lett and Everhart 2022), improved attention to diversity within trans communities (Lett et al. 2022), insider/

outsider perspectives (Rosenberg and Tilley 2020; Vincent 2018), and research agendas (Hanssmann 2010; Veale et al. 2022).

In order to understand more about this field of research, our team developed an evidence map of trans research (Marshall et al. 2019). Evidence maps employ systematic review methodologies including systematic searches, screening references on title and abstract, and on full text, using pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria (Miake-Lye et al. 2016). Each of these steps contributes to increased accountability, replicability, and transparency and this time-consuming process also ensures a full immersion in the data and the ways the research is presented.

One of the key objectives of the evidence map was to explore the behaviors of researchers who study trans individuals and communities, including what topics they tend to study and which research methods they employ. From an initial search that produced 25,230 references, 3,533 references were screened on full-text, including 1,667 studies that included trans people. While reviewing abstracts and articles on full-text, there were many examples of studies that did not seem to adhere to the core principles of research ethics including respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC 2018). Linking literature about trans research ethics with concrete documentation of the ways researchers represent trans people in peer-reviewed publications, this manuscript contributes to new dialogues about empirical trans research ethics highlighting challenges and recommendations at each stage of the research process.

## LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

The concept of gender modality introduced by Ashley (2022) describes, "the correspondence (or lack thereof) between a person's gender identity and gender assigned at birth" (1). We use the term trans to refer to people whose gender identity and gender assigned at birth are not aligned. The term cisgender refers to people whose gender identity aligns with their birth assigned gender (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In this paper, we have opted for a broad trans conceptualization (Chen 2018) that incorporates diverse gender identities, expressions, and modalities. This includes trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse people.

## CHALLENGES AT ALL STAGES OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Difficulties accurately reflecting gender identity and expression can be seen at all stages of the research process. In the next three sections we highlight key concerns related to research focus and study design, data collection and analysis, and reporting and publication. Suggestions for addressing these concerns are included at the end of each section. Further reflection on recommendations is contained in the Discussion.

## RESEARCH FOCUS AND STUDY DESIGN

Challenges related to research focus and study design include: 1) centering a cisnormative world view, 2) conducting research not identified as a priority by trans people, and 3) lack of accountability in research design decisions.

## 1) Centering a Cisnormative World View

A cisnormative world view assumes that everyone is cisgender and that variations from the norm do not exist (Ansara and Hegarty 2012; Bauer et al. 2009). From a cisnormative perspective, gender corresponds with the assignment made at birth, and does not change during the life course (Baril 2009). Cisnormative customs and societal structures reflect this belief system and center a "non-trans norm" (Pyne 2011). The existence of trans people, whose gender identities do not necessarily align with their birth assigned gender, challenges a cisnormative world view of sex and gender.

Grounded in cisnormative conceptualizations, psychiatrists, psychologists, and physicians function within a model that typically understands trans experience as a mental illness in need of treatment (MacKinnon 2018; Schwend 2020). Until recently, formal acknowledgment of trans people without pathologization was impossible. That is, in order to be recognized as trans and to gain access to medical transition, it was necessary to be diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (APA 1994) and subsequently Gender Dysphoria (APA 2013), disorders identified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. A similar practice relates to trans-related codes in the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (World Health Organization 2018).

Depending on context, some people still need to obtain a formal diagnosis in order to access gender affirming care, and indeed these mechanisms contribute to beliefs about what it means to be trans, or even "trans enough" (Vincent 2020). The majority of professionals receive no training related to trans experience (MacKinnon et al. 2020). Medical and psychological training that does exist has been shaped by a psychopathologizing framework. Even in cases where professionals purport to recognize that being trans is not a mental illness, simplifications (including false equivalence between "being trans" and "suffering gender dysphoria") may occur such that trans experience is conceptualized *as if* pathology. Imagining gender identity as a "disorder" is enacted through societal structures and systems, including the practices of researchers who study trans people. This is also reflected in terms of who is included on research teams and as co-authors, the ways studies are conceived and designed, in the identified objectives and hypotheses, and in the selection of measures and outcomes of interest.

## 2) Conducting Research Not Identified as a Priority by Trans Communities

Research about trans people typically reflects the interests and needs of researchers, clinicians, and funders. It is unclear how often decisions about research topics, or the identification of research questions, have been informed by the perspectives of trans individuals, communities, or other stakeholders. With the exception of participatory research, typically there is no discussion of connection to communities or their role in determining project focus in peer-reviewed publications. Instead, some authors describe how the purpose of the project relates either to their own learning goals (Kaufmann 2010) or to expanding knowledge in the field as a whole. Similar to other historically marginalized communities, these practices lead to justifiable anger and mistrust towards research and researchers, and require accountability (e.g. Jaiswal and Halkitis 2019; Perez-Brumer et al. 2021; Tagonist 2009).

Current practice supports the increased participation of people with lived experience in research prioritization (Johansson 2014; Staley et al. 2020). The involvement

of people whose lives are affected by research or policy decisions contributes in ways that may not have formerly been considered (Brett et al. 2014). Trans-focused community-based research studies in the dataset clearly described how trans community members were involved in the initiation or development of the projects themselves (e.g. Davidmann 2014; Travers et al. 2013). In the context of limited resources to fund research initiatives, centering trans people in identifying research priorities will help to increase the relevance of the information that is produced (Bauer et al. 2019). In addition to considerations related to areas of research priority, there are also implications attached to research design decisions.

### 3) Lack of Accountability in Research Design Decisions

Recent attention has turned to the importance of reducing research waste and increasing the value of research contributions (Moher et al. 2016). In the dataset, the majority of studies were descriptive, including cross-sectional surveys, exploratory qualitative studies, and clinical case reports (Marshall et al. 2019). There were 21 systematic reviews of descriptive or qualitative research. While we do not intend to reinforce a positivist view that prioritizes randomized controlled trials and meta-analyses, it is important to question what designs are being implemented and who benefits or is harmed by current approaches to study design (Lett et al. 2022).

In some situations, qualitative research provides new insights into specific aspects of trans identities and experience. For example, research conducted by Singh (2013) explores aspects of resilience for young trans women of color who are trauma survivors. In addition to enhancing our understanding of young racialized trans women, these results help to shift the field away from deficits and towards a greater focus on the strengths of members of the population being studied.

The example of case reports is not so clear-cut. Case reports document novel or rare medical circumstances and have traditionally been used for discovery and teaching (Packer et al. 2017). In the case of trans surgeries, there are a limited number of surgeons who conduct gender affirming procedures such as vaginoplasty, facial feminization, chest reconstruction, or phalloplasty. For trans people and their practitioners seeking detailed information about these procedures and potential complications, case reports can be of value. This is particularly true in the absence of clinical trials or other forms of study design. However, these publications also have the potential to augment the reputation of particular surgeons and to draw attention to their areas of expertise, possibly increasing the number of procedures they perform and their personal income. While the contribution of single case reports may benefit trans people in the way they address surgical techniques, side-effects, and complications, their contribution to evidence-informed practice is not always clear. We would argue that the value of case reports depends on how the information is used, whether the publication contributes to increased stigmatization of trans people, and whether researchers use existing case reports to conduct meta-analyses (Vandenbroucke 2001) or to develop more robust research. In order to address these challenges related to study design and research focus, four recommendations are identified below.

Recommendation 1: **Adopt an approach to research that centers gender self-determination** (Stanley 2014). Integrated this perspective would help to counter system-

ic cisgender norms that are embedded in typical research processes. A shift towards embracing gender diversity and experience within the context of self-determination would aid in addressing challenges linked to pathologization and the stigmatizing and at times highly disrespectful language used to describe trans bodies and experiences. Recent examples of these changes include a focus on trans joy and gender euphoria (Alutalica 2021; Jacobsen and Devor 2022; Shuster and Westbook 2022). As part of this first step, it is also necessary to acknowledge differences between conceptualizations of gender as binary and biologically based, and a broad diversity of genders determined by multiple factors. Ermine's (2007) concept of ethical space, developed in relation to research involving Indigenous communities, is helpful in clarifying the need for respectful engagement of difference across thought-worlds. For example, if cisgender experience were de-centered, researchers may be less likely to emphasize biology or genetics in thinking about gender because of the ways trans gender modalities unsettle assumptions about gender identity and gender assigned at birth.

Recommendation 2: **Acknowledge the structural implications of study design on trans people.** Study design influences the types of questions that can be explored, expectations of participants and research teams, and the potential impact of the project. The time and emotional costs of research participation for trans people and community partner organizations also need to be taken into account in making decisions about study design. Attending to the impact of research fatigue within trans communities is a further consideration (Ashley 2021; Glick et al. 2018). In order to make research more relevant, useful, and accessible, Chalmers and Glasziou (2009) and Moher et al. (2016) underline the importance of: i) public engagement in research prioritization; ii) appropriate research design, conduct, and analysis; and iii) accessible, full research reports.

Recommendation 3: **Conduct research identified as a priority by trans communities.** There are clear methods for centering communities in research prioritization, including detailed strategies outlined by the James Lind Alliance Guidebook for Priority Setting Partnerships (2021). Taking these steps will make it more likely that research that is funded and carried out is a priority to trans communities, that study designs will include a range of methods, and that research will contribute to transformative change. In considering research that is relevant to trans communities, it is also important to acknowledge diversity within trans communities, and to prioritize the leadership and perspectives of people from multiply marginalized subpopulations (Lett et al. 2022). Decision-making processes which do not account for systemic and structural discrimination will continue to replicate existing power hierarchies (Lett et al. 2022).

Recommendation 4: **Establish trans research ethics initiatives in partnership with local communities.** In addition to identifying research priorities alongside trans communities, it is recommended that trans communities establish research ethics groups to provide input and oversight into research happening in local communities. There are multiple approaches to organizing community ethics review processes. As documented by Shore et al. (2011) these processes primarily operated through community-based organizations, community-institutional partnerships, community health

centers, and tribal organizations. Recent research has highlighted the ways Indigenous communities have established models of accountability that balance individual and collective rights, support ethical principles that are culturally-grounded, and ensure research that is community-driven and self-determined (Hayward et al. 2021). Establishing trans research ethics initiatives, such as committees, boards, or consultation groups will contribute to larger community dialogues and histories, in solidarity with communities who have also been harmed by research and researchers.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we consider the next phase in the research process related to data collection and analysis. Difficulties in this realm include: 4) reinforcing gender binaries, 5) collapsing gender identity and sexual diversity, and 6) misrepresenting trans experiences through data manipulation.

### 4) Reinforcing Gender Binaries

Aside from being grounded in cisnormative assumptions about sex and gender, research on trans people is also influenced by broader framings of gender binarism, where sex and gender are each classified as "two distinct, opposite, and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine" (Phoenix and Ghul 2016, 200). In contrast to gender binarism, gender can be considered a multiplicity (Linstead and Pullen 2006), one aspect of the diversity of human experience.

Beliefs about gender are concretized in the design of data collection tools, and in the ways data are analyzed (Lindqvist, Sendén, and Renström 2021). There are signs that help the reader to discern whether and to what extent researchers have adopted unproblematized cisnormative and/or binary assumptions about gender. For example, referring to "opposite sexes" or "both men and women" suggests that the writer believes there are only two genders and they may have been less likely to conceptualize their research to be inclusive of people who are nonbinary, or even non-cisgender.

Binarism is also communicated in the ways researchers position trans, nonbinary, and cisgender people in relation to each other. Within a cis-binary world view (Chen 2018), researchers may assume clear distinctions between trans, cisgender, and nonbinary identities. Research design needs to take into account the potential intersections of these experiences in the lives of individual research participants (e.g. Ashley 2022; Puckett et al. 2020; Scheuerman et al. 2021). Failure to acknowledge diversity within trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse communities can be invalidating, but more than this it demonstrates a lack of understanding of lived experience. For example, if a survey asks people to indicate if they are "men," "women," or "nonbinary," this poses a dilemma for trans people who identify as men and/or women and who also want to be visible as trans (and not nonbinary) people. These categories are also not mutually exclusive for many people, and being forced to choose between "men," "women," or "nonbinary" can also create limitations related to what the dataset is capable of representing and communicating (Cameron and Stinson 2019; Frohard-Dourlent et al. 2017).

Data based on these types of question mean that participants in the response categories for "men" and "women" will include trans people, cisgender people, and oth-

ers, and researchers will have no way of clarifying their findings. In this example, if researchers reported that the nonbinary respondents were the only trans participants, this also communicates an underlying belief that trans people cannot be men and/or women. It is important to be aware of additional subtle distinctions in the ways these questions are worded. For example, if cisgender people are asked their gender, and trans people are asked for their gender identity, this reinforces the belief that cisgender people have gender, but trans people have gender identities (Motola 2012; Reed 2014). The different choice of words for cis versus trans people is implicit of a fundamental difference of validity between cis and trans peoples' genders, where cis peoples' genders are axiomatic and trans peoples' genders are suspect.

### 5) Collapsing Gender and Sexual Diversity

In addition to questions about gender, there are a number of ways researchers group trans people with sexually diverse participants, with particular issues related to data collection and analyses. For example, in some population health studies, participants are asked their gender at the start of the survey with the choice of "male" or "female." Then later in relation to sexual orientation they are asked, are you "a member of the 'gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered community'?" (Perrella, Brown, and Kay 2012, 90). When this question is asked with a single "yes" or "no" response option, it is not possible to determine individual numbers of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans participants separately. A further difficulty occurs when there is no room for trans people to identify their sexual identities because of the ways the questions are posed. For example, if questions about gender include two response options (woman/man or male/female), and questions about sexual identity include single response options from a list of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, then respondents are not able to identify as both transgender and lesbian (White et al. 2010). These response choices also foreclose experiences at the intersection of gender and sexuality, and do not make room for identity complexity and fluidity (Suen et al. 2020).

### 6) Misrepresenting Trans Experiences Through Data Manipulation

As researchers become increasingly aware of the existence of trans communities, learn more about how to access trans people through recruitment, and ask questions that are inclusive of trans experiences, trans people's data become more visible. However, this increased awareness in itself does not guarantee that trans people's information will be respected during data analysis. Respecting trans people's data means accurately and sensitively reflecting the diversity of trans people's lives (Adams et al. 2017).

One of the ways researchers fail trans people is to collect information from participants but to subsequently exclude it from data analysis. For example, in some studies researchers report that due to the small number of trans participants in the overall sample, they are unable to include this data in the analysis. Researchers typically explain this with statements such as, "Individuals who self-identified as transgender (*n* = 35) were also excluded from the analytical dataset due to the small sample size and focus on gender comparisons" (Yuan et al. 2014, 10464), "This project incorporated terminology for both queer and trans spectra; however, very few respondents identified along the trans spectrum and therefore were not included in our final subset" (Patridge, Barthelemy, and Rankin 2014, 79), or "… too few clients (<1%) reported their

sexual orientation as 'questioning' or 'transgender' to include in the study…" (Lipsky et al. 2012, 403). While some researchers may feel it is methodologically necessary to exclude trans participants from analysis due to small numbers of participants, the implications of these decisions and alternatives require careful consideration (Lett et al. 2022). To convey respect for participants, if trans data will be excluded based on sample size, this possibility should be clarified during recruitment and when obtaining consent in relation to the costs and benefits for trans people.

Another researcher practice when faced with low numbers of trans participants is to combine trans responses with larger subsamples. For example, some researchers explain that in order to include information from trans people they group them together with people from the same birth assigned gender. The emphasis on bio/logics (Van Anders 2014) over gender identity in analyzing and reporting results is most often observed in studies that focus on men who have sex with men (Solomon et al. 2014), but is also reported in other types of studies. For example, as Wells et al. (2013) report, "This coding was based on the assigned sex of the respondents and those to whom they were attracted" (315). Similarly, Newcomb et al. (2014) asked participants to identify their birth sex (options: male or female), sexual identity (options: male, female, male-to-female transgender, or female-to-male transgender), and sexual orientation (options: gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning/unsure/other). Despite investigator efforts to gain more nuanced information about sexual orientation and gender identity with these questions, they went on to analyze their data according to birth assigned gender as described here,

> Our study indicates that LGBT birth sex differences in smoking may be more similar to those found in general populations than was previously believed. However, over time male-born LGBT youth decreased their odds and rate of smoking, while female-born LGBT youth simultaneously escalated their rate of smoking and appeared to catch up to their male-born counterparts. (Newcomb et al. 2014, 562)

This grouping of trans people according to birth assigned gender is a fundamental betrayal. While it may simplify reporting or data analysis, it does so at the expense of participants' own understandings of their lives and experiences. The classification of trans experiences in these ways reflects an underlying bias against the legitimacy of trans gender identities as valid, a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) that has implications beyond political correctness.

Recommendation 5: Closer attention to the design of data collection tools to allow for the full participation of all people would also improve data quality and respectful representations of trans experience. Specifically, **questions about gender and sexual orientation need to be asked separately**. If participants are being asked who they have sexual contact with, or who they want to have sexual contact with, this list needs to include more than standard responses of women or men. An increased diversity of response options would allow participants to more accurately reflect the range of gender and sexual identity (Suen et al. 2020).

Recommendation 6: The development and validation of gender and sexuality measures is a highly active area of research. This includes the multiple studies focused on

how best to ask about gender in surveys (Bauer et al. 2017; Broussard, Warner, and Pope 2018; Kosciesza 2022; Lombardi and Banik 2016; Morrison, Dinno, and Salmon, 2021; Reisner et al. 2014; Tate et al. 2013), the development of new measures that more accurately reflect expansive gender and sexual identities (Dockendorff and Heist 2021; Frohard-Dourlent et al. 2017; Gender Census 2021; Westbrook and Saperstein 2015), critiques of existing measures (e.g. Glick et al. 2018; Katz-Wise et al. 2016; Lett and Everhart 2022; Snyder, Tabler, and Gonzales 2022), and recent research highlighting trans people's perspectives on existing measures (Puckett et al. 2020; Suen et al. 2020). A number of guidelines have been published related to sexual orientation and gender identity questions in surveys including: *Best Practices for Asking Questions to Identify Transgender and Other Gender Minority Respondents in Population-Based Surveys* (Badgett et al. 2014), *Updates on Terminology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Survey Measures* (Morgan et al. 2020), and *Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation* (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022). With the rapid growth in this field, and the ways language shifts to reflect emerging conceptualizations of sexual and gender diversity, our suggestions focus more on research processes than identifying specific measures or questions. It is recommended that researchers asking questions about sexual and gender diversity **remain up-to-date with the most current research, and engage with relevant trans communities in the development of research tools and measures.**

Recommendation 7: Potential participants have a right to know how researchers plan to use their information, including whether their data will be excluded in the case of small trans sample sizes, or if the researchers plan to analyze their responses according to birth assigned gender. There are increasing examples of how to do this. Vivienne et al. (2022) and Beischel et al. (2022) have also identified new strategies for categorizing sex and gender during data analysis, including the perspectives of research participants in developing these ideas. **During study design, recruitment, and data collection plan for how trans data will be managed and be transparent about this when seeking informed consent.** Research documents such as consent forms and data collection tools should make clear the investigator's plans for data analysis, including whether all trans responses will be grouped together, or if data from trans people will be analyzed according to birth assigned gender. Failure to inform trans participants that their data will be excluded or that it will be analyzed according to birth assigned gender is a misrepresentation of the research process.

## REPORTING AND PUBLISHING PRACTICES

There are multiple challenges related to reporting and publishing practices including: 7) misgendering, 8) informational erasure when describing sample demographics, and 9) under-attention to complex informed consent dynamics.

### 7) Misgendering

As defined by Ansara and Hegarty (2014, 260), "Misgendering describes the use of gendered language that does not match how people identify themselves." There are several sites of misgendering within the dataset. In the context of peer-reviewed case reports,

authors tend to handle patient pronouns in one of four ways. They either refer to the person by their gender, they refer to them by their birth assigned gender, they refrain from referring to the participant's gender, or they refer to them by different pronouns before and after gender affirming surgeries. Unless authors explicitly address their choice of pronouns, these decisions can lead to ambiguities, and lack of clarity for the reader. There are many examples of authors who use birth assigned gender pronouns to refer to people who have pursued cross-sex hormones or gender affirming surgeries. For example, in referring to a patient pursuing facial feminization surgery the authors comment, "The case of a 39-year-old male-to-female transgender patient who underwent feminization of his masculine forehead is presented. Surgical techniques to feminize his forehead were as follows" (Cho and Jin 2012, 1207). Similarly, from Rieger et al. (2013), "All implants originated from women, except for two that were removed from men undergoing gender reassignment" (768). While case reports do not provide insights into patient descriptions of their gender, Kapusta (2016) has underlined the moral contestability of misgendering, including the refusal of some clinicians to acknowledge patient authority over their gender.

Another example of misgendering relates to labelling trans women as men who have sex with men (MSM). In some publications, authors describe their sample as MSM but later in a demographics table, results section, or footnote, they identify the number of "trans female" participants. Although there is increasing awareness of the ways it is unacceptable to refer to trans women as men, this practice continues (Parker, Aggleton, and Perez-Brumer 2016). For example, a study by Rhodes et al. (2010), begins with the following statement: "A community-based participatory research partnership explored HIV risk and potentially effective intervention characteristics to reduce exposure and transmission among immigrant Latino men who have sex with men living in the rural south-eastern USA" (797). Subsequently, the authors note "two participants self-identified as male-to-female transgender" (797). As noted by Kaplan, Sevelius, and Ribeiro (2016, 824):

> the problematic conflation of trans feminine individuals and MSM in much of the existing HIV literature [...] has stymied progress in slowing the HIV epidemic in the most at-risk groups, including those who do not fit neatly into binary notions of gender and sex.

Finally, we have examples of misgendering rooted in transmisogyny. For example, in case reports some clinicians describe surgical outcomes in ways that suggest trans (women's) bodies are not legitimate. For example, Jarolim et al. (2009) state, "... for male transsexuals, surgery can provide a cosmetically acceptable imitation of female genitals" (1643). In other instances, authors highlight the functionality of trans affirming surgeries, particularly as they relate to the sexual experience of partners. One author went so far as to comment, "My responsibility is to make our patients a 'turn on'" (Reed 2011, 172). While on the one hand these comments may speak to priorities identified by surgeons (and some trans people), these statements communicate an underlying transmisogyny and fail to acknowledge the multiple meanings trans people may hold in relation to their bodies and gender affirming surgeries.

### 8) Informational Erasure in Reporting Research Results

The ways that researchers describe their sample demographics can make it difficult to discern who was involved. For example, some authors identify a certain number of LGBT or LGBTQ participants with no additional information about participant characteristics (Binnie 2014; Das 2012). Sometimes authors explain that this practice is to preserve the anonymity of their sample, which makes sense from one perspective, but this also means that it is not possible to be certain whether trans people participated or in what numbers. This situation is exacerbated when researchers resort to non-specific use of LGBTQI+ acronyms, and when they group results from all trans people together.

Regarding the non-specific use of LGBTQI+ acronyms, one challenge occurs when authors use trans-inclusive acronyms (e.g. LGBTQ or 2SLGBTQ) to refer to their participants but on closer examination of the sample demographics, no trans people (who are not already counted as 2SLGBQ) are included. A further concern relates to the visibility of trans participants at different levels of the publication including title, abstract, and body of the text. Some authors do not mention trans people in the title or abstract, but do identify trans people when describing sample demographics. For example, the title of a study by Stroup, Glass, and Cohn (2014) identifies bisexual, gay, and lesbian students, "The adjustment to U.S. rural college campuses for bisexual students in comparison to gay and lesbian students: An exploratory study," however 5.3% of the sample is trans. It should be noted that this also happens in relation to bisexual and other sexually diverse participants with identities outside lesbian and gay sexual identity categories. These practices erase (Bauer et al. 2009) trans participants and draw the reader's attention towards (cisgender) gay and lesbian experiences, reinforcing their centrality. That it also takes more work for the reader to determine whether there are trans participants or not, means that the contribution of these participants is more likely to be overlooked and excluded from knowledge synthesis projects.

A second challenge occurs when researchers group results from all trans people together. Sometimes researchers only document the total number of trans participants, and are unable to distinguish between different groups of trans participants because of the ways that questions are posed. For example, in some surveys participants are asked whether they are "female," "male," or "transgender" and asked to select one option (e.g. Sherman et al. 2014). Someone can be both trans and male, or trans and female. Indeed, one can be male and assigned female at birth, female and assigned male at birth, and trans people of the same assignment at birth may select different options when presented with "male" and "female" response options. The benefit of these separate options is that the reader may be able to determine the total number of trans participants, however because of the way the question is asked, it is not possible to identify diversity within the trans sample, including the number of people who identify as trans women, trans men, nonbinary, people of transgender experience, or other genders. These practices may also be echoed when it comes to reporting, when all trans and gender diverse participants are combined, making it unrealistic to decipher the diversity of gender identities within the sample. For example, in McElroy, Everett, and Zaniletti's (2011) study, "The data were also divided into heterosexual category and SGM [sexual and gender minority] category. Anyone who did not self-define themselves as male or female from the gender question and straight/heterosexual from the sexual orientation question was classified as SGM status" (441).

One of the impacts of these practices of informational erasure (Bauer et al. 2009) is that it becomes very difficult to identify who is impacted by structural forms of oppression including violence, discrimination, and poverty. For example, although trans women (including racialized trans women) are more likely to experience violence and criminalization, current approaches to reporting may lead the reader to erroneously believe that all trans people are equally at risk (Namaste 2011). This has further ramifications in that beliefs about who is affected by oppression and inequities can influence decisions about resource allocation including program and research funding (Tordoff et al. 2022). Apart from the methodological challenges this poses in relation to various forms of knowledge synthesis, reporting information in this format conflates gender and sexual diversity, erases specific aspects of trans and nonbinary experience, and fails to account for potential differences within communities.

### 9) Under-Attention to Complex Informed Consent Dynamics

In clinical research, it is not uncommon to encounter studies that use clinical assessment data or medical records with no discussion of explicit patient consent. There are multiple studies within the dataset that summarize clinic data from patient medical records (e.g. Anderson 2014; Bucci et al. 2014). The majority discuss enrolling consecutive patients in their studies, but do not elaborate on how informed consent is obtained. It is important to flag the complex dynamics that may influence the process of obtaining informed consent to participate in research from patients who are attempting to simultaneously gain access to gender affirming care (Adams et al. 2017). In these instances, it unlikely that patients who are attempting to navigate access to treatments such as hormones or surgeries would be in a position to decline the request to participate in research carried out within the same service (Denny 1992; Toze 2015).

The requirement for informed consent to analyze de-identified health administrative data varies. In some countries, "'fair processing notices' … are sent to data subjects to inform them that personal data are being processed for stated purposes" (Council of Canadian Academies 2015, 132). In others, there is no requirement to inform patients of the use of anonymized health information. Given the challenges presented by trans research in relation to respect for participants and the compromised nature of free and informed consent in the context of trans healthcare (for example, the practice of enrolling consecutive clinic patients in research studies), documentation of clear and transparent informed consent processes should be reported alongside study findings.

Recommendation 8: **Use language that respects the lived experience of trans people.** Misgendering is only one sign of disrespect, however it is an important one (Kapusta 2016). Referring to people in ways that respect gender necessitates an awareness of the need to ask for this information, and instituting approaches that make room for gender diversity in responses (Bauer et al. 2009; Tordoff et al. 2022). It is recommended that clinicians and researchers have clear mechanisms for gathering information about gender and pronouns in order to accurately reflect (and respect) the self-determination of trans patients and participants.

Recommendation 9: **Emphasize transparency and specificity when reporting trans data**. For example, if there are only lesbian and gay (LG) participants in the sample, it is detrimental to include a B or a T when describing sample demographics. Researchers should also report disaggregated data and sample demographics (Tordoff et al 2022). If there are 18 Two-Spirit people, 14 nonbinary participants, 55 trans women, and 42 trans men in the study, report this information, not total numbers of trans participants. Researchers need to respect the gender identity of trans women and refrain from grouping these participants together with MSM. As well, when conducting systematic reviews if researchers are describing sample demographics, they should be inclusive of trans experience by documenting trans participants alongside cisgender sample demographics.

**Figure 1. Trans Research Ethics Challenges and Recommendations**

| Stages in the Research Process | Challenges | Recommendations |
|---|---|---|
| Research Focus and Study Design | 1) Centering a Cisnormative World View | 1) Adopt an approach to research that centers gender self-determination |
| | 2) Conducting Research Not Identified as a Priority by Trans Communities | 2) Conduct research identified as a priority by trans communities |
| | 3) Lack of Accountability in Research Design Decisions | 3) Acknowledge the structural implications of study design decisions on trans people<br>4) Establish trans research ethics initiatives in partnership with local communities |
| Data Collection and Analysis | 4) Reinforcing Gender Binaries | 5) Ask questions about gender and sexual orientation separately |
| | 5) Collapsing Gender and Sexual Diversity | 6) Remain up-to-date with the most current research, and engage with relevant trans communities in the development of research tools and measures |
| | 6) Misrepresenting Trans Experiences Through Data Manipulation | 7) During study design, recruitment, and data collection plan for how trans data will be managed and be transparent about this when seeking informed consent |
| Reporting and Publishing Practices | 7) Misgendering | 8) Use language that respects the lived experience of trans people |
| | 8) Informational Erasure in Reporting Research Results | 9) Emphasize transparency and specificity when reporting trans data |
| | 9) Under-Attention to Complex Informed Consent Dynamics | 10) Require researchers and clinicians to obtain written consent to use trans health information |

Recommendation 10: **Require researchers and clinicians to obtain written consent to use trans health information.** There are variations in the type of consent required for identifiable and de-identified health information. Given the historical relationship between researchers and trans communities, the level of medicalization experienced by trans people alongside dual clinician-researcher roles, explicit written consent to use trans people's health information for research purposes should be mandatory (Adams et al. 2017). Documenting informed consent within peer-reviewed publications, as recommended by the Committee on Publication Ethics, would also clarify whether participants have given explicit written consent.

## CONCLUSION

In this manuscript, we have highlighted key ethical challenges and recommendations at each stage of the research process with trans people (see Figure 1). Challenges at the level of research focus and study design include: 1) centering a cisnormative world view, 2) conducting research not identified as a priority by trans communities, and 3) lack of accountability in research design decisions. Related to data collection and analysis, there are concerns related to 4) reinforcing gender binaries, 5) collapsing gender and sexual diversity, and 6) misrepresenting trans experiences through data manipulation. In terms of reporting and publishing practices, problems are identified related to 7) misgendering, 8) informational erasure in reporting research results, and 9) under-attention to complex informed consent dynamics.

One of the limitations of this project is that these challenges were identified during a trans research mapping process with publications from 2010-2014. This has allowed us to include very specific illustrations from that period but also helps to explain why some of the examples are not from publications in the last couple of years. Grounding the identification of challenges in this dataset meant that we did not go beyond the scope of the studies we examined. Citations related to specific papers are included to provide concrete examples, with the awareness that the perspectives and practices of researchers and clinicians may have changed over time. This reminds us that research, including the identification of specific challenges and suggestions in the field of trans research, is context dependent.

Ten recommendations were developed in response to these challenges: 1) adopt an approach to research that centers gender self-determination, 2) conduct research identified as a priority by trans communities, 3) acknowledge the structural implications of study design decisions on trans people, 4) establish trans research ethics initiatives in partnership with local communities, 5) ask questions about gender and sexual orientation separately, 6) remain up-to-date with the most current research, and engage with relevant trans communities in the development of research tools and measures, 7) during study design, recruitment, and data collection plan for how trans data will be managed and be transparent about this when seeking informed consent, 8) use language that respects the lived experience of trans people, 9) emphasize transparency and specificity when reporting trans data, and 10) require researchers and clinicians to obtain written consent to use trans health information.

The development of recommendations was complex. We believe that the identification of recommendations should be carried out in collaboration with trans com-

munities. Earlier drafts of this work included fewer suggestions, however through the revision process it became clearer that identifying recommendations based on the existing record of research with trans people might support greater accountability. In the process of summarizing challenges and identifying suggestions, it became clear that many authors, including trans researchers and community members, are calling for change and contributing to this dialogue. Where possible, we have made links to recommendations that others have identified or endorsed. The number of publications in this area is accelerating, and similar to research prioritization, it leads to larger questions about how and who is involved in identifying recommendations for improving trans research processes. As we work towards holding researchers accountable and conducting research with transformative potential, it would be useful to draw together this literature, to synthesize key recommendations, and to engage in a process of review and refinement in partnership with diverse trans communities, with particular attention to communities who have been historically-excluded from research processes (Lett et al. 2022).

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Grieving the Transgender (Assumed-Cisgender) Child: What Gendered Mourning Among Midwestern Parents Tells Us About Familial Cisnormativity and Creating Livable Trans Futures

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This article examines how feelings of loss and grief commonly experienced by parents of transgender youth, which I call gendered mourning, give insight into the cisnormative inner workings of family gender systems. Examination into the experience of gendered mourning illuminates the ways in which cisnormativity frames ideas of familial futurity, setting parents up for feelings of loss. Ethnographic fieldwork at a support group for parents of transgender youth in a Midwestern state in the United States and in-depth interviews with attendees of the support group reveal that gendered mourning primarily involves feelings about a child's changing name and body, the trans child existing in a hostile world, and fears of losing a child through suicide. Additionally, this study finds that gendered mourning has generative capabilities for informing parental work of fostering trans livability. This research positions cisnormativity, acting as a collective harm to us all, as the producer of loss instead of the transgender child.

KEYWORDS gendered mourning; loss; transgender youth; cisnormativity; cisgender privilege
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Further understanding of cisgender parents' reactions to their transgender[1] children coming out and socially or medically transitioning is crucial in creating safer worlds in which trans young people can flourish. Cis parent and trans child relationships are important because of increased mental health concerns when trans youth do not have family support (Austin 2016; Barron and Capous-Desyllas 2017; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; McDermott et al. 2021; Pyne 2014). Studies have found that parents of transgender youth often experience feelings of sadness, loss, and grief when their child first comes out (Coolhart, Ritenour, and Grodzinski 2018; Gregor, Hingley-Jones, and Davidson 2015; McGuire, Catalpa, et al. 2016; Norwood 2012; 2013; Wahlig 2015); however, investigation into what these feelings tell us about larger gender frameworks within the family is lacking.

This study seeks to investigate feelings of loss and grief associated with the disruption of gendered expectations that are incited by cisnormative frameworks instilled in the family, which I call gendered mourning. The sociological analysis of gendered mourning gives insight into how shifting conceptualizations of gender are unfolding in our social world, the harm that has on those most directly impacted, and the opportunities for informing trans-affirming familial and societal change. By exploring the affective experiences of cisgender parents of transgender youth in a Midwestern state in the United States, this study offers an intimate view of what happens when cisgender people confront societal and familial cisnormativity.

The experience of mourning a transgender child has been largely uninterrogated in literature about and for parents of transgender children. Although there is notable dislike of the concept of "mourning" among transgender people—stating that it is unsupportive or transphobic, as reflected in *The New York Times* article, "Celebrate Your Kid's Transition. Don't Grieve It" (Talusan 2019)—when gendered mourning goes unexamined due to the naturalization of loss accompanying having a trans child, or it is dismissed as unsupportive, we miss the opportunity for a more nuanced analysis about the collective harm of cisnormativity, "a system that forces everyone to identify and be easily recognizable as either a man or a woman" (Serano 2007, 161), and erases trans possibilities which results in transness being treated as a "social emergency of sorts" (Bauer et al. 2009; Enke 2012).

This article draws upon previous literature about gender operations within the family to provide the tools for examining the affective complexities of gendered mourning and the cisnormative aspects of American family systems which position transness as a "problem" to be dealt with. Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) provide a framework for examining how dominant, normative gender systems—instead of trans children themselves—produce experiences of loss. They argue that cisgenderism—"the idea that there are only two genders, [and] that gender is determined on the basis of assigned sex" (Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2018, 69)—is central to parents' loss of assurance in educational contexts that their trans child will be treated equally. I expand upon this to look at how cisnormativity, acting as a form of cisgenderism, produces gendered mourning within the family. While cisgenderism highlights the falsehood of the two-gender system, cisnormativity points to the specific fantasies of

1 I use "transgender" as an umbrella term to refer to both binary and nonbinary transgender people, and "trans" as an abbreviation.

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the two-gender system which ignite parental distress and loss when a child comes out as trans.

I also unpack existing research that addresses feelings of grief experienced by parents of transgender youth while underlining the ways in which this previous literature fails to take cisnormativity into consideration in the identification and processing of these feelings. Furthermore, this article highlights the need for interrogating the cisnormative and ableist frameworks which position transness and trans bodies as a death or loss. Lasty, I will explore how gendered mourning informs necessary work to create more livable minds, bodies, and environments for trans youth.

## FAMILY AS A GENDERED SYSTEM

The institution of the family is the primary source of gender normativity and gender binary socialization (Berkowitz and Ryan 2011; Kane 2006). Gendered assumptions frame parental dreams for a child's future, ideas of what parent–child relationships will look like, and even how family history is carried into the present. Gender is not only something that shapes individual identity and experiences, but it is also a structure and an institution that shapes our larger social worlds. Risman (2018, 28) positions gender as a "social structure with social processes that occur at the individual, interactional, and macro levels," noting the interconnectedness of the various levels. Lorber (2001) theorizes that gender is a social institution which organizes our lives, legitimates those in authority, and creates a stratification system of rights and responsibilities. The gender binary not only creates a hierarchy of men above women, but it also creates a hierarchy of cisgender people above transgender people. This hierarchy places transgender children in even more of a subordinated position in relation to their parents, regarding age and gender, and therefore privileges the parental understanding of gender as the dominant operating system within the family.

The operation of gender as a system—organizing roles, dictating responsibilities, and creating expected future paths for family members—is most accurate for understanding how gendered mourning operates within the family. When one part of the system changes, all the other parts must recalibrate to find equilibrium again. Transfamily theory states that most families expect and anticipate their family members to be cisgender, and the presence of a trans family member "brings attention to the tension between essentialist versus social constructionist views on gender" (McGuire, Kuvalanka, et al. 2016, 61). Cisnormativity is embedded into familial gender systems—covertly informing expectations of family operations and framing how the future is envisioned for both parent and child. Queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006) provides tools to look at how orientations, such as these cisnormative gender ideologies and expected gendered paths, point us towards the future. These orientations, like landmarks or familiar signs, let us know where we are going, which direction we are headed, and what to expect. Normative orientations direct people in the path of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and compulsory able-bodiedness, which is done through constant sexuality, gender, and body-norm socialization. This normative orientation provides us with the fantasy of "the good life" (Berlant 2011) for which American family systems aspire and enlist children in the reproduction of these fantasies and desires. Yet, these fantasies of a normative future can become a "cruel optimism"

(Berlant 2011) when something that is desired is actually an obstacle to one flourishing. When a child does not follow the directed path a parent imagines for them, the parent may experience loss of an imagined future—an obstacle in the journey of acceptance. Conflicting gender ideologies disrupt the assumed mundaneness of gender and complicate the family's gender system.

## LOSS / GRIEF / MOURNING OF THE TRANS CHILD

In research about parents of transgender youth, feelings of loss are noted among parents' reactions surrounding their child's coming out and transition (Barron and Capous-Desyllas 2017; Gregor, Hingley-Jones, and Davidson 2015; Norwood 2012). Scholars such as Coolhart et al. (2018), McGuire et al. (2016), Norwood (2013) and Wahlig (2015) use ambiguous loss theory (Boss 1999) to unpack the ambiguity and uncertainty of this particular "death." Ambiguous loss, a theory used to understand experiences of grief by families of missing persons or family members with Alzheimer's disease, is described as a "situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution" (Boss 2016, 270). This theory is used to unpack the feelings of one's child being gone when the child is still physically alive although physically different. Parents articulate seemingly incongruent yet concurrent feelings of physical absence and presence of the child as well as psychological absence and presence (McGuire, Catalpa, et al. 2016).

Norwood (2013) details four ways of coping with this ambiguous loss: feeling that the child has been completely replaced by a new person, that the child is undergoing revisions and changes, that the child has evolved into an "updated version" of themselves, or working to remove gender constraints they once put on their child. Coolhart et al. (2018) explains the ways in which this loss experienced by parents of transgender children falls under the category of Type 2 ambiguous loss—physical presence and psychological absence—while Wahlig (2015) briefly proposes that parents experience "dual ambiguous loss," a combination of Type 1 and Type 2 due to both physical and psychological losses. The stages of grief, as developed by Kübler-Ross (1969), have also been used to understand feelings of loss, noting how this unique experience of grief extends the typical death and dying process by incorporating pride as a sixth stage (Wahlig 2015).

Parents of transgender youth report experiencing the loss of the gendered identity of "son" or "daughter" which involves the loss of mother–daughter or father–son relationships (Barron and Capous-Desyllas 2017; Norwood 2012). These findings point to the integral nature of gender in parent–child relationships, suggesting that normative gender expectations are at the crux of feelings of loss. While it has been theorized that *gender transition* provokes parental fears that their child will not be able to live a normative future in terms of getting a job or having a romantic partner (Katz-Wise et al. 2017), others critique the focus being on the transgender person instead of the social systems which result in social inequalities. Riggs and Bartholomeaus (2018) contest the focus on loss, stating that scholars such as Norwood (2013), Wahlig (2015), and Brill and Pepper (2016) normalize and naturalize the idea of loss because it positions the child as the source of emotional distress rather than gender normativity. They find that cisgenderism produces an aspect of certainty of what parents can expect of a

child's schooling experiences and that this is lost as parents struggle to ensure inclusion of their trans children in gender-normative school systems. This is an important divergence in the literature, offering a distinction between viewing the child's gender identity as the "problem" and instead viewing societal structures as the issue. I expand upon this divergence in specific relation to how cisnormative family systems inform feelings of loss among parents of transgender youth, which has gone unexamined in previous research.

While theories of ambiguous loss and the stages of grief are helpful in identifying feelings of loss, these frameworks lack broader investigation into what these feelings of loss tell us about institutional investments in cisnormativity. Although transfamily theory helps to understand how cisnormativity shapes the family and the repercussions that has for transgender family members—such as how the institution of the family operates from understandings of sex and gender as dimorphic and binary, and assumes that gender identity development is binary and unchanging (McGuire, Kuvalanka, et al. 2016)—this theory does not examine feelings of loss expressed by parents of transgender youth. When put in the context of this grief, transfamily theory is useful in addressing how parents' cisnormative gender frameworks prompt their experience of mourning. However, there still lacks specific analysis of how cisnormativity shapes the institution of the family which results in what I call gendered mourning.

## TRANS BODIES

This research also examines how gendered mourning involves cisnormative ideas of the body. Queerly gendered bodies cannot be discussed without considering compulsory able-bodiedness—defined as the "natural order of things" (McRuer 2006, 1) where the "cultural presumption of able-bodiedness" masks "the pervasiveness of disability" (Kafer 2003, 80)—because cisnormative body ideals are often constructed through the lens of able-bodiedness. Disability and transness are both situated within this binary of "normative" and "non-normative" bodies, even though this binary is false and non-natural (McRuer 2006). Disabled bodies fall into this category of queer bodies in the way that they subvert ideas of normative or acceptable bodies (Clare 1999) and give a "failed (or queer)" gender performance (Elman 2014, 2), just as the bodies of trans people subvert normative ideas of sex and gender. Elman (2014, 6) discusses how disability narratives of "overcoming" are based in the idea that disability is undesirable and must be overcome or eliminated in order to "achieve a coherent and stable (read: able-bodied and heterosexual) adulthood." Ableism and cisnormativity intersect to create the societal view that any body which differs from the norm—disabled or trans—is deviant and undesirable (Baril 2014). This linkage helps to explain why bodily changes, such as appearance changes due to hormone replacement therapy or gender-affirming surgery, are sometimes the onset or exacerbation of feelings of loss. Transgender children are seen as disrupting normative orientations of compulsory able-bodiedness and conceptualizations of a "normal" childhood due to the idea that childhood gender transition disrupts "healthy" or "typical" development.

## METHODS

### Participants

The sample (*N* = 22) consisted of 16 mothers, 2 grandmothers who are primary caretakers of their grandchildren, 3 fathers, and 1 stepfather. Participants ranged in ages from 28 to 75 years old, and all reside in a Midwestern state in the United States. Four participants completed high school, 9 held bachelor's degrees, and 9 held graduate degrees. Twenty-one parents were white and one was Hispanic. Their transgender children ranged in ages from 5 to 21 years old at the time of the interview, and 2 to 17 years old at the time they came out as transgender. There were 19 youth represented, as some of the participants were married or separated co-parents. Ten children were trans girls, 6 were trans boys, and 3 were nonbinary. Sixteen youth were white, and 3 youth were multiracial or biracial: (1) African, Native American, and white, (2) Hispanic and white, and (3) Black and white. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and limit identification.

### Procedure and Analysis

Participants were recruited through a Midwest LGBTQI+ community center, which I call The Center. Participants had attended at least one meeting of The Center's support group for parents of transgender children, which I call Parents of Trans Kids (PTK), during the ethnographic observation period from 2016 to 2020. Permission was obtained by the Board of Directors of The Center as well as by the parent who led the group to observe the group meetings, which occurred twice a month for two hours. Observation occurred at PTK meetings as well as at numerous community events which allowed me to "get the feel" (Spradley 1980, 51) of what having a transgender child is like. While the observation period allowed me to witness the real-time unpacking of their fears, anxieties, and struggles, feelings of loss were often mentioned but not explored in-depth in the group setting. Following the observation period, open-ended phone interviews were conducted with 22 of the group participants which allowed for further depth and development (Weiss 1995) of gendered mourning.

Solicitation for interviews occurred at PTK meetings and the online forum that PTK uses to share resources. Advertisement for the interviews called for parents to discuss their reactions to their child coming out as transgender and did not specifically recruit for parents experiencing feelings of loss, despite this being a common framework for how the parents discussed their child's coming out and transition. The interviews ranged from 55 minutes to 123 minutes, and each was recorded and transcribed. Detailed notes were taken during observation, as well as during and after the interviews. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded using NVivo. The first round of coding consisted of an inductive and descriptive process where each line or section received a code that summarized the thought or feeling being expressed. The transcripts were then re-read and received a second round of coding where the initial codes were reviewed to condense similar initial codes into broader second codes to ensure codes were consistent across the data. The second codes were then used to construct themes and subthemes of the analysis; for example, "fears of society" and "lack of protections" created the analytical theme of "cisgender privilege loss."

Critical discourse analysis was utilized to "understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality" (van Dijk 2005, 352) and to explore how the social reality (Phil-

lips and Hardy 2002) of gendered mourning is produced through cisnormative frameworks held by the parents. I approached the data with the perspective that one's social reality "cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning" (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 3); therefore, the analytic themes were informed by socio-political discourse surrounding transness. I paid attention to patterns of language used by parents—such as "lost or losing," "mourn or mourning," "dead or dying," "grief or grieving"—and then derived meaning behind that language through analysis of the stories told in the interviews regarding what the child's transition meant for the larger family, the child's safety, or the child's well-being. This was useful in understanding the social production of gendered mourning—how gendered mourning is created in the first place and how the frameworks which produce gendered mourning are "maintained and held in place over time" (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 6). Critically analyzing *why* parents feel loss helped to identify that the sadness is not about the child being trans, but instead about failures of cisnormative familial expectations, which illuminates paths to reducing social inequities of transness being linked with death.

### Researcher Positionality

I am a white, queer, nonbinary transgender person who comes from a trans-affirming positionality. While navigating "the field" as a trans person interacting with cisgender participants, I noticed occasional discomfort from participants while discussing their feelings about transness. Some participants were apologetic and expressed embarrassment over incorrect terminology or binary ways of thinking, as well as the hope that they were not offending me. This is important to note due to the potential impact my embodiment and presence had on the group conversations at PTK, leading parents to steer away from expressions of grief in the group setting due to their labeling of these feelings as "negative" or "transphobic." However, many parents thanked me after the phone interview for providing them with a "safe space" that was "like therapy." Phone interviews, along with the assurance of privacy of information shared, provided distance from embarrassment expressed over taboo feelings within the group setting, which allowed for more unfiltered sharing during the interviews.

## RESULTS

I detail five main findings which unpack the dimensions of gendered mourning. Even though a child coming out as transgender is not an actual death, it still brings about feelings that the "before times" are not coming back, and envisioned futures are forever changed as trans realities sink in. Parents of trans youth describe experiencing various complex forms of mourning, grief, and feelings of loss which are categorized as (1) feelings of melancholy surrounding name changes resulting in shifts in cultural family lineage, (2) feelings of conflict surrounding the child's changing or anticipated changing body, (3) fears of their child existing in a transphobic culture, and (4) fears of losing a child through suicide. I find that even accepting parents still experienced these pangs of sadness when reflecting on their child's past, present, or future. I also discuss (5) the ways in which gendered mourning informs trans-affirming efforts to foster livability of the trans child.

### Name Loss

Gender is passed down throughout the family not in a biological way, but in a cultural way that connects a child to a family lineage and gendered traditions. The expected gender inheritance in the family system occurs through naming practices, which are important in the maintenance and management of gender categories (Pilcher 2017). Throughout history, gendered names have decided a child's "economic, symbolic and affective positions within the family and its social future" (Vernier 2017, 217). Parents are often intentional about picking first and middle names that honor family members and traditions. This can become problematic for transgender people when the given or birth names instead are a representation of a gendered embodiment that brings discomfort and psychic alienation. However, parents are tied to these gendered names chosen at birth because they have family meaning.

> There was an emotional investment with the middle name because my wife's middle name is the same, her mother's middle name is the same, and I think the grandmother's middle name was the same. But when Joshua chose his new names, he picked Henry, which is his grandfather. So, that was pretty cool. He replaced a family name with a family name.
> –Adam (50 years old), stepfather of 20-year-old transgender boy who came out at 15 years old

Naming practices in families are a way to show respect for family history and honor family lineage (Pilcher 2017; Vernier 2017). When the child chooses a different name, the parental recalibration process of adjusting to a new name often brings about feelings of loss of connections to that family lineage, which I call "name loss." Parents express sadness, many crying during PTK meetings and the interviews, because they had sentimental attachment to the child's birth name. Naming a child after a family member, mainly family members who have now passed away, is a way to keep that family member present and "alive." As showcased in the above quote, parents were pleased when the child's chosen name was still a "family name," continuing the tradition of honoring a family member. Even though transgender children are disrupting the cisnormative gender binary, there is still some adherence to the gender binary when picking new names—from feminine to masculine or vice versa—due to the highly gendered composition of the family system. Furthermore, nonbinary youth who chose gender neutral first names still opted for gendered middle names to honor family members. There is no escaping the gender binary and its embeddedness in the family even when one is intentionally non-gendered or gender neutral.

Some parents felt like choosing a different name was a rejection of that family connection and history, and a dishonoring of the family.

> It's just hard because it was a family name, and they were just very important people to me. It's how I kept them alive. And it's really hard because it's like, that is gone, and it's silly but, that's just how I felt.
> –Martha (52 years old), mother of 18-year-old nonbinary child who came out at 14 years old

> We had this whole plan that we'd made to honor people, and then, when we can't use that it's kind of like dishonoring the family almost? It was almost a little hurtful to me to have the name discarded. Although, you

> know, the logical part of my brain can understand it, the emotional part of my brain had difficulty with that.
>
> –Tessa (55 years old), mother of 19-year-old nonbinary child who came out at 14 years old

When a trans child chooses a different name, their birth name is commonly referred to as a "deadname"; it acts as a separation from a gendered self and a gendered name that does not fit who they are. The parents experience this change of "birth name" into "deadname" as a loss of those family connections. Names are immensely meaningful, tied to memories and visceral feelings, which is the same reason trans youth must choose a different name. Parents contend with the disruption in assumed cisnormative linearity of personhood and family lineage while navigating feelings of rejection and lingering loss. There are many names given to *that name* such as old name, birth name, deadname; but they all represent a past that is no longer being carried into the future.

## Body Loss

Another prominent aspect of gendered mourning experienced by parents of transgender youth is "body loss" which pertains to the ways in which trans bodies are pathologized and mourned in relation to imagined cisnormative bodies and the embeddedness of normative body ideals. Parents see their child's body, which does not conform to cisnormative understandings of the body, as a potential safety hazard. Underlying cisnormative and ableist ideologies about "good" bodies infiltrate parents' views about their child's desired physical changes.

Generally, parents of transfeminine youth held more concerns about gender-affirming surgeries as compared to parents of transmasculine youth. Greg, the father of an 18-year-old trans girl describes that his daughter "wants to be castrated." The use of "castration" in reference to gender-affirming surgeries—a "'disabling' body modification" (Baril 2014)—holds a negative connotation of a brutal punishment. This view is echoed by Patricia:

> With a trans male you're talking about top surgery and the creation of something that looks like a phallus, right, or something to function as a phallus. And for trans women, you're talking about castration and removal of parts. Loss of a penis.
>
> –Patricia (55 years old), mother of 17-year-old transgender girl who came out at 15 years old

Patricia's sentiments reflect how surgeries for transmasculine people are viewed as a "creation" or an addition to the body—transmasculine people are seen as gaining social status while transfeminine people are demoted below the rank of "woman." Gender-affirming surgeries for transfeminine people are viewed as a literal loss due to the removal of the penis. This is not just about the physical penis, though that certainly creates anxiety for parents, but it demonstrates the larger transmisogynistic societal views about transfeminine people that gender-affirming surgery is damaging the "male body." Viewing gender-affirming surgeries as a "loss" contributes to grief of the trans body.

Gender-affirming surgeries that are not apparent are less anxiety-producing because the mark of transness is not visible, denoting the assumption of safety and

the deferment of having to process the child's visible changes. Andrea, mother of a 20-year-old transgender boy, discusses how "a hysterectomy doesn't seem as daunting as going on testosterone or having a double mastectomy…because its hidden." While discussing top surgery, Ruth compares it to her child's recent tubal ligation:

> The tubal ligation actually was a lot easier; it doesn't show… I'm sure I would adapt [to top surgery], but when you have a nice body—ha, 'a nice body'—even if it's not the body that they want, it's just a big step.
>
> –Ruth (65 years old), mother of 20-year-old genderfluid child who came out at 16 years old

Ruth describes her child's body as "a nice body," meaning conventionally attractive through white European non-disabled beauty standards. Transness is damaging the "nice body" by taking away its potential of attracting heterosexual desire. Gender-affirming surgeries that are not apparent are not things people will "discover" through physical intimacy with a partner, and they are also procedures that cisgender people regularly receive; they are not "trans surgeries." When there are physical changes that *are* apparent, feelings of loss are often exacerbated.

Apparent physical changes invisibilize the image of the assumed-cisgender child. Parents often can still see their child as the "old person," or as the gender associated with their assigned sex at birth, if the child does not look drastically different during early stages of transition. This brings comfort about stability in presentation despite a difference in gender identity. However, this is an illusion. Cisnormativity is exactly that—an illusion of gender stability.

At a PTK meeting right at the beginning of Andrea's son's gender transition, Andrea cried over not being able to recognize her son as that "little girl" anymore: "I can't *see* my daughter." Physical changes often trigger gendered mourning because it cannot be ignored or avoided any longer. Similarly, Brianna describes that her mourning process started after her daughter began changing her wardrobe to accurately reflect her gender identity:

> Sophie asked me to take all of her clothes out of her closet, and I just remember sitting in her closet and crying, and it was not a pretty cry. I still think about it, and I can cry. About a week after her transition, um, I felt like Colton died, and I mourned the loss of Colton.
>
> –Brianna (42 years old), mother of 7-year-old transgender girl who came out at 5 years old

Taking the clothes out of her closet was an act of erasing any trace of the costume of masculinity that was given to Sophie as a baby. The clothes given to children to express their assumed gender are costumes adhering to the expected gender performance based on their assigned sex at birth. Getting rid of the dapper wardrobe Brianna constructed for "Colton" resulted in it feeling like Colton had died. Even though Sophie is the same person, the shift in gender expression signaled a break in the assumed linear and stable nature of gendered beings.

Linear assumptions of personhood—meaning that the embodiment a person has today will stay the same throughout life—is false for many reasons, but it is the story that cisnormative and ableist society teaches. Gender binary ideologies about "good" or "correct" bodies, minds, and identities contribute to what we know about the harms of ableism and neuronormativity. Cisnormativity, or this illusion of gender

stability, causes trans bodies to be viewed as a loss or a death.

## Cisgender Privilege Loss

When transgender people socially and/or medically transition, there is often loss of privileges that accompany being perceived as cisgender. Perceived cisgender privilege refers to the social privileges afforded to a person when they are interpreted as cisgender, such as being able to attend school, go to the doctor, use public restrooms, have a job, access housing, etc. (J. Johnson 2013) without the fear of harassment, misgendering, microaggressions, physical assault, or being denied resources. Transgender youth experience this loss of perceived cisgender privilege early in life, yet the dreams parents have for their children are wrapped in a clear coat of cisgender privilege. The parents cannot see this clear coat and do not know it is there, until it is ripped away. Cisgender people are unaware of cisgender privilege because compulsory gendering and cisgender assumption are invisible social forces (Serano 2007). The ripping away of this clear coat of cisgender privilege results in feelings of sadness and loss of protections.

> I was sad…because of the issues it was going to cause her with life. She already had a lot of issues with life. This was just putting a lid on any chance for her to have a happy life.
> –Barbara (75 years old), grandmother of 21-year-old transgender girl who came out at 17 years old

Parents of transgender youth express fears of their child entering a world that is not made for them. Typical parental fears are exacerbated by this loss of cisgender privilege and the recognition that trans communities are often demeaned and dehumanized.

> The statistics are insane; the statistics for homelessness, for sexual abuse, for suicide—it's staggering. It's terrifying to think of them leaving the nest and being on their own as it is, but you couple that with the risk factors for transgender teens and it's terrifying.
> –Patricia (55 years old), mother of 17-year-old transgender girl who came out at 15 years old

Parents of non-normative youth (not white, not straight, not able-bodied, etc.) have fears of the child navigating hostile social institutions. Cisgender parents often are not aware of the depth of discrimination and risk that transgender people must navigate daily, or that cisgender privilege is even a thing that can be lost.

> I was sad not because my child was coming out as nonbinary, not because I'm ashamed or because of religion, but because I was scared for my kid's life. And I was stuck because I knew if my kid doesn't come out, I'm still going to be scared for my kid's life.
> –Martha (52 years old), mother of 18-year-old nonbinary child who came out at 14 years old

> She's exactly who she's supposed to be… but I also know that, statistically, she's in a much higher risk of violence. As a parent getting ready to send my child off to college, I have a lot of fear with that.
> –Kim (47 years old), mother of 17-year-old transgender girl who came

out at 13 years old

I do feel pain…having to constantly let go of this idea that I could protect her.
–Jennifer (35 years old), mother of 8-year-old transgender girl who came out at 2 years old

Cisgender parents hold intense fears about their child's future once they learn the reality of the struggles their child will likely face. This fear is worsened by the socio-political climate of the United States during the time of data collection (Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo 2018). Legislation banning gender-affirming care for transgender youth was proposed in the Midwest state in which my data collection took place. Parents worried this lack of access would lead to more mental health concerns for their children (Kidd et al. 2021), bringing their child closer to the harm, and potentially death, that gender-affirming care prevents.

Just the other day, they reversed access to healthcare. I mean, that's just total panic. I'm counting down the years of if Trump gets elected again, how old will she be? That was devastating.
–Phoebe (28 years old), mother of 8-year-old transgender girl who came out at 6 years old

Many parents view their pre-pubescent transgender children's puberty as a ticking time bomb. If transgender children do not have access to hormone blockers to delay puberty before they can begin hormone replacement therapy, they will go through their endogenous puberty, bringing about development of secondary sex characteristics which will worsen gender dysphoria. Puberty blockers, and supporting social transition, are deemed best healthcare practice for transgender minors (Rafferty et al. 2018) yet are often delayed due to parental fear or uncertainty (Ashley 2019). For transgender kids, puberty can mean experiencing extremely distressing changes to their body that will make it harder for them to "pass" later in life.

"Passing" is often debated in trans communities; some see it as adherence to cisgender standards of beauty, yet on the other hand, some trans people and their loved ones see passing as a survival tool of assimilating into cisnormative society to avoid harassment and rejection (Billard 2019; Puar 2017). Passing can be "simultaneously affirming and compliant" (Vivienne 2017, 138), allowing one to be seen as who they are, yet also adhering to standards which harm the community. Some do not have the economic resources to access gender-affirming healthcare that would make "passing" a reality due to higher rates of unemployment and poverty (James et al. 2016). Therefore, there is an inherent privilege in passing. Parents struggle with this tension of wanting to affirm their child as they are, yet desiring compliance to cisgender beauty standards.

Selfishly because of safety issues, I hope that she… To me it seems like you'd be safer to be more feminine. To try to look as much like a wo-, you know, biological woman as you can, so that people don't know.
–Mary (44 years old), mother of 18-year-old transgender girl who came out at 16 years old

Parents of transgender youth, particularly transfeminine youth, worry about things like "wearing swimming suits, or growing facial hair later, or getting too tall, or having huge feet," as described by Phoebe, the mother of an 8-year-old transgender

girl. Therefore, they strive for cisgender passability for their children. Puberty blockers allow for the potential of a passable, potentially safer future. However, this is not attainable for many. Economic barriers to accessing puberty blockers (Stevens, Gomez-Lobo, and Pine-Twaddell 2015), as well as other systemic issues such as lack of service availability and lack of medical provider awareness (Puckett et al. 2018), essentially eliminate this as an option for low-income and rural families. Low-income, rural, and trans youth of color generally have less access to this lifesaving healthcare which will result in increased disparities as compared to their middle/upper-class and white transgender peers. The applause of only passable trans people privileges those who have the resources to achieve cisgender beauty standards. Although, even for parents with the economic means to provide puberty blockers to their children, it still may not be an option because the child came out "too late."

> Sometimes I'll look at her and think, "If we got you on hormone blockers, would you have struggled less?" When we go to a restaurant, I will make sure to refer to her as Christina in front of the waitstaff. It's that parent wanting to make things as good as possible, but I think also some of it is that guilt that, you know, if she had been on hormone blockers earlier, maybe it would've made the transition easier.
>
> –Kim (47 years old), mother of 17-year-old transgender girl who came out at 13 years old

Guilt and anxiety surrounding not accessing puberty blockers alludes to this idea that there is an ideal transition timeline to achieve passability, and consequently recover the once-lost cisgender privilege. The illusion of a cisnormative future, either through being cisgender or through achieving cisgender passability, leads parents to feelings of sadness when they contend with the changed future vision for their child.

## Fear of Losing a Future

Not only does gender transition change the ways parents dream of their child's future, but it also sparks the sudden fear of losing any type of future. Increased risk for suicide due to societal discrimination and stigmatization is a very present fear among parents at PTK, many of whose children have survived suicide attempts.

> There were some wake-up calls. I don't think I'd have a… my child wouldn't be alive. We already had one [suicide] attempt. She's highly allergic to hazelnuts—anaphylactic—and she walked herself to the grocery store, and she just um, she purchased Nutella, and um, she waited until she got home to eat it on the porch.
>
> –Eleanor (43 years old), mother of 16-year-old transgender girl who came out at 14 years old

Eleanor goes on to describe the image of her child standing on the front porch and smiling while eating Nutella because she thought her pain would be over soon. Parents express story after story of their child's immense pain which could have been alleviated or avoided by wider acceptance and awareness of gender diversity.

These "wake-up calls" are often what puts parents on the path of intentional learning about transgender identities and experiences to support their children. A significant "wake-up call" that occurred during my data collection was the death of my participants' cisgender son; Andrea and Adam lost their cisgender son, Brandon, to

suicide. They shared how the loss of Brandon put their former feelings of loss for their "daughter" into a different perspective:

> For a time, I mourned the loss of a daughter. I thought I did. In 2015 and 2016, I thought I'm never going to walk a daughter down the aisle now. Um, it wasn't really mourning because then I learned what that really was like.
> –Adam (50 years old), stepfather of 20-year-old transgender boy who came out at 15 years old

> A really big turning point was the loss of our other son. Brandon passed away, and of course that changes a lot. Because, for Joshua, I fear if we didn't figure out how to support him, then we might be burying him too. And that scared the daylights out of me. With Brandon, there is no future. With Joshua, we do have a future, but at the same time, that future is different. So, you're still kind of mourning loss of a future.
> –Andrea (49 years old), mother of 20-year-old transgender boy who came out at 15 years old

When confronted with the reality of the actual death of a child—some talked about miscarriages—it is made clear that gendered mourning results not from the transgender child, but from the death of the cisnormative futurity parents envisioned for their assumed-cisgender child. Parents of transgender youth mourn the loss of the potential of a cisnormative future—cisnormative potentiality—not the child itself. Although, this altered or abandoned futurity is not something that is mourned by transgender children themselves because they do not hold the same investments in cisnormative futures. These conflicting perspectives on futurity among transgender communities and the cisgender people in our lives produces tension in relationships but it also generates the ability for perspective-shifting to occur surrounding cisgender peoples' views on trans futures. Parents at PTK commonly expressed, "I would rather have a living transgender son than a dead daughter." There is a realization that one "life" must die, either the transgender child's life or the idea of the imagined-cisgender child's future.

## Trans Livability

As parents grappled with their internal feelings of grief stemming from cisnormative views of the child, they began to challenge their own cisnormative socialization and ultimately foster trans livability. My use of the term "livability" can be defined as the ability for one's transness to live and be fully expressed in a relationship, a family, a community, or any space a trans person might inhabit. Livability is created through pushing back against cisnormative expectations, assumptions, and enforcements of personhood. In Letcher's (2018) deconstruction of transgender murder memorials such as Transgender Day of Remembrance, they discuss how trans livability is often not acknowledged on a national scale since there is so much focus on mourning trans people because of physical death, and I extend that to include metaphorical death of the assumed-cisgender child. Trans livability is created through efforts of transgender communities as well as cisgender parent accomplices to make institutional space for

gender diversity within the family.[2] I find that parents engage in intentional efforts to support their child, both within and outside the family, which results in a reimagination of the child, and of the future, to include trans futurity.

When parents are confronted with evidence of their child not fitting the gender binary, many seek out information about trans experiences. Consuming educational materials (books, documentaries, trans-affirming trainings, etc.) helps parents understand their children, learn how to best support them, and ultimately results in better connections between parent and child. Intentional learning coincides with unlearning harmful and inaccurate narratives about trans people. As parents learned more about the nuances of gender identity, gender expression, and diverse sexuality, they implemented that knowledge into their parenting practices and engaged in efforts to decenter cisnormativity within their family.

Sandra and Stacey provide examples of how supportive parents of trans youth are changing socialization practices to reflect the realities of their children's lives:

> Emmy talked about when she grows up, she wants to be a girl, and we talked about that not all girl bodies are the same.
> –Sandra (36 years old), mother of 5-year-old transgender girl who came out at 3 years old

> Rain and I were talking about sex this weekend. I said, "If you decide to have sex with a sperm-producing partner, we need to talk about appropriate birth control." You all… their jaw hit the floor, in a good way!
> –Stacey (42 years old), mother of 15-year-old nonbinary child who came out at 13 years old

Parenting practices that are inclusive of all different types of bodies and gender expressions can help trans children develop an understanding of their own body that is not filled with internalized-transphobic and cisnormative ideas. Growing up with the perspective that "girls' bodies" can exist with or without a penis, breasts, a high-pitched voice, or facial hair works to combat the onslaught of cisnormative and transphobic messages that transgender youth receive daily, whether subtle or explicit. When parents begin to see the world through their children's frameworks of gender, parents are better able to create familial environments which affirm their trans child.

Additionally, parents begin to understand gender transition as lifesaving, and they treat medical transition as a celebration instead of a loss. This denotes an important shift from viewing transness as a deficit to something positive. Since gender dysphoria is linked with increased suicidality (Aitken et al. 2016), support for medical transition—particularly puberty blockers for pre-pubescent children—is vital for creating more livable minds and bodies for trans youth as they age.

> I was thrilled because I knew this was what she wanted, and I knew that this is who she is. And every little bit felt like she's getting closer to who she feels she wants to be and feeling more comfortable in her body which was so important. The day that she started her hormone blockers

2 I use the term "accomplice" instead of "ally" to note how accomplices "focus more on dismantling the structures that oppress that group" (Clemens 2017) as opposed to allies who focus on individual progress and representation.

> we had pink cupcakes with high heels.
> –Kim (47 years old), mother of 17-year-old transgender girl who came out at 13 years old

Although parents decenter cisnormative expectations to support their children, gender normativity still creeps into views of the child. The choice of pink cupcakes with high heels indicates a persistent view of girlhood as one linked with femininity, despite Kim's transgender daughter not being interested in performing stereotypical ideas of femininity. This reveals how trans people are subject to transnormativity, which describes how gender expressions are regulated and held to standards of "realness" and positions binary trans people as the "true" versions of transness as opposed to nonbinary or gender-nonconforming trans people (A. Johnson 2016). Gender-normative and transnormative future paths are relied upon until parents learn their child's version of girlhood, boyhood, or a childhood that does not fit either of those paths.

Parents, primarily mothers, of transgender children participate in the arduous process of unravelling and undoing cisnormativity—the very framework which produced their gendered mourning. This is reflected in the parents' participation in local and state-wide activism, creating gender-affirming plans and policies within school districts, hosting a gender-inclusive children's reading event at a local bookstore, successfully organizing a ban of conversion therapy in the city in which this research took place, and continuously testifying against proposed anti-transgender legislation in the state—all in the face of those "who don't believe my child should exist as she is," as expressed by Jennifer, mother of an 8-year-old transgender girl. Institutional space for living is created through this parental work both within and outside the family, as opposed to trans experiences being equated with death. Through these practices, cisgender parents give life to the familial and societal frameworks which recognize and embrace their transgender children.

A few states away from where this research took place, a mother who was forced to leave Texas as a result of legislation that considers her efforts to keep her child alive to be child abuse said, "We are choosing to grieve the loss of our home instead of the loss of our child" (Marques 2022). Parents who have the economic ability to relocate are fleeing their home states to protect their children from the government. Instead of grieving the loss of the trans child due to non-affirmative frameworks or due to the loss of life from increased rates of suicidality when forced to delay transition, parents—who have the financial security to do so—are choosing a different subject of grief. While this mindset flips the common narrative of grieving the transgender child, loss is still present no matter what as long as we live in a transphobic society. The unavoidability of choosing between subjects of grief—losing your child *or* losing your home, friends, family, job, etc.—indicates the need for undoing systems of cisnormativity in all areas of life so that one day, transness will not have to equate to loss and grief.

## DISCUSSION

Through examination of feelings of loss and grief amongst parents of trans youth, I find that gendered mourning stems from difficulties adjusting to the dis/reorientation of gender within the family system, cisnormative and ableist notions of the body,

parental worries about the child's future living in a transphobic society, and fears of losing the child through suicide. I argue that feelings of grief and loss are not rooted in the trans child but are instead directly linked to familial and societal investments in cisnormativity, whether intentional or not. These investments create conditions under which being transgender is, at best, not anticipated and, at worst, met with hostility. Even amongst accepting parents, cisnormativity within American families creates the conditions through which the anticipated and assumed-cisgender child is mourned when the child comes out as transgender.

When transness is not in societal and familial imaginations, trans futures cannot be accounted or prepared for. Therefore, parents who experience gendered mourning are part of the system which creates the conditions for that very mourning through the exclusion of the potential of a trans future. Gendered mourning illuminates how cisnormativity is embedded into the institution of the family through cultural naming practices connected to family lineage, linear views of the child, and gendered expectations of the parent-child relationship. Additionally, perspectives of trans bodies as being a site of danger, as well as gender-affirming surgeries as taking away instead of giving trans life, demonstrate how cisnormativity infiltrates views of the trans child. Parental ideals of cisnormativity and "passing," and through extension compulsory able-bodiedness, are often due to parents wanting their child to be able to rehabilitate the once-lost perceived cisgender privilege to achieve safety and social acceptance.

This study's findings suggest practical implications that would benefit parents of transgender youth and practitioners working with trans youth and their families. Through research about gendered mourning, I find that education about cisnormativity and the diversity of gender identity as well as community connections among parents of transgender youth to process the unravelling of cisnormative assumptions are of utmost importance. Support for education not only for parents of trans youth, but education that can reach all parents is vital in reducing or avoiding gendered mourning altogether. This study also finds that unpacking gendered mourning has generative capabilities in terms of informing parents' work to move away from the focus on loss, and instead to embrace gender frameworks, familial practices, and socio-political efforts which keep their child alive. My findings on trans livability reveal that working to identify where these feelings of loss come from is useful in pointing parents towards trans-affirming operating frameworks.

I argue that the micro-level experience of gendered mourning cannot be examined without the context of transphobic violence and discrimination, since non-affirmative microaggressions and the denial of personhood contribute to the larger socio-political atmosphere for transgender populations. This is also vital for practitioners working with trans people and their families in terms of understanding how feelings are informed by the realities of discrimination, violence, and societal othering towards trans people in America. The myths and misconceptions perpetuated by anti-transgender legislation deepen the parental pain of their child not being valued or protected by institutions of power. Trans populations are relegated to the status of living dead in broader society which informs parental understandings and experiences of transness. Cisgender parents of transgender youth experience second-hand insight into the oppression of trans communities, prompting many of their grief responses yet also informing efforts to improve socio-political conditions for their children.

### Limitations and Future Research

While gendered mourning was prominent among the parents in my research, it is important to note that my participants were all either supportive or wanting to learn how to be supportive, hence their attendance at a community group for parents of trans kids. I was unable to capture the gendered mourning experiences of parents who are actively hostile towards their transgender child. I anticipate that gendered mourning among unsupportive parents would have overlap with the findings of this research but have additional aspects of gendered mourning due to differing gender frameworks and perspectives on trans identities and bodies. Further research into the gendered mourning process among unsupportive parents of transgender youth is greatly needed despite the difficulty of accessing this population.

Additionally, further research is needed into gendered mourning specifically among fathers due to only having 3 fathers and 1 stepfather in my sample. The joking mentions by multiple mothers and one of the fathers that PTK should host masculine bonding activities, such pub crawls or barbeques, to get fathers to participate points to the societal pressures of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) which hinders the fathers' ability to engage in an emotionally vulnerable group setting revolving around the discussion of gender. Further examination of gendered mourning among fathers is vital in exploring how fathers process the loss of cisnormative ideas of futurity—both for their child's life and for their role as a father—and how fathers can embrace more flexible forms of masculinity which make space for gender-nonconformity.

Similarly, due to the limited sample of those who attended PTK being almost exclusively white mothers, this research cannot speak to all aspects of gendered mourning for parents of color. Although, I anticipate the gendered mourning process to be influenced by the concern of gendered racism (Hill Collins 2006) their child will encounter, as well as how their own views of gender are influenced by histories of racism. In the dehumanization process of Black women, "woman" was a concept only white women had access to (Hill Collins 1990; hooks 2015). Historically, categories of who is "normal" and "civilized" equated to white Americans with a "sexual fitness" for reproducing the white race (Carter 2007). White supremacy has been enforced through the labelling of Black and Brown people as abnormally gendered. Being trans distances Black and Brown youth from the protections of being seen as "normal," which can lead parents to desire their child to adhere to a cisnormative future. Further research is needed into the intricacies of the gendered mourning process among parents of color. Likewise, distinct trans-affirming education which incorporates how histories of racism coincide with histories of transphobia is needed.

## CONCLUSION

The examination of gendered mourning allows us to see how the initial expression of sadness, grief, or fear about a child being transgender does not always equate to a parent's lack of support, but instead reveals the internal processing of the false promises and illusions of cisnormativity. The system of cisnormativity within the family sets parents up for the anticipation of a cisgender child, with a linear future along the gender binary. When this path is disrupted, parents of trans youth struggle with the

shift of personal imagination and divergent futures. Recalibration and letting go of cisnormative parts that no longer fit into the family system is a much-needed aspect of the journey towards fostering trans livability. When cisgender parents become disoriented in the process of reorientation towards trans-affirmation, parents struggle with the conflicting gender ideologies. Gendered mourning exemplifies how cisnormativity is a collective harm to us all, impacting transgender people as well as the cisgender people in our lives. Of course, the people who most suffer from this collective harm are transgender people who are left to deal with societal oppression and/or fractured family relationships.

I argue that unpacking the experience of gendered mourning is crucial in parents' interrogation of how gender functions in their lives. This forces them to confront uncomfortable cisnormative internal beliefs that they otherwise might not have done had they not had a transgender child. It is also useful for practitioners working with families of trans people in terms of providing a trans-affirming frame for these "negative" emotions or views on transness. When mourning, grief, and feelings of loss are rejected as merely negative, we are denying the reality of emotion which is not only a masculinist and ableist response to someone's lived experience, but it also disregards the opportunity for meaningful reflection and change. Instead of denying the emotion, the sociological analysis of gendered mourning allows us to view this grief through a different lens and facilitates the identification of what parents are really grieving; the falsehood and failure of cisnormativity, not their actual child. The illumination of these falsehoods and failures is essential in the undoing of cisnormativity.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# (De)Transphobia: Examining the Socio-Politically Driven Gender Minority Stressors Experienced by People Who Detransitioned

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Existing research on gender minority stress theory largely presumes that transgender identity is a categorically immutable characteristic often tied to a unidirectional gender

transition, neglecting to consider individuals whose gender identity/expression and embodiment desires change over time. Applying constructivist grounded theory, this article empirically develops the concept of *detransphobia* from the distal and proximal gender minority stressors, stigma, and discrimination experienced by individuals who shifted or reversed their gender transition. Between October 2021 and January 2022, 28 participants completed semi-structured, one-on-one virtual interviews regarding their experiences of detransition/retransition and their social support needs. Interviews ranged between 50–90 minutes and they were transcribed and analyzed following an iterative, multi-pronged coding process to thematically conceptualize detransphobia. Fifty-two percent of the sample reported three or more past gender identities, 61% currently identified as nonbinary, and 100% identified along the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Participants' experiences of multiple gender transitions, and their embodiment following detransition, rendered them vulnerable to unique gender minority stressors for inhabiting an unintelligible category—detrans. Detransphobia was found to be rooted in cisnormativity and transnormativity, together with socio-politically-located anti-transgender stereotypes related to the process and the outcomes of detransitioning. Detransphobia compounds gender minority stressors and social exclusion in those who shift or reject their past transgender identity through the process of detransition.

**KEYWORDS** gender minority stress; nonbinary; transgender; detransition; retransition
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Transgender, nonbinary, and other gender minority people have gained much visibility in popular culture over the past decade (Cavalcante 2017). Some social media personalities and journalists have responded by directing attention toward a presumptive rise in youth who identify as trans, speculating they may later regret their gender transition and *detransition*, or reverse the process. Likewise, some media sources speculate that transgender is a "fad" which could be discarded later in life like other fleeting trends (Gill-Peterson 2021; Shrier 2020). Particular public concern is concentrated around young trans and nonbinary people who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) and who seek gender-affirming hormones or surgical procedures which can result in permanent physical changes made to the body—embodied outcomes expressly desired by those seeking these interventions. Narratives focusing on medicalized gender transition and detransition appear in prominent news stories such as in the *National Post* (Blackwell 2020), *Psychology Today* (Veissière 2018), *USA Today* (Tanner 2018), and *The New York Times* (Bazelon 2022), and are identified as contributing to "moral panic" about trans youth in particular (Slothouber 2020). However, sparse attention is paid to the material challenges, stigma, and discrimination associated with living trans or detransitioned lives in political climates ostensibly dedicated to limiting their emergence in the first place, as evidenced by ongoing gender-affirming care legal battles (Bell v. Tavistock, EWCA Civ 1363;[1] MacKinnon et al. 2021; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health 2021).

1 Bell v. Tavistock, EWCA Civ 1363 (2021). https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Bell-v-Tavistock-Judgment.pdf.

Gender minority populations confront multi-layered, gender-based discrimination relating to the disruption of cisnormative sex/gender/sexuality schemas which privilege cisgender (cis), gender-conforming people who identify with their gender assigned at birth (Ashley 2018, 2020; Hill and Willoughby 2005; Morrison et al. 2017; Paine 2018; Willoughby et al. 2010). Within the literature, the main concepts and frameworks used to examine stigma and discrimination on the basis of gender nonconformity include: transphobia (Hill and Willoughby 2005; Morrison et al. 2017; Willoughby et al. 2010), transantagonism (Ashley 2018, 2020) and gender minority stress theory (Tan et al. 2020; Riggs and Trehame 2017). While each has a unique definition, they share a common a recognition that trans and other gender minorities comprise a marginalized group who experience social stigma, stressors, and discrimination due to their gender identity/expression which can pose deleterious consequences to social, economic, and health outcomes. For instance, high prevalence rates of past suicide attempts among trans people (29% per recent meta-synthesis; Adams et al. 2017) have frequently been attributed to exposure to gender-based violence and victimization (McNeil et al. 2017; Pellicane and Ciesla 2022). Paine (2018) found that trans men, nonbinary people, and gender nonconforming cis women experience "embodied disruption" and "mis/recognition" regarding discrepancies between their sexed bodies, gender identities/expression and that this in turn contributes to stress and stigma relating to disrupting gender expectations and gender nonconformity.

The gender minority stress framework developed by Testa et al. (2015), outlines multi-layered forms of distal and proximal stressors, such as gender-based rejection, experienced by trans and other gender minorities whose existence challenges hegemonic social expectations for sex/gender. Distal stressors are conceived of as microaggressions and other events of gender-based victimization or rejection, including non-affirmation and misrecognition of gender identity/expression, based on the experiences of being a gender minority (Meyer 2003; Tan et al. 2019). Proximal stressors can include nondisclosure of one's gender identity as a protection strategy, which may lead to distress and poor psychological outcomes for the individual (Tan et al. 2019). Gender minority stress theory builds from Meyer's (2003) minority stress model which conceptualizes distal, proximal, and social stressors as loads that place individual, cognitive, and social strain on minority people, resulting in poor mental health. Within gender minority stress theory, authors also recognize resiliency and coping strategies that may buffer or mitigate negative minority stressors (Testa et al. 2015; Tan et al. 2019).

Riggs and Trehame (2017) add to gender minority stress theory by conceptualizing how ideologies act upon the social environment, institutionalizing social norms and delegitimizing minoritized groups in turn. In this way, ideologies pertaining to sex/gender can compound stress for gender minority individuals and the group. For instance, gender minority people transgress social and embodied expectations for sex/gender/sexuality. Trans people, in particular, challenge cisnormative ideology by identifying with a gender different than the one assigned to them at birth, and this may produce stressors. Gender minority people who transition and later detransition are affected not only by cisnormativity, but also transnormative ideology. Transnormativ-

ity makes trans identity and trans community accountable to medicalized notions of being born in the "wrong body" whilst constructing a hierarchy wherein "legitimate" trans people seek medical/surgical interventions to achieve a binary gender transition (Johnson 2015; Vipond 2015). This normative belief is widely propagated by media and by some trans people (Johnson 2016; MacKinnon 2018). People who detransition often deviate from this binary, medicalized trans narrative, engaging in fluid expressions of sex/gender across the life course, while also resisting broader transnormative "born this way" biomedical cultural scripts (MacKinnon et al. 2021; Johnson 2015). In response to transnormative ideology, people who are detransitioning may encounter unique gender minority stressors. However, these have yet to be understood because the gender minority stress literature largely takes for granted that transgender/nonbinary identity is a static and immutable characteristic. Empirical inquiry into the unique gender minority stigma or stressors associated with identity fluidity or of shifting one's gender identity/expression *after initiating* a gender transition—detransitioning—has been neglected despite much recent public discourse on the subject.[2]

It is important to understand the unique social experiences and gender minority stressors associated with detransition, as these may warrant distinctive social inclusion efforts, support program development, and further research. For instance, some authors observe it is widely believed that it would be "distressing" for young people to change their gender identity after first initiating a gender transition, arguably introducing new distal and proximal gender minority stressors (Olson et al. 2022). Indeed, studies of individuals who have stopped/reversed their gender transition have identified unmet care needs and stigma is reported by this group (MacKinnon et al. 2022; Vandenbussche 2021). In recent years, a self-applied gender minority label of *detrans* has emerged, adopted largely by those who detransitioned and who question or reject their past trans identity (Vandenbussche 2021). Detrans people are visible on social media platforms and share their own personal stories of gender transition, detransition, and of ostracization from trans and/or LGBTQ+ community (Hildebrand-Chupp 2020). Vandenbussche (2021, 7) found that detransitioners reported it was difficult to discuss detransition within LGBTQ+ spaces or with trans friends, and that many detrans women need to be "accepted as female while looking male." Thus, questions arise surrounding what detransition-related gender minority stressors people confront, and how these experiences may be shaped by anti-detrans beliefs, behaviors, prejudices, and broader socio-political discourses.

This paper explores proximal and distal gender minority stressors, discrimination, and stereotyping experienced by those who have shifted or reversed a gender transition and in doing so we empirically develop the concept "detransphobia." To our knowledge, this term appears to be in use over social media but has yet to be discussed within academic scholarship. Urban Dictionary defines detransphobia as: 1) "fear or hatred of detransitioners," 2) "fear or hatred of the existence of detransition," and 3) "fear or hatred of anyone who sympathizes with detrans folk." (jouissancepastance

2 Although the term "retransition" is occasionally used as a synonym for detransition, within detransitioning communities, *retransition* means to resume a gender transition and re-identify as trans after a detransition to one's assigned gender at birth. As such, we apply this definition of retransition to be consistent with detrans community.

2018). The objective of this paper is to rigorously conceptualize detransphobia, grounded in perspectives, feelings, and events described by individuals with experience of questioning, shifting, or rejecting their trans identity *after initiating* a gender transition. Following Riggs and Trehame's (2017) emphasis on ideology's impact on gender minorities, we also examine how broader socio-political discourse about trans and detrans subjectivity may compound detransition-related gender minority stressors.

## DETRANSITION AS A PROCESS AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE DETRANS POPULATION

Though academic debate on the definition of detransition is ongoing, most authors agree the process involves stopping or reversing a gender transition alongside a shift in an individual's affirmed gender identity/expression (Expósito-Campos 2021, 2022; Hildebrand-Chupp 2020; Pazos Guerra et al. 2022; Vandenbussche 2021). Not unlike an initial gender transition, the detransition process can involve social interventions such as changing one's clothing, name, pronouns, legal applications to change identification, and medical care to discontinue or reverse prior gender-affirming treatments (e.g., discontinuing or switching gender-affirming hormones; breast reconstruction surgery). Some who engage in detransition as a social and/or medical process self-label as nonbinary or gender-fluid, or continue to affirm their trans identity (Expósito-Campos 2021; Littman 2021; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Pullen Sansfaçon et al. 2022). Others reject their past trans identity and re-identify with their assigned sex at birth (e.g., female) (Littman 2021; Pullen Sansfaçon 2022; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Vandenbussche 2021). Of note, many detransitioners—including those who re-identify with their birth sex—reject the transnormative notion that they were never "truly" trans (Hildebrand-Chupp 2020). Not unlike trans and nonbinary people, many detrans people continue to report ongoing struggles with gender dysphoria and gender-based discrimination on the basis of gender-nonconformity (Hildebrand-Chupp 2020; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Vandenbussche 2021). As Hildebrand-Chupp (2020) puts it, detransitioners "refuse to preserve the stasis between cis as non-trans" (as originally quoted in Enke 2012, 74).

Detransition is estimated to occur in approximately 7–13% of those who initiate a gender transition (Butler et al. 2022; Boyd et al. 2022; Hall et al. 2021; Olson et al. 2022; Turban et al. 2021) and factors associated with detransition are complex and varied. Studies of detransitioners show that some feel gender transition was ultimately not the right path for them and/or they had negative outcomes related to medical/surgical treatments which prompted them to halt the process (Littman 2021; MacKinnon et al. 2022). Others may have initiated a transition expressing a binary trans identity (e.g., trans man or trans female) only to later discover a nonbinary identity better reflected their embodied experience of gender, which in turn triggered a discontinuation of gender-affirming hormones, disinterest in interventions once desired, and/or seeking to reverse the effects of past interventions (Boyd et al. 2022; Hall et al. 2021; Littman 2021). Detransition is also associated with transgender-related discrimination or external pressures, as described in three recent studies (Littman 2021; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Turban et al. 2021). Of note, the 2015 United States Transgender Survey (USTS) found that 13.1% of a sample of 17,151 respondents reported a history of detransition,

with 82.5% reporting at least one external factor for detransition. However, eligibility criteria for the 2015 USTS required respondents to affirm a transgender/gender diverse (TGD) identity. Thus, as Turban et al. (2021) note, these results may be more reflective of TGD people who have a history of detransition, because anyone who detransitioned and who no longer identified as TGD was excluded from participating in the survey.

To better understand detransition and detrans people, recent studies have purposively sampled participants on the basis of the experience of detransitioning (Littman 2021; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Pullen Sansfaçon 2022; Vandenbussche 2021) or have identified patients who detransitioned via medical case notes (Boyd et al. 2022; Hall et al. 2021; Pazos Guerra et al. 2020). These studies have found that individuals within this group have heterogenous identities and life experiences, with most of these studies' samples comprising a majority AFAB young adults. Vandenbussche's (2021) international survey recruited 237 detransitioners who were a mean age of 25 and 92% were AFAB. Littman's (2021) international survey of 100 detransitioners was composed of 69% AFAB respondents; 90% were white, a majority were sexual minorities (LGB+), and they were a mean age of 26 when they detransitioned. Sixty-one percent re-identified with their assigned gender and 39% were TGD or "other" (Littman 2021). A Canadian qualitative study sampled 28 people (64% AFAB) who detransitioned, finding 71% were between the ages of 20–29, 75% were white and 61% were nonbinary (MacKinnon et al. 2022). In a medical case note analysis in England, Boyd et al. (2021) identified that 4 out of 41 (9.8%) trans patients discontinued hormone therapy due to changes in identity/detransitioning to their assigned female sex (three of four) or nonbinary (one of four); they were a mean age of 18 when presenting for treatment and remained on testosterone for a mean of 18 months. Taken together, these studies highlight that changes in self-conceptualized identity often occur alongside detransition.

*Detrans* is an emerging subjectivity through which people understand themselves, and there is increasing public and scholarly attention turned toward detrans online spaces. Littman (2021) notes a rise in detransition YouTube videos and membership of one Reddit group called r/detrans which, at the time of writing, has >42,000 members (though an informal survey of detransitioners on r/detrans recruited only 400 participants, and after verifying that respondents met the moderator's definition of detransition, only 247 respondents remained; DetransIS 2022). Indicating the growth of detrans social networks, there are also private detrans Discord servers, another subreddit, r/actual_detrans, with >5,000 members, and detrans TikTok and YouTube creators with >100,000 followers (e.g., Alia Ismail).

In terms of the socio-political context surrounding detransition, individuals and organizations who publicly sympathize with detransitioners often deploy statements demonstrating anti-trans beliefs (Bergeson 2022). For instance, British gender critical organization, *Transgender Trend*, cautions about the rise in child and adolescent referrals to gender identity services, rejects the concept of "gender identity" and "trans" people altogether, and curates a list of resources for those who regret their transition—explicitly stating that "detransition stories" are "hidden and denied by transgender activists" (Transgender Trend 2022). Indeed, there is concern that gender critical partisans, who routinely express critique toward trans-inclusive social policies and gender-affirming healthcare, may exploit detransition narratives for nefarious

objectives (Andersson 2021). That is, to amplify skepticism surrounding trans identities, to restrict access to gender-affirming healthcare, and to create division between trans and detrans communities (Pearce et al. 2020; The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health 2021; Zanghellini 2020). Our study of detransition-related gender minority stressors includes examination into the broader socio-political context, including interrogating discourses about trans and detrans subjectivity and their impact on those who are detransitioning.

## METHOD

The current article is based on a critical qualitative study which aimed to understand the identities, experiences, and support needs of detransitioners/retransitioners living in Canada (MacKinnon et al. 2022). Hildebrand-Chupp (2020) argued that detrans research often diverges along the lines of either seeking to *prevent* detransition or to *support* detransition. The former research objectives concentrate on identifying causal factors associated with detransition and the detrans rate, while the latter focus on generating support and inclusion needs for detrans people. This study adopted a *supporting detrans* approach to research, specifically from a trans-affirming perspective. Using constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology, the present analysis empirically distills experiences of anti-detrans beliefs and minority stressors, to introduce the concept of *detransphobia* to inform the development of support programs and to mitigate detrans-related stigma.

CGT methodology is recognized as useful for developing new theories and concepts grounded in empirical data and the life events of research participants by accounting for the power relations and mechanisms by which "reality arises from the interactive processes and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts" (Charmaz 2000, 524). Developed by Kathy Charmaz (2008), CGT parts from traditional grounded theory methodology in that it incorporates a constructivist epistemology while preserving a pragmatic orientation to qualitative data analysis. Applied to research, constructivism recognizes that knowledge is built by researchers themselves through study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Charmaz 2014; Hallberg 2009). For this reason, CGT emphasizes the importance of researcher reflexivity and co-constructing knowledge together with research participants by amplifying participant voices. As a team we are a majority white, and we each bring different identities along the LGBTQ+ spectrum. We engaged in researcher reflexivity practices, examining how our positionality shaped recruitment, data collection, and analysis. To address insider/outsider relations in knowledge production, interview data were analyzed by team members who have experiences of gender transition, as well as some who have detransitioned/retransitioned. This enabled us to better conceptualize interview data from the perspective of individuals with actual experiences of detransition (rather than interpreting data exclusively from outside of this experience) and to understand the substantive content of the interview data. To add trustworthiness to our study findings, we consulted with a total of four individuals who had detransitioned/retransitioned who were living either in Canada or the United States to develop participant recruitment and data collection tools, and to support the interpretation of study findings. The study was approved by the York University research ethics board and all study participants provided verbal informed consent prior to enrolling in the study.

## Data collection and analysis

We conceptualized detransphobia by conducting and analyzing semi-structured interviews with people who had detransitioned/retransitioned. Purposive and snowball sampling were implemented such that study advertisements were circulated over social media, to clinicians who work with trans and other gender minority populations in six Canadian cities, to detransition-support groups, and within participants' social networks. To maximize heterogeneity among the sample, additional recruitment materials were circulated which focused on recruiting into the study Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as those assigned male at birth (AMAB). Eligible participants were ages 18 and older, living in Canada, and able to participate in an interview conducted in either English or French. Further eligibility criteria included: experiencing a shift in gender identity after transitioning or stopping a gender transition, and self-identifying as one or more of the following: detrans/detransitioning; retrans/retransitioning; discontinuing transitioning; and/or re-identifying. Between October 2021 and January 2022, participants completed semi-structured, one-on-one virtual interviews regarding their experiences of detransition/retransition. Gender transition was defined to include any configuration of social, legal, and/or medical transition. Those with specific experiences of re-identifying with their assigned sex at birth and reversing their transition, in particular, were encouraged to share the flyer among their personal networks.

Twenty-eight individuals were eligible and completed the full interview and demographic questionnaire. Two interviews were conducted in French by team member, FR, whose first language is French, and the rest were conducted in English by KM or GE. Interviews ranged between 50–90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to prepare for data analysis. Participants received a $30 CAD electronic gift card as an appreciation of their time. Throughout data collection and analysis, we applied an iterative, inductive multi-pronged coding process to identify prominent emerging themes and to develop a coding framework.

Our analytic objectives were to critically interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions and to develop thematic codes to theoretically interpret participants' accounts of gender minority stressors and gender-based discrimination in their lives, particularly in relation to detransition. To develop the preliminary coding framework, we first conducted initial line-by-line coding of the first 20 interview transcripts. English and French transcripts were read and coded initially by a minimum of two team members who are proficient in reading both languages (KM, GE, LR). The final eight interviews were conducted and initially coded to finalize the codebook of themes and to assess theoretical saturation of findings, a measure of analytic rigor in CGT (Charmaz, 2006). For the second stage of focused coding, each transcript was coded in Dedoose analytic software by three team members (KM, WAG, GE). Each transcript was read and re-read a minimum of three times by these researchers. The third and final stage of coding was specific to the objective of conceptualizing detransphobia. In this step, we applied the constant comparative method to further examine themes relating to social stigma, stress, and discrimination on the basis of detransitioning.

Following Charmaz (2014), our main tasks of the constant comparative analysis method were to draw comparisons between what was said by one participant within the same interview, together with comparisons of several participants across multi-

ple interviews. Through the constant comparative technique, we coded similar and dissimilar events, and the three coders discussed observations and interpretations of specific cases which demonstrated detransition-related stigma and participants' accounts of sex- and gender-based discrimination, refining the analysis iteratively. To identify instances of detransphobia we explored and coded events relating to gender minority stressors and discrimination through their initial gender transition, and then compared and contrasted those with participants' descriptions of events unique to detransition. We further compared and contrasted data coded as detransphobia with dissimilar data—such as those reflecting support and positive feelings associated with detransition. This inductive, constant comparative approach permitted for increased fidelity in extrapolating a coherent constructivist grounded theory of detransphobia from the perspective of individuals positioned to describe this novel form of bias and prejudice.

## RESULTS

Participants ranged in ages from 20–53, they were predominantly currently nonbinary-identified and AFAB. A majority had started their transition identifying as binary trans (trans men or trans women) before experiencing a change in their self-conceptualized identity and re-identifying as nonbinary or with their assigned sex (or both). A few participants brought a life history of detransition to their assigned gender, followed by retransition to their current identities.

Participants described experiencing complex and multifaceted forms of distal and proximal gender minority stressors and discrimination throughout the course of their lives, including during and following detransition. We conceptualized the latter as detransphobia: a particular form of detransition-related prejudices, microaggressions, gender-related stressors, and discrimination. Detransphobia is illustrated by Figure 1 and elaborated upon by participants. Within participant narratives, detransphobia was most salient across three domains: (1) detransphobic stereotyping; (2) detransphobic prejudices; and (3) coping with and resisting detransphobia.

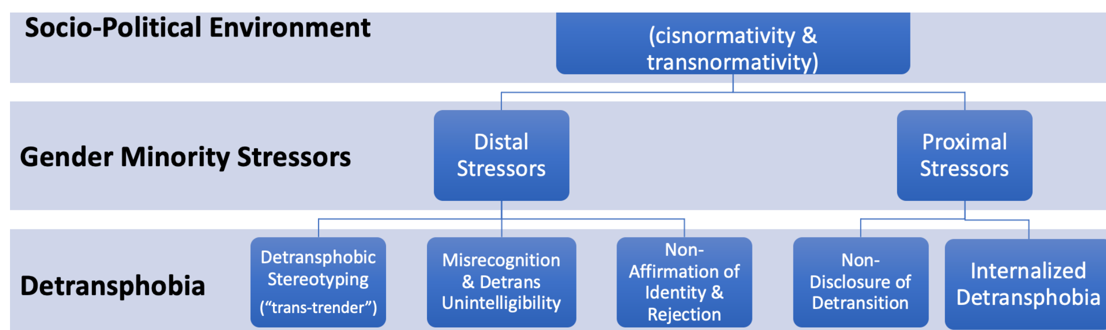


**Figure 1. Conceptual model summarizing findings**

**Table 1. Participant Demographics (*N* = 28)**

| Variable | *n* (%) | Variable (cont.) | *n* (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | Age at Detransition | |
| 20–29 | 20 (71.5%) | <18 | 1 (3.6%) |
| 30–39 | 6 (21.4%) | 18–24 | 13 (46.4%) |
| 40+ | 2 (7.1%) | 25–29 | 9 (32.1%) |
| Assigned Sex at Birth | | 30+ | 5 (17.9%) |
| Female (AFAB) | 18 (64.3%) | Sexual Orientation | |
| Male (AMAB) | 10 (35.7%) | Gay/lesbian/homosexual | 10 (35.7%) |
| Current Sex/Gender Identities | | Bisexual/pansexual | 9 (32.1%) |
| Female | 6 (21.4%) | Queer | 7 (25.0%) |
| Nonbinary & female | 1 (3.6%) | Asexual | 1 (3.6%) |
| Nonbinary & male | 1 (3.6%) | Heterosexual | 1 (3.6%) |
| Nonbinary & gender-fluid | 3 (10.7%) | Race/Ethnicity | |
| Nonbinary, gender-fluid & male | 1 (3.6%) | White | 21 (75.0%) |
| Nonbinary | 5 (17.9%) | Multi-racial* | 5 (17.9%) |
| Trans & nonbinary | 6 (21.4%) | Jewish (White) | 2 (7.1%) |
| Trans | 2 (7.1%) | Identify as a Person with a Disability | |
| Undecided/Questioning | 3 (10.7%) | Yes | 16 (57.1%) |
| Number of Past Gender Identities | | No | 12 (42.9%) |
| Two | 12 (42.9%) | | |
| Three | 6 (21.4%) | | |
| Four | 4 (14.3%) | | |
| Five | 4 (14.3%) | | |
| Six | 0 | | |
| Seven | 2 (7.1%) | | |
| Age at Social Transition | | | |
| <15 | 5 (17.9%) | | |
| 15–17 | 6 (21.4%) | | |
| 18–24 | 12 (42.9%) | | |
| 25–29 | 3 (10.7%) | | |
| 30+ | 2 (7.1%) | | |

*Note.* *includes Black, Indigenous, Arab, Latine, and South Asian

## Detransphobic stereotyping

Participants observed common generalized beliefs and microaggressions about people who detransition, often discussing online spaces, but also in their personal relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. For instance, one participant reflected that:

> [detransitioners] are often met with the awful term "trans-trender". And I think that's probably one of the most disgusting things someone can throw at someone because, just like sexuality, just like anything,

> things are fluid. You learn as you grow. (Participant 6, nonbinary, AFAB, age 36)

For this participant, the word “trans-trender” is a stereotypical and stigmatizing term used specifically against those who once identified as trans but who later questioned or rejected their trans identity and detransitioned. Such encounters were experienced as distal gender minority stressors and non-affirmation of their past and current gender identity. Reflecting transnormative ideology, the belief that only those who are binary identified and who engage in medical/surgical transition are legitimate has also been deployed through term “trans-trender” to denigrate nonbinary identities, gender fluidity, and trans people who do not access medical/surgical interventions (Moncel 2021; Vipond 2015).

Other participants reported witnessing both cis and trans people (often in online spaces) who said that detransitioners were evidence that trans identity is a fad, thereby buttressing cisnormative, transantagonistic beliefs that trans is a delusion, or symptom of a mental illness. One participant who self-labelled as a former “radical feminist detransitioned woman” expanded on these stereotypical narratives which form an elaborate “constellation” of beliefs advanced within diverse political circles encompassing radical feminists, anti-capitalists, and “hardline right-wing fundamentalists”:

> All of them seem to have this specific narrative… where AFAB people transition because they’re traumatized and want to escape womanhood. And then come to regret it because they’ve realized it’s impossible because it’s not real. And [the desire to transition] arises because of trauma and mental illness… That narrative [theorizes] a predatory industry around [transition], where… the medical industry wants you to give them your money in the form of like hormones and surgeries for the rest of your life. And we should question that because we should question these capitalists’ affiliations in general. (Participant 5, questioning/trans, AFAB, age 29)

Many also discussed how these beliefs were often advanced by the media, with representations rarely reflecting their actual experiences of detransition, instead constructing stereotyped generalizations:

> I’ve [only] ever seen media portrayal[s] of detransition… that are rabidly anti-trans that are using detransitioners as some “got you” argument against transition. I don’t think I’ve actually seen any more honest or realistic portrayals of people detransitioning. (Participant 25, nonbinary, AMAB, age 28)

As such, media amplified anti-trans and detrans stereotypes that did not reflect their own experiences, contributing to distal gender minority stressors like misrecognition or misrepresentation of themselves in media. Participants also reflected that these ideological beliefs were socially and politically positioned, often aligned with “gender critical ideology” and promulgated by self-described radical feminists, as well as individuals they thought were “alt-right.” Most often described broadly in interviews as TERFs (an acronym for trans exclusionary radical feminists), participants noted that these partisans:

> would become really negative towards other people being able to access HRT [hormone replacement therapy], saying really negative things about trans women and how they think that female assigned people are mutilating their bodies, and all kinds of stuff like that… The media either wanted to ignore us, or to take our stories and weaponize them [via media], either to demonstrate how TERFs are evil, or to demonstrate how queer people are evil… The media wanted to say that we hated trans people. (Participant 5, questioning/trans, AFAB, age 29)

Importantly, participants rejected "TERF" involvement in their lives and expressed feelings of frustration with these generalized stereotypes and broader cultural misunderstanding or misrepresentations about trans and detrans lives. Another participant explained: "detransitioners get support from people who they don't necessarily agree with. There's a line between a radical feminist and a TERF. And TERFs are kind of assholes" (Participant 10, female, AFAB, age 29). Participants expressed discomfort and varying degrees of disagreement with beliefs and practices they associated with "TERFs" even as they recognized those affiliated with "TERFs" also expressed outward support for detransitioners.

Participants expressed concern regarding the unique social stressors associated with detransition, especially with regard to the difficulties of re-identifying and the vulnerability of those who are considering detransitioning. Online detrans spaces were thought to be especially attractive to young people who were questioning their identity and experiencing detransition-related stressors such as social exclusion and misrecognition/misrepresentation of detrans subjectivity:

> I really didn't want to be a part of any of those [online detrans] communities… Just because I made the decisions that I made, and then later changed my mind about them, I never thought that that should mean that no trans people are valid, and no trans people should be able to access HRT… I think a lot of those communities are really harmful and they can prey on young people who are in a really vulnerable, confused state, re-questioning their identities. (Participant 7, cis woman, AFAB, age 29)

Taken together, some participants felt that the proliferation of stereotypes about detransitioners as being anti-trans and of opposing gender-affirming healthcare, may in turn compound rejection and alienate people who are detransitioning, making them vulnerable to exploitation within certain detrans online groups.

According to participants, many individuals (including relatively accepting friends and family) expressed "confusion" regarding participants' detransition, rather than specific stereotypical beliefs, such that distal stressors like the feeling of being misunderstood was common. Often, misunderstandings stemmed from other ideological systems and dominant cultural scripts about sexual and gender minority people, such as heterosexism, cisnormativity, and transnormativity. However, they also felt relief when friends and family did not respond with immediate, negative bias. Regardless, misperceptions and confusion on the basis of sexual and gender minority status still introduced stressors into close relationships, as shown below:

> My mom is pretty confused… Super supportive. Really, really, she's wonderful. We're very close. But she's confused! We haven't really spoken

> about me retransitioning. The other day, we went out for dinner, and she looks at me, and she was like, "so, are you—would you date a man?" And I think that my gender fluidity signaled to her bisexuality because somehow being more feminine is that you're somehow interested sexually in men. And I was just not equipped to have that conversation with her. (Participant 11, nonbinary, AFAB, age 26)

Here, a participant's mother conflated shifting from a binary trans man identity to nonbinary and reversing some transition-related medical interventions with bisexuality, leading to abandoning the conversation entirely. Other participants reported misrecognition in that they are often assumed to be trans based on their gender nonconforming presentation, despite very distinctly *not* identifying as trans as they did in the past. After having lived binary trans lives for several years and later detransitioning, their specific gender was often socially unintelligible. Very few participants explicitly stated they were cisgender after detransitioning. Most expressed their identities and gender expression as more liminal, embodying something in between cis and trans, as described below by a participant who lived as a trans woman for a few years:

> For the past few months, I've used the term gender-fluid. Though most of the time I've been presenting as male and I'm happy to be referred to with "him" pronouns. I feel like having had gender confirmation surgeries, having been on hormones, [cisgender is] not the right fit either. I'm still open to playing with gender. I'm still queer, but I do day-to-day present as male. (Participant 17, gender-fluid male, AMAB, age 32)

Another participant who had also detransitioned from a binary trans woman experience explained that since detransitioning they are often now read socially as an AFAB trans man:

> I [was] an MTF [male-to-female]. But I think the big thing that living as a trans woman did for me for a long time is that it kind of changed that baseline… So I'm really short, and I have a kind of unusual vocal timbre, and I dress very, very masculine typically now, and I've had a lot of people think that I am a trans guy… Like almost everyone seems to think that I'm a trans guy when they first meet me. (Participant 1, nonbinary, gender-fluid male, AMAB, age 25)

Detransitioning from binary trans to a gender more aligned with their assigned sex at birth, was rarely described by participants as re-identifying as cisgender. Inaccurate beliefs, including generalized stereotypes about transition and detransition, contributed to misrecognition and social unintelligibility that caused them unique forms of distal gender minority stressors, and they were often still perceived socially as trans.

### Detransphobic prejudices and their impact

Though many participants reported feeling continued support in family, friendship, and romantic relationships throughout their detransition, others recalled instances in which they experienced interpersonal rejection. They experienced significant stigma attached to detransitioning, which led to persistent prejudices (negative, and sometimes positive, biases) and ostracism. For instance, a participant reflected challenging experiences with trans people specifically:

> Basically, everybody's cut me out. There's like four people that I'm still

> friends with that I still talk to. Most of them, I trigger their dysphoria and invalidate them by existing… I haven't found community within the [LGBTQ+ community] center, any of those spaces. There isn't room for detransitioners… When I was emailing [LGBTQ+ community] center, I sent them a [detransition support] booklet that they could put up… [I said:] "Here's the experience of detransitioners and how they deal with the distress around their gender." And they stopped replying to me. (Participant 10, female, AFAB, age 29)

Another participant who had detransitioned from a binary, "stealth" trans man to live as a butch woman for several years recalled being on a date and hearing negative remarks/microaggressions regarding their detrans gender embodiment:

> If I'm meeting someone [for a date] and they're like… "What is it about you? Something's strange." And I'm like: "FTMTF [female-to-male-to-female]. Do you get it?" And then they're like "Oh, that's why you're saying she/her, and you're presenting as feminine, but there's something strange" … I definitely will never look like a cis woman. (Participant 13, nonbinary, transmasculine, AFAB age 25)

Participants frequently described strained relationships with some trans people and LGBTQ+ community members in relation to their detransition, including microaggressions that seemed to convey both transantagonism and detransphobia, as shown above. These encounters were often described as emotionally difficult, and some participants lost important community connections, close friendships, and peer-based supports.

> But [detransition] has been definitely very weird. I lost a lot of binary trans women community that I had, which I'm definitely a bit sad about, because even just for the sake of sharing resources or being able to go to people for emotional support, that's been rough sometimes. (Participant 1, nonbinary, gender-fluid male, AMAB, age 25)

Other participants, when discussing romantic or intimate relationships, encountered trans people who "took it personally" when they voiced that they were questioning their own trans identity, rendering them vulnerable to non-affirmation—a distal stressor:

> A woman I was dating at the time a couple of years ago—she was a trans woman—and towards the end of our relationship I did talk to her a bit: "I don't really feel like I'm a trans woman anymore, I feel like I might be nonbinary." And she didn't really respect that very well. I don't know, she somehow took it personally and was a little weird about it and said she would try to use different pronouns for me, but never did. (Participant 25, nonbinary, AMAB, age 28)

A few participants also shared that they were frustrated with "trans activists" in particular who they felt rejected or harassed detrans people. These participants themselves self-labelled as a former trans activists and talked about being frustrated by community dynamics such as feeling pressure to conform to a binary trans identity and transition pathway. Others discussed social rejection from trans/LGBTQ+ communities and explained that online detrans space can be an important resource for detransitioners who are facing social rejection:

> The detrans Reddit was such an amazing community for me and it was

> always under the threat of being shut down. You'd see the screenshots from the trans activist Reddit groups who were basically trying to organize mass events and stuff to take down the Reddit for detransitioned people. Calling it like a TERF group… There was this looming threat of like, well how much longer will this space be here? (Participant 10, female, AFAB, age 29)

Despite a near total absence of support resources for detrans people, the detrans Reddit group was thought to be under looming "threat" by trans activists. For participants who endorsed unmet needs for detransition support following rejection from communities to which they once belonged, there was a distinct feeling of social exclusion and of their needs being dismissed by dominant trans communities and by LGBTQ+ community organizations.

Participants expressed a need for more support and recognition of their experiences during their detransition and to buffer detransphobia, with many reporting searching online for resources. Yet paradoxically, the online detrans peer support spaces they found were experienced as "toxic" and otherwise unable to meet their needs; thus, isolation, non-affirmation, and misrecognition occurred in both trans and detrans spaces:

> There are detransitioning communities online that I was a part of when I was first thinking of detransitioning. But I can't say it was particularly helpful… Yeah, it could be toxic at times. There was a lot of kind of right-wing, or alt-right, or religious overtones to some of the groups. And so, I didn't feel comfortable in a lot of detransitioning circles because of that. (Participant 9, uncertain identity (she/her), AFAB, age 37)

Most of the participants who searched online for detransition supports and joined online detrans groups felt that these peer resources were unable to address the negative social impacts of detransphobia and gender-based discrimination they were experiencing.

Participants also reflected on how common, cisnormative beliefs about trans identity as a "phase" led to positive confirmation biases about their own transition and detransition, which in turn contributed to minority stressors. However, this *de facto* positive support for their detransition was alienating, when it was rooted in non-affirmation of their initial trans identity:

> [My mom] doesn't like to really talk about [detransition] though… It hurts because sometimes it feels like she just expected that to happen… It just always feels like she's never trusted any decisions that I've [made in] my life or—everything I always want to do or anything I say about myself has just always been brushed off or not taken seriously. So, I just remember when I came out as trans it just felt like she didn't take it seriously, she didn't take my feelings—how I was feeling about myself or my body seriously at the time. And so, I just—it just always feels like everything is brushed off. (Participant 22, female, AFAB, age 29)

For this participant, because her mother endorsed the common negative belief that trans identity was a "trend," she invertedly supported detransition, but this positive support and recognition was alienating. Similarly, another participant withheld from her family that she detransitioned and re-identified as a cisgender woman in order to

prevent family members from endorsing, negative beliefs (even as they might contribute to support or recognition of her current identity):

> When I transitioned, [my family] were all like: "Oh, you know, you're going to regret this and change your mind." It's like, I did end up changing my mind, but not for the reasons they thought I would. So, I just didn't want to give them the satisfaction of thinking that they were justified in their transphobia. So, I just didn't bother to tell them that I changed my mind [and detransitioned]. (Participant 7, cis woman, AFAB, age 29)

So, as an approach to protect from the effect of a positive detransition bias, she opted to remain known to her family as a trans man. Thus, even positive support may amplify detransition-related stressors if it is based in negative beliefs and stereotypes. Other participants similarly carefully negotiated to whom they disclosed their detrans status (or history of transitioning), or withheld this information, indicating proximal gender minority stressors of non-disclosure and potentially the presence of internalized detransphobia.

Proximal stressors such as holding internalized detransphobic stereotypes triggered in participants feelings of shame that they had made a "mistake"; of "second guessing" their desire to detransition; and of being apprehensive or fearful about the detransition process:

> I had to do a lot of internal work… [Detransition] felt [like] this weird process of—like when you first have suspicions that you're trans when you're living as a cis person where there's a lot of denial, there's a lot of guilt, there's a lot of—like you second guess yourself. You're like, "Oh, it couldn't possibly be that I'm trans, it must just be that… Maybe I just like dressing a different way or something." And [detransition] felt very similar to that. There was a lot of denial and a lot of second guessing, and a lot of almost taking active steps to do things with it, but then not. But then it eventually clicked suddenly for me. (Participant 1, nonbinary, gender-fluid male, AMAB, age 25)

> When I did decide to detransition… I started kind of like slowly kind of coming out to people again as hey, I'm [Name]. Like, "I didn't make the right choice. That wasn't who I am." I was losing myself in that [gender transition] process. But, letting everyone know, I'm still super supportive of the trans community. (Participant 20, female, AFAB, age 25)

Participants described an internal process of gender identity exploration and detransition decision-making as not unlike their initial gender transition. Many participants attributed feelings of guilt or shame to broader cultural transnormative/transmedicalist narratives about detransition, together with challenging interpersonal dynamics with friends, family, romantic relationships, and trans/LGBTQ+ communities.

## Coping with and resisting detransphobia from trans community

Overall, participants reported positive experiences of support from friends, family members, and romantic partners when explaining their intentions to detransition. However, interviews also revealed a number of coping strategies participants used to prevent negative stereotyping and stressors from trans community members, spe-

cifically. In particular, participants frequently objected to detransphobic stereotypes such as the notion that detransitioners are anti-trans, they repeatedly aligned themselves with trans communities, and conveyed empathy to maintain connections with trans people that may be vulnerable to detrans prejudice. First, participants routinely expressed support for trans people and for access to gender-affirming interventions, such that they distanced themselves from negative stereotypes that may amplify detrans stereotyping and stressors:

> Just because I made the decisions that I made, and then later changed my mind about them, I never thought that that should meant that no trans people are valid, and no trans people should be able to access HRT. I actually believe the opposite. I think that the easier it is for everyone to access, then the less stigmatized it will be for everyone to make whatever decisions they need to. (Participant 7, cis woman, AFAB, age 29)

Participants also resisted negative framings of detransition, such as discriminatory attitudes surrounding gender-fluidity, questioning or rejecting one's past trans identity, and the mainstream media narrative that all detrans people are regretful and "ruined", as shown below:

> If you don't feel like being trans has helped you, there's still a life after. You're not ruined… It's going to be okay. And as detransitioners started to actually openly talk, and I saw that it's not just religious fanaticals that detransition—there's complex reasons that go into how someone could end up [detransitioning]. (Participant 10, female, AFAB, age 29)

> The media uses the hypothetical concept of someone detransitioning as a scare tactic to try to make accessing HRT harder… You know, "What if you're one of those people who changes your mind? And you ruin your life, and you regret it?" … I don't like it when people use my narrative to try to deny care to other people. (Participant 7, cis woman, AFAB, age 29).

Participants demonstrated protective coping strategies from detransphobic misrecognition of their beliefs and experiences, such as defining and narrating their own subjectivities. Although participants expressed feelings of hurt or grief about community or friends lost due to detransphobia, they often voiced empathy and recognition of the socio-political context, thereby attempting connection despite overt prejudice.

> [After announcing my detransition] there was one or two [trans people] that started to send me a—not a really angry message but just disappointed message… Like I understand. It feels like a vulnerability when people detransition from the trans community. So, I can understand that they feel vulnerable, because now, "Oh those cis people can just say "Look, see it's wrong and you shouldn't do it." Just because a few people [detransition] doesn't mean [transition is] wrong. (Participant 28, nonbinary male, AMAB, age 54)

> I think [some trans people] are projecting whatever insecurity they might have on to detransitioners and vice versa. I just think people are

> taking it personally if somebody detransitions; it feels like a personal attack on their trans identity… it just seems that there's hurt feelings. (Participant 22, female, AFAB, age 29)

Participants often expressly worked to dispel negative stereotypes about detransition while also using empathy to challenge negative prejudices. In doing so they offered support towards trans community, while at the same time coping with detransition-related minority stressors and resisting detransphobia.

## DISCUSSION

We investigated unique forms of politicized, distal, and proximal gender minority stressors experienced by individuals who questioned or rejected their past trans identities and shifted or reversed their gender transitions. In the process, we empirically substantiated what has been anecdotally described in online detrans spaces as detransphobia, defined as fear or hatred of detrans people and the existence of detransition (jouissancepastance, 2018). Analyzing in-depth participant narratives, we found that detransphobia is rooted in socially and politically located stereotypes and prejudices related to the act, the process, and the embodied outcomes of detransitioning itself. Participants who had experienced embodiment changes from gender-affirming medical/surgical interventions and who went on to later affirm either a cis or non-trans identity, or expressed their gender in alignment with their assigned sex, demonstrated how experiences of gender transition and detransition rendered them vulnerable to particular forms of gender minority stressors because they inhabited a new, largely unintelligible gender minority category—detrans. Our analysis also revealed that detransphobia is tightly tethered to anti-trans, cisnormative, and transnormative ideologies which place additional minority stressors on those who question, change, or reject their trans identity during the detransition process. Detransitioners bear witness to, and resist, the ways in which their identities and experiences are routinely cast as categorically anti-trans and fodder for transnormative microaggressions (e.g., "trans-trender") within broader socio-political discourses, amplified by a motley crew of political partisans. In response, participants engaged in gender minority protective strategies, such as embracing and self-determining their own detrans identity, a practice of resilience identified by Singh et al. (2011). Others engaged in non-disclosure that they had detransitioned to prevent distal stressors, comprising a proximal stressor that past research identified as compounding poor mental health among gender minorities (Testa et al. 2015; Tan et al. 2020). We are unaware of any existing studies that have explored or measured the mental health of individuals who are in the process of, or post-detransitioning. This research is needed to understand the psychological impact of detransition-related gender minority stressors and detransphobia.

Detransphobia is amplified through a confluence of gender critical/radical feminist presentations of transition and detransition such as prominent anti-detrans narratives in the media of being "mutilated," "ruined," or a "trans-trender," as noted by participants who coped with, and resisted, these cultural scripts and microaggressions about themselves. Our findings therefore suggest that detransphobia is often intertwined with transphobia and categorically negative attitudes about gender transition. Yet, participants in our study also found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place in that they lost important trans/LGBTQ+ community connections during

detransition and then received support from "TERFs" (e.g., "people who they don't necessarily agree with") whom they also recognized as creating the very socio-political conditions which may give rise to detransphobic prejudices, negative biases, and the conflation of detransition with transantagonism. Our findings on the theme of coping with detransphobia from trans people also extend Vandenbussche's (2021) survey results which identified that detrans people need supports to address feelings of rejection from trans/LGBTQ+ communities. Our analysis highlights a need for detrans-inclusive LGBTQ+ support programs to achieve greater social inclusion.

We observed that participants in our study were cautious when sharing their stories and often emphatically voiced support for trans people. Engaging in researcher reflexivity, and given that interviews were conducted by team members who openly identify as trans and/or nonbinary, we interpret this as a protective strategy to buffer against detransphobic stereotyping. Participants, including those who themselves self-labelled as detrans and/or radical feminist, spoke about the broader socio-political landscape and how detransition is leveraged by a "constellation" of transantagonists (e.g., "TERFs"), and they also frequently rejected the stereotype that all detransitioners are transantagonistic. While we are not suggesting participants' feelings of support toward trans people were disingenuous, our analysis raises a question: In the absence of the interconnectedness between detransition and anti-trans discourses, would participants still feel the need to defend against the assumption that they, too, might hold anti-trans beliefs? Insofar as participants negotiated an initial transition and then a detransition/retransition within close relationships of family, friends, and romantic partners, though, they may have felt some social obligation to scaffold their journey from their prior transgender selves to their current detrans, nonbinary, gender-fluid, and/or gender-questioning present. Regardless, their personal narratives hold implications for broader investigation, as well as social policy considerations, as the personal is always political.

We recognize this study has limitations. First, given that so few studies have participants on the basis of detransitioning (or detrans/retrans as identity), results and demographic characteristics must be interpreted with caution. This is a Canadian study of adults who detransitioned, with a majority affirming a nonbinary identity at the time of interview. Although efforts were taken to achieve a heterogenous sample in terms of racial diversity and assigned sex, the sample comprises a majority AFAB and a majority white participants who felt they detransitioned largely due to internal factors such as gender identity evolution, health concerns with hormones, dissatisfaction with binary transition, and/or mental health challenges (MacKinnon et al. 2022). While this is consistent with other studies that have sampled detransitioners, detransphobia is very likely experienced differently by AMAB and/or BIPOC individuals who confront intersecting forms of discrimination or for whom detransition is largely driven by transphobia or external pressure. Future studies focusing specifically on BIPOC and AMAB detransitioners are needed to improve empirical understandings and to develop intersectionality-based policies to support detrans folks confronting a range of social oppressions.

Our analysis also has implications for broader cultural and scholarly assumptions about what it means to embark on a gender transition. Marked by individual detransition experiences, participants reported a range of identities beyond a cis/

trans binary. At the time of interview, several participants felt they are now cisgender and/or they identify more strongly with their sex or sexual identity. However, some of these same individuals continue to live context-based trans lives (e.g., with family; or being perceived trans socially). Others expressed that they are "technically" no longer trans, but that living as binary trans men or trans women for a period of time "changed that baseline" such that now they embody sex and gender somewhere between cis and trans. Others were questioning or unsure about their identities while they were taking active steps to socially and/or medically reverse their initial gender transition. Other studies have similarly found a complex overlap in the way that detransitioners experience their subjective gender, with trans and nonbinary identities persisting for some, while others re-identify with their birth-assigned sex (Expósito-Campos 2021; Hildebrand-Chupp 2020; Littman 2021; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Turban et al. 2021). Taken together, these findings disrupt the cis/trans binary. We underscore that, for some people, gender identity is not experienced as an innate, immutable characteristic. Rather, one's embodied sense of the sexed body and gender identity can evolve over time, and some who engage in a gender transition may later discover that trans is no longer suitable, not safe enough, or not possible, for various reasons. For some of these individuals, detrans/detransitioner may replace their former trans identity; however, based on our analysis this comes with considerable social risks and minority stressors such as being labelled with detransphobic terms like "trans-trender," of being assumed anti-trans, and of social exclusion.

## CONCLUSION

We conclude with the following reflections on the contemporary emergence of the term *detrans* and its often assumed linkages to the socio-political anti-trans discourses, most notably being conflated with "ex-gay" and "ex-trans" movements (Urquhart 2021). From participants' narratives and their embodied and material work of constructing and reconstructing themselves through the process of multiple gender transitions, we interpret the emerging subjectivity of detransitioner/detrans to mean not "ex-trans" but instead a temporal and dynamic process of scaffolding between past and ongoing gender minority experiences. From this, we suggest the "de" in detrans could denote the Latin root "de" (*from/of*) rather than a complete undoing of gender transition and an absolute dis-identification with trans/gender minority identity. *Detrans = of trans origins*. Though, we also recognize the detrans community is diverse and dynamic, comprising individuals with varying relationships to trans communities, unique experiences, feelings about gender transition, and with diverging views about the categorical boundaries of detrans. Regardless, this is a population who share much in common with trans/LGBTQ+ people and who are equally deserving of social inclusion and recognition, and to live in environments free from gender minority stressors and detransphobic prejudices.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Challenges of Trans Public Policy in Argentina and Germany: A Conversation Between Nyke Slawik and Alba Rueda

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The Argentinian Gender Identity Law was approved in 2012. On the occasion of its tenth anniversary and in the wake of a German self-determination law, two pioneer trans activists engaged in policymaking—Alba Rueda of Argentina and Nyke Slawik of Germany—discuss the challenges of developing trans-supportive policies in Latin America and Europe. Besides the differences between the two countries and the complexities of language and political–cultural translation, the conversation showcases some of the various ways in which scholarship, policymaking, and activism can create critical spaces of conversation to foster new synergies against exclusionary and reactionary trends, and to build a more democratic and equal future for everyone. The conversation is preceded by a short scholarly introduction that presents the theoretical context for the conversation and introduces the discussants. The article closes with a conclusion that unpacks the general implications of the conversation for scholars and advocates working in Germany, Argentina, and beyond.

KEYWORDS Argentina; Germany; travesti; transgender politics; self-determination
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The Argentinian Gender Identity Law was approved in 2012.[1] What today is considered a turning point in the history of LGBTQI+ rights was the result of the advocacy and involvement of trans people in the legislative process. From the streets to the parliament, the Argentinian trans movement shaped a law with a unique nature. In contrast with other legislation elsewhere in the world that requires medical procedures, the Argentinian state recognizes every citizen's self-attested gender, along with other deep reforms such as requiring public and private healthcare systems to provide free access to gender-affirming care.

On the occasion of its tenth anniversary and in the wake of a German self-determination law, we invited two pioneer trans activists engaged in policymaking—Alba Rueda and Nyke Slawik—to discuss the challenges of developing trans policies in Latin America and Europe. Alba Rueda is Argentina's Special Representative on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. She was the first national Undersecretary of Diversity Policies (2019–2022) and co-founder of the organization *Mujeres Trans Argentinas* (Argentinian Trans Women). Rueda participated in the creation of the Gender Identity Law, the Law of Trans Employment Promotion, and the recognition of nonbinary identification documents.[2] In 2021, the BBC chose her as one of the 100 most influential women in the world, and in 2022 she was part of the TIME100 Next list—a list that recognizes 100 "rising stars" from across industries and around the world. Nyke Slawik is one of the first two openly transgender members of parliament (MPs) in the German parliament. She started her political career at the age of 15 as a member of the Green Youth. From 2015 to 2017 she was chair of the Green Youth in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. She campaigned for the 2017 state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia and the 2019 elections for the European Parliament. Since 2021, she has been a member of the German parliament, as part of a new progressive coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). This coalition has publicly negotiated improving the living conditions of queer and trans individuals, queer families, and other vulnerable groups, and is currently working on a self-determination law that would abolish the old Transsexuals Act that was established in the 1980s and that today is regarded as unconstitutional in many regions. This progress was the result of a long history of trans activism that transformed the standards of who could be elected to formulate policies and that pointed out a new cycle of participation in the hostile landscape of politics.

1 This text is built around the transcription of a conversation between Alba Rueda and Nyke Slawik that took place at the University of Cologne, Germany, on 1 July 2022. The dialogue was entitled: "Can Germany Learn from the Argentinian Gender Identity Law?" We are thankful to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions project grant number 886496, and Competence Area IV: Cultures and Societies in Transition at the Global South Studies Center at the University of Cologne for making this event possible.

2 In 2021, the Argentinian parliament passed the law "for the promotion of formal employment for travestis, transsexual, and transgender people." The legislation provides for a 1% employment quota in the civil service, tax relief for private companies hiring trans people, and training to reduce trans unemployment. Also in 2021, Argentinian President Alberto Fernandéz signed an executive order recognizing nonbinary identification documents and passports with an "X" gender marker.

The conversation between Rueda and Slawik emerged as a challenge to the discursive monopoly on trans lives previously held by cisgender physicians, policymakers, and lawyers. However, rather than merely celebrating the event, we want to call on attention to how it contributes to building a field of applied transgender studies. While spending an afternoon in a range of activities with Rueda and Slawik—from lunch to the public conversation and a subsequent informal chat—we couldn't avoid noticing the complexities of these interactions. Even with a common ground of activism and achievements, it was still a somewhat challenging conversation that demanded not only a linguistic translation but also the creation of solid bridges between two very different political contexts in the Global North and Global South.

In this brief introduction, we discuss how this dialogue contributes to the broader field of (applied) trans studies and the study of transgender politics. We focus on the challenges to building a conversation as a generative starting point for scholarship about the limits of universalizing trans theory, the need to develop contextualized analytical languages, the limits of state-based transformation, and the challenges of facing a global anti-trans movements both in academia and politics. Like Billard, Everhart and Zhang (2022, 4) wrote in the inaugural issue of this journal, the challenge is how to advocate for a "multi-theoretical and multi-methodological post-discipline of transgender studies that affords the analytic flexibility and intellectual pluralism needed for trans studies to make itself of importance to addressing the problems of the world." As Rueda and Slawik emphasize in the conversation, the synergy between trans activism, theory, and policymaking has the potential not only to improve trans lives, but also to open broader questions about how to address inequality and citizens' bodily autonomy. But creating this synergy is challenging, as the editors of this journal suggest:

> First, it would mean a turn away from a focus on field-building within the humanities, opening up the field of inquiry to interested scholars approaching trans studies from a wider range of disciplinary homes. [...] Second, it would mean insisting upon transdisciplinary collaboration despite the academy's failure to encourage such collaboration. But perhaps most importantly, it would mean a turn toward addressing the material conditions of transgender existence and the issues transgender people face in the world. (Billard, Everhart, and Zhang 2022, 1)

Even if from two totally different logics, these conversations highlight the difficulties of creating a global trans perspective that does not erase local particularities. The conversation points out not only the differences between national realities, but also differences within the community itself. When we focus on the material conditions of trans life—when we think, for example, of those Latin American trans migrants living in Europe or the lives of those from working-class backgrounds—we notice how static notions of the Global North and Global South become problematic. Indeed, there are numerous challenges when politics are turned into action and the lives of trans people are improved on both a local and a global level. Where do the material conditions trans people face due to the social and political specificities of a given place intersect on a global scale? Where do they differ? And what is needed to facilitate a global discourse, despite these local peculiarities? These are some questions that came to light during the dialogue between Rueda and Slawik.

The conversation stresses the fact that in trans politics (as in the trans field more broadly) we still have the challenge of finding a language that speaks to both the common and the particular experiences of transness. Previous literature has pointed out the risk of universalizing the trans subject and therefore denying geographical and temporal particularities (Harsin Drager and Platero 2021; DeVun and Tortorici 2018; Wayar 2018; Madsen Evang 2022; Yarfitz 2023). But even if this awareness is developed theoretically, the question of how these particularities affect the everyday lived experience of being trans around the world often remains overlooked. The case of the Argentinian legislation is an example of the strong links between activism and social change in a certain place at a certain time. The law would not be the same without Argentinian travestis' political experiences, which is why it is not easily possible to translate travestis' experiences grounded in Latin America to the experience of transness in other geographical contexts, e.g., in Europe. Harsin Drager and Platero (2021, 419) remind us that Latin American travesti communities are strongly connected to "an activism that is rooted in experiences of sex work, and anticolonial and class resistance" and that the search for a global umbrella term "has the effect of erasing the particularities of the vernacular, of the historical, or the chosen names for one's experience."[3]

What nowadays we define as the Latin American travesti theory—a body of ideas grounded in travestis' experience—is helpful to understand the political and theoretical tensions in these dialogues on activism, scholarship, and beyond. The Argentinian travesti activist Lohana Berkins distrusted the potentiality of queer and trans theory from the Global North precisely *because* it ignores Latin American travestis' experiences and thinking. In her own words, "we endorse queer theory as a knowledge that questions the binary gendered order. However, as a community, we also want to have some distance from these theories, shaped by difference but produced, fundamentally, in the central countries" (Berkins 2013, 91). *Nuestra América Latina* (Our Latin America) became her geopolitical place of enunciation, a strategy to claim how their irreducible corporeal experience could not be dissolved by "universalizing" theories grounded in other contexts:

> We are seduced by the idea of demolishing identities, of living in a "degenerate" world, but it seems to us that saying this in the US or European context is very different from saying it in our Latin America. Translating from one context to another is a very complex process, so far unachieved. It is not the same to be a travesti in Buenos Aires, in Salta, in Bolivia, as to be one in Manhattan or in Amsterdam [...] We often get caught up in a lesbian gay discourse, and even when many years ago the t was added, if we make a critical analysis of GLTTYB discourses, our representation is still fragile, our demands are not always incorporated, our conquests are invisible and it ends up being a politically correct response. (Berkins 2013, 91)

The tension between the universality of transness in contrast to travesti experiences emerged in the Argentinian Gender Identity Law itself. Even if the legislation

3 In fact, it is difficult to define travesti, as it is a changing historical reality. In this text, we use the word travesti to highlight their particular experience characterised by the intersections of racialization, working-class culture, and femininity.

was criticized by some activists for not including or formally recognizing the travesti identity within the reparational framework (i.e. for ignoring one particular group that is heavily connected to the geopolitical space of Argentinian activism), it "marks a minimum departure point—and not an arrival" that allowed other identifications (De Mauro Rucovsky and Russell 2019, 231–33). No law changes the social situation and lived experiences of the people affected all of a sudden, which is an important observation also for other legal and geographical contexts. "In this same sense, the LIG's existence does not change the experience or social treatment of gender. However, the law's overarching spirit unleashes an understanding of the normative power forces that construct sexed bodies" (De Mauro Rucovsky and Russell 2019, 234). From a different perspective, Paisley Currah (2022) argues for a better understanding of the productive power of "sex." For him, it is essential to focus on how the incongruent ways in which different state agencies define sex produce different living conditions for the state's citizens as a whole. As Alba Rueda expressly stresses in her intervention, the Argentinian Gender Identity Law's transformation of the administrative definition of gender, its movement from the state to the Argentinian citizens, opened a door for other kinds of personal identification, as the most recent recognition of nonbinary identities shows.

A second major issue of interest for scholars is that Rueda and Slawik discuss the general potential and limits of legislative transformation with regard to the lived experiences of trans people. Alba Rueda points out that legislation is certainly an extremely important step, but by far not the only one to reach a transformation of the material conditions of existence. There is still a need for a major cultural and institutional transformation to make existing rights available to every citizen. Rueda points out that the instrumental power of the law has—as Dean Spade (2015) pointed out—to be confronted with the "administrative systems that govern the distribution of life chances." Far too often, public systems still follow cis- and hetero-normative, colonial, classist, and racist logics. As the editors of this *Bulletin* envisioned, we hope this conversation contributes to imagining a "politics of everyday life" (Billard, Everhart, and Zhang 2022, 9), in order to overcome these power structures that still determine administrative systems in numerous countries around the globe.

Therefore, far from fostering the idea that there is no common ground, this conversation sheds new light on the productive richness of local differences. While organizing the event, we constantly asked ourselves: "Can Germany learn from the Argentinian Gender Identity Law?" We think this conversation has a lot to say about the transferability of collective knowledge, about possible alliances, and about paths forward for producing legal and cultural transformation. We are at a turning point for trans, feminist, and LGBTQI+ theories and politics. In fact, Alba Rueda's recent work in international diplomacy focuses on building stronger positions for the recognition of trans rights in the world, especially seeking dialogues between countries of the Global South in a context in which far-right movements have made trans rights one of their biggest targets. The urgent need for a strong interplay of both politics and activism, as well as a united action of governments and social movements in several parts of the world—despite all possible differences—becomes apparent when we consider the threat posed to numerous trans individuals by a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) movement that is not only becoming increasingly radicalized, but also

increasingly connected worldwide (Madsen Evang 2022; Tudor 2021)—a fact that is also mentioned by the two discussants. An answer, then, must necessarily be global, too. To successfully put into practice these transnational alliances, it is vital to seek dialogues that take the rich differences as a starting point for accumulating knowledge about both strategies and theoretical approaches that are able to effectively confront the anti-trans movement, and thus build a better society for everybody.

## THE CONVERSATION: CAN GERMANY LEARN FROM THE ARGENTINIAN GENDER IDENTITY LAW?

***Patricio Simonetto:***

*Welcome, Alba and Nyke. We are very thankful that you accepted our invitation to have this transnational conversation on transgender legislation.*

**Alba Rueda:**

I am very thankful to Horizon 2020's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the University of Cologne for inviting me. I want to begin by highlighting the value of friendship as a political commitment. I haven't walked all this road alone. There have been so many friends that made and continue making a difference. I am very thankful to the three of you for making this meaningful dialogue possible.

**Nyke Slawik:**

Thank you so much, Alba, Patricio and Janek. I am incredibly happy to meet Alba Rueda and to start a conversation. Last autumn, together with Tessa Ganserer, who—like me—is a member of parliament for the Green Party, I became the first openly trans person to enter the German Bundestag [parliament]. That was very historic, something that had never happened before. Many of us have tried to do this in the last few years, because the LGBTQI movement has also become stronger in Germany and there have been more trans people that actively want to change something in the laws and stand up for equality. This is a great honor for me, and I am very happy that I not only made it alone, but also have a second colleague at my side and that—a lot has been reported and written about this—the current Bundestag is more diverse than ever before.

***Janek Scholz:***

*Let's start by discussing Argentina's trans movements and policy experiences over the last decades. Alba, could you give us a brief overview of these movements?*

**Alba Rueda:**

Sure. I'm happy to share my experience and perspective not only as an activist, but also as a travesti who has been involved in the development of public policies and the challenges that I faced in these institutions over the last two years. I want us to think together about what are the challenges of doing policies from a travesti and trans perspective, and also how these experiences can help us to face those movements that threaten our rights. I want to start by sharing a summary of the context of the passing of the Gender Identity Law in 2012 and what it meant for the travesti/trans movements

in Argentina.

Before the passing of the Gender Identity Law in 2012, social movements, especially travesti and trans people, had a rich history of struggle. In Argentina, the LGBTQI+ movements and organizations have a long historical tradition dating back to the last military dictatorship. The first group, the Homosexual Liberation Front, emerged in the late 1960s. Following the bloodiest dictatorship in our history, the LGBTQI+ movement arose during the democratic transition to fight against local policies criminalizing our identities and for governmental action against HIV/AIDS. Even if during these years, most of the LGBTQI+ population suffered from social and legal discrimination, travesti and trans people faced particularly severe challenges. During those years there were legal codes that prohibited "wearing clothes of the opposite sex," which resulted in social and institutional violence. Moreover, the social exclusion of travestis and trans people from the formal job market, educational institutions, and families forced them to survive through sex work. This made our community even more vulnerable to criminalization and political violence. We have to think that during those years, state action and social discrimination drastically reduced the life expectancy of our community, causing hundreds of deaths. Travesti and trans agendas responded to this brutal violence and discrimination during those first years. However, the Lesbian and Gay movement underestimated the reality of the travesti and trans community; many considered that there was no place for us in their demonstrations and political agendas.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the country underwent political transformations that increased the space for the political intervention of the travesti and trans movements. One of them was the debate for the new constitution of the City of Buenos Aires in 1994 when the capital declared its autonomy. The discussion was a scenario in which travestis and trans people built coalitions with gays and feminists against the criminalization of prostitution. A decade later, the supreme court recognized the legal right of trans people to create legal associations. In 2006, the legal recognition of the Association for the Identity of Travesti and Transsexuals was a turning point because it was the first time the state acknowledged our legal right of association.

A major cultural and political shift during the 2000s was the progressive elimination of local legislation which criminalized travestis and trans identities. Along and across the country, travesti and trans people fought fiercely against the legal instruments that empowered the police to incarcerate us just for walking in public spaces.

What I mean by all this is that there is a long history of activism that made it possible to discuss gender identity. The travesti and trans movements have built a social demand with a robust public presence. For those interested in our history, you have to read about Claudia Pía Baurdacco and Diana Sacayán, who worked hard to decriminalize our identities. Lohana Berkis was another prominent activist that worked to transform our identity into a political subject of social change in Argentina.

Finally, the Gender Identity Law is a political turning point in our country; there was a government that opened a space not only for the passing of this progressive legislation but also for the travestis and trans people to decide on the content of the legislation. The richness of our legislation comes from the involvement of our community in making the law. Another excellent example of this moment would be the passing of the Equal Marriage Law in 2010.

***Patricio Simonetto:***
*In your opinion, what is the importance of the Gender Identity Law that passed the legislation process in 2012?*

**Alba Rueda:**
The Gender Identity Law in 2012 was a turning point for the rights of trans people around the globe. I want to stress three characteristics that make this law unique: the possibility of changing your legal sex, the access to health care, and finally, the right to be treated with dignity.

In the first place, this law acknowledges the gender self-perception of every citizen. This means recognizing that the highest authority to know who one is, is oneself. State agencies only have an administrative duty to recognize your decision and update your birth certificate and ID accordingly.

The provision of full access to health care means that hormones and surgery are included in all basic medical treatment plans—both private and public. Health care access includes a wide range of gender affirmation practices, all those that affect the expression of someone's gender identity.

The third characteristic is the right of every citizen to be treated with dignity. Under article 12, private and public institutions must respect the gender identity of citizens with a simple request, even if the person is under the legal age of 18. There is no need to change your ID for your gender identity to be respected at school, the gym, or anywhere else where you develop your life, and institutions must change one's name and gender information only upon a simple request. This law actually does not affect only trans people. It is a right for all citizens; it is legislation that empowers people over themselves, transforming the relationship with the state.

***Janek Scholz:***
*Nyke, the German government also plans to introduce a self-determination law. How is the situation in Germany until today and why is it necessary to change it?*

**Nyke Slawik:**
The starting position we face in Germany is difficult. Germans often see themselves as very progressive, but if you look at our laws, they are actually not—not only in a worldwide comparison, but also in a European comparison. For example, at the ILGA Europe ranking, a European umbrella organisation of the queer community, Germany gets just 50% of the value that could be achieved for LGBTQI rights. Equal marriage was only introduced in Germany in 2017 and we still don't have a self-determination law based on the Argentinian model, at which I look with a bit of envy, to be honest. It is a very comprehensive law and thus a good and important model. The current legal situation in Germany is mostly based on the Transsexuals Act of 1980, which at that time made it possible for the first time for trans people to change their gender registration and their name. But the law had many hurdles and problems and is today in many parts unconstitutional and must therefore be replaced by a new law.

According to this law, it was for a long time a central requirement for trans people who wanted to change their name and gender entry in official documents that they were not married. People felt pressured to end their marriages; many marriages ended

in divorce. There was a trans person who sued against this and went all the way to the Federal Constitutional Court, which then declared this regulation unconstitutional in 2009. There was also the requirement that trans people had to undergo an operation that would make them permanently unable to reproduce. This, too, was compulsory—only when it was fulfilled could the process of changing official documents take place. Again, this compulsion was challenged, and the passage was declared unconstitutional by the Federal Constitutional Court in 2012.

What you can see is that this law, which was written in 1980, was a step forward because for the first time it made it possible to change something in the documents, but it was also a law that was written from a very trans-hostile and queer-hostile perspective: They wanted to prevent same-sex marriages, they took away the right of trans people to start their own families, and they also strongly interfered with the bodily self-determination of trans people.

What is still in place from the original process that trans people have to go through if they want to be legally recognized in their gender is that they need two independent psychiatric reports and go to therapy. They also have to go through a process in the local court to complete the change of civil status. They have to pay for all this by themselves—usually it costs about 1,500 euros, which is about what many people in Germany earn per month, but for some it is even more than that.

Health care is of course also a problem for trans people in Germany, even though it is true that the statutory health insurance covers the costs of gender reassignment procedures. It has been fought for, partly through legal action, but it is still legally ambiguous in many cases. There is often the case that trans people are in a legal dispute with the health insurance companies about which measures are actually paid for. And we have the big problem that people from abroad who live here, refugees who live here, trans people who come to Germany, who do not have health insurance and therefore have no access to the German health care system, cannot easily get gender reassignment measures and they are therefore in a very precarious health situation.

Finally, the social situation is also very difficult for many trans people. We know from surveys that there are many trans people who experience massive discrimination at work or lose their jobs; there are significantly more individuals among trans people who are unemployed than in the rest of the population. It also happens every once in a while that people lose their flat or end up in very difficult social situations, even though the social safety net in Germany is not geared to the needs of trans people, at all. This is the case in counselling centers, in job centers, i.e., in unemployment assistance, but I have also experienced that in places where homeless people are helped; in homeless shelters there are no special offers for trans people or little understanding for them and thus trans hostility is implemented in these institutions and the people then experience additional hardship. In all these areas, trans people often experience additional discrimination.

***Patricio Simonetto:***

*Apparently, there are a lot of potential issues to solve. How does the new government plan to intervene in all these very distinct areas?*

**Nyke Slawik:**
The LGBTIQ community has become much stronger in recent years. Trans people have become more visible in Germany and are fighting against the discriminatory Transsexual Act and for an improvement in the legal and social situation. But all these improvements in recent years have been fought for mainly through the legal process and have been rather prevented politically, because for the last 16 years we had a conservative-led government in Germany that blocked everything that came from the LGBTIQ movement, e.g., rights for rainbow families, rights for trans people, etc. The only exception was equal marriage, which at some point became so popular among the population that it was finally adopted at the end of the penultimate legislative period.

Hopefully, we can now change all the failures of the last few years. A self-determination law is finally to be introduced, for which the key points were presented yesterday [30 June 2022]. "Key points" means that it is not yet a fully written draft, but rather the agreement within the government on what should be included in the law. These key points are based on a draft that we [the Green party] already proposed in the last legislative period. That draft was somewhat more comprehensive and perhaps comparable to the law in Argentina. The key points paper that we presented yesterday, first of all, regulates the topic of changing names and personal status, namely that trans persons can change their gender entry completely self-determined, without the psychological reports. This is only logical, because the World Health Organization also decided some years ago that trans identity is not a mental illness, and that only the people themselves can decide and express their gender, and we will now put it into this law. All people can make use of this possibility, from the age of 18 people can decide for themselves, and in the case of minors, the custodians—usually the parents—must give their consent, but it is possible for all people to make use of this law.

Then the law will also state that trans parents will be recognized with the correct gender on their children's birth certificates. Currently, it is possible to change the civil status, but when trans people have children, they are listed on the birth certificate under the old, wrong gender entry; this will now finally be corrected. What should also be put in the law is a ban on external disclosure, which means that the old first names of a person who has discarded them may not be made public against the person's will, e.g., no newspaper article may be published with these names and the registry office, for example, may not make these names public either. If they do, fines are imposed.

Unfortunately, health care is not in the bill, nor is discrimination protection, which is in the law in Argentina, but the coalition has defined many more projects for the LGBTIQ community in its coalition agreement. For example, the law of parentage is to be reformed so that rainbow families are better protected. The issue of trans parenthood is to be finally regulated and the protection against discrimination for LGBTIQ persons is to be improved. Furthermore, there is discrimination in blood donation in Germany, where gay men and trans persons are classified as a risk group and thus excluded from donating; this should also be abolished. The health care of trans persons is to be better protected under social law. And there are many other projects that I am very much looking forward to, for which we also negotiated hard last autumn with this new government. Currently, there are no concrete draft laws or plans that the government has presented, but I very much hope that this will come and that we can expect a lot in the next few years.

***Janek Scholz:***
*Alba, in Argentina it is 10 years now that you passed a law comparable to the legal and political changes, Germany is facing right now. What were, since then, the challenges of the progressive trans legislation in Argentina? What do you think are the main challenges of making trans policies?*

**Alba Rueda:**
We are celebrating the first decade of the Gender Identity Law in Argentina, and in these first ten years, many people (especially many policymakers and public servants) have understood our law as an individual issue. I think here resides one of our biggest challenges. In these ten years we have seen a trend to reduce the law to an individual negotiation of trans people or families with institutions. When we think, for example, about the state offices that administer ID and birth certificates, we find different bureaucratic ways to apply the Gender Identity Law. Even if the law allows minors to change their gender, it doesn't specify whether we need the permission of one or two parents. In many of these cases, these permissions depend on the decision of a judge. The same applies to healthcare access. Because we don't have a federal transformation of health care providers, trans people depend on allies inside hospitals to be able to access hormones or other treatments. When we think about the right to be treated with dignity, we see that some parents need to carry a printed version of the law to the school to have their children's self-perceived gender recognized. What I mean by this is that we have the challenge to drive a radical transfeminist transformation of the logics of the state. We need public policies to help us to have a national approach to the Gender Identity Law because it is the state's responsibility and not of individual citizens to negotiate with hospitals or the state on how they access their rights.

I think it is important to highlight the positive experiences but continue being aware about the real challenges that we are still facing. It is not enough to have a good law to work in favor of travesti and trans people. Laws will not stop TERFs on their own. A good law is a tool, a helpful starting point. Still, we need robust public policies to foster a broader social and cultural transformation and to attack the structural inequalities that make trans lives precarious.

One of the richest things about the Gender Identity Law is that it fosters a conversation about inequalities. When we think about the inequalities that affect LGBTQI+ people, people with diverse corporal realities such as disabilities or those living in areas lacking access to public services, we are not talking about individual issues. I grew up listening to so-called "specialists" saying that trans people depended on prostitution because it was part of their perverse nature. These "specialists" understood these decisions as an expression of our alleged immoral sexuality. Transfeminist public policies are a response to this attempt to individualize inequalities. With the pandemic, war, and global inflation contributing to inequality in our world, it is the state's and society's responsibility to disassemble the mechanisms that create inequality. Talking about specific groups such as trans people, cis women, and disabled people is an opportunity to bring social movements to the table. We have the knowledge produced by the social movements that can help us to formulate creative policies to improve the lives of our communities and guarantee their access to rights. For me, that is the conclusion that motivates me as an activist to work on public policies. I believe

that the state has the power to drive the social and cultural transformations that we need. Any cultural transformation starts with a political agenda designed to transform our reality.

### *Patricio Simonetto:*

*To reach state driven social change, you certainly need a broad allyship. Nyke, is there resistance in the other parties to all these planned changes in the German law? For example, on the part of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), but perhaps also within the SPD, which usually sells itself as very progressive?*

### Nyke Slawik:

The current government is led by Social Democrats, with us Greens as the second largest force in the coalition and the Liberals, and we had a great deal of agreement on these socio-political projects. Just last week, we abolished a law that prohibited doctors from providing information about abortion under penalty of law. And we will now get all these socio-political things underway.

The AfD [Alternative for Germany]—an extreme right-wing party—is of course against all these plans, and the Union parties [the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union (CSU)], it must be said, are also against our plans on many points, with a few exceptions. What we have also planned is an amendment to the constitution. Article 3 of the German constitution, the passage that protects people against discrimination, states that no person may be discriminated against on the basis of certain characteristics. Currently, this includes gender, religious affiliation, and many more. However, queer people are currently not included in this article, and we want to change that. Queer people should also be protected against discrimination by the constitution, and the CDU/CSU also supports this plan. With the planned self-determination law, on the other hand, one senses in many parts that representatives of the CDU/CSU are clearly against it and in some cases even adopt TERF narratives, for example that such a law would endanger women's shelters. I don't even want to list all the TERF arguments here, especially since one can see, for example, in Argentina, where such a law has been in place for 10 years, that many of these concerns are completely unjustified. Unfortunately, the conservatives are using the socio-political agenda in Germany for a culture war.

### Alba Rueda:

I told Nyke, during our lunch today, that Argentina could provide some essential data for the debate against TERFs here in Germany. Usually, these anti-trans groups are against self-gender recognition because they say that some people will use these laws to take advantage of cisgender women's rights, for example, being able to retire earlier in the case of Argentina. According to the last census, Argentina has almost 47 million people. In ten years, only three people corrupted the Gender Identity Law. So, every time they tell us that a law allowing people to change their identity will give some men an advantage, we have to be clear: the Argentinian case shows this is a lie. We are talking of Argentina, a very sexist and unequal country.

Nyke, I believe you have the enormous challenge of increasing your participation in politics. It is central that we have more trans people leading processes of social

transformation; we need to have powerful political participation. Sometimes we will find support in our parties, and in other scenarios, we will struggle with this alone. By taking my position first as National Undersecretary of Diversity Policies and then as Special Representative on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, I learnt that our presence is uncomfortable for these institutions because there is something counter-cultural about having trans people making decisions in favor of our communities.

***Janek Scholz:***
*We are heading towards the end of this conversation. Thank you, Alba and Nyke, for your valuable insights. Do you want to add some final remarks?*

**Nyke Slawik:**
Thank you, Alba. Today's conversation gave me a lot: to meet you, to talk to you, and to see what you have decided in Argentina is just ground-breaking. It has radiated so far into the whole world and, for many, it is a model of how positive a law can be.

I can only agree with everything you said: that we need to make society better for trans people, as well as for other marginalized people. The idea of democracy is to be there for all people, that everyone can participate. And we still have a long way to go. But if we manage to empower people, to make them less discriminated against, to make them visible, to allow them to get involved, to allow them to participate, then that opens doors for many people and I believe that, as a result, our society as a whole will improve.

**Alba Rueda:**
We are at a critical moment for society as a whole. We need to find a political sense in this context of extreme inequality. I am convinced that trans people can play a vital role in creating a response to this structural inequality. I want to finish by saying that you and everyone looking to drive the agenda against inequality will find me and my fellow travestis and trans activist as allies because that is the meaning of our democracy, fighting for real equality.

***Patricio Simonetto:***
*Thank you so much for engaging in this conversation!*

## FINAL WORDS

This conversation documents some of the various effects of trans movement activism, and the possibility of holding conversations that intersects the boundaries of the state, trans movements, and academia. Far from a document of mere celebration, this is a recollection of a moment that demands new coalitional efforts against exclusionary and reactionary trends. We hope this conversation showcases one of the multiple ways in which scholarship, policymaking, and activism can create critical spaces of conversation to foster new synergies in our common interests. This conversation is important, because it stresses a) the need to develop trans studies and politics that depart from recognizing the impossibility of building universal trans discourses and shift toward recognizing the richness of contextualized local traditions; b) an approach that

departs from understanding that the expansion of legal rights is vital but not enough for transforming the material conditions of trans life; c) the need for building spaces of dialogue and synergy to face anti-trans movements and discourses.

We address the words that opened this journal: "we must aspire to 'do' trans studies in a way that 'builds structural competency' within and for transgender movements for justice. We must find ways to take transgender research out of the tower and into the public, where we can intervene in the dismal state of affairs facing our communities" (Billard, Everhart, and Zhang 2022, 12). Both in Argentina and in Germany, political change did not happen top-down, but rather bottom-up. Major changes in legislation have been fought for either in the streets—as in the Argentinian case—or in the courts—as in the German case. Both women clearly stress the importance of these movements for the development of progressive laws. But still, there is a major difference, as the Argentinian law has been explicitly written by trans activists and is thus a good example that a legislation process does not need to follow a strict top-down direction to be successful and legally secure. The Argentinian trans movement was able to build a policy from below and it's precisely that nature that gave the legislation the progressive force it still has today, ten years after its approval. This is certainly one thing Germany can learn from Argentina. Furthermore, both Rueda and Slawik underline the importance of friendship for their political engagement. Rueda says that she got the position as Special Representative only because there were so many friends that made a difference and Nyke Slawik, too, mentions the importance of the fact that she is not the only first openly trans MP in Germany, but that she has another colleague at her side to join their forces and their activism.

The conversation shows the role of trans activism in making our understanding of the political more complex. From the Global South and Global North, Rueda and Slawik showcase how trans politics engage with intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability, and—even more importantly—their role in taking trans policy thinking beyond their own agenda to place in the core of the struggles to make a more democratic and equal future. Even though both Rueda and Slawik base their policies and their activism in individual, embodied experiences as a travesti in Argentina and as the daughter of a Polish working-class immigrant in Germany, they remind us of the importance of a structural perspective: Transphobia, racism, classism, sexism, etc. are not individual problems, but structural ones. Consequently, the state has the responsibility to change these structures. The application of the law in several everyday contexts is not something a single person has to fight for, but something the state should ensure.

The discussants clearly stress the need for a transfeminist agenda to foster changes not only in trans rights around the globe, but also when it comes to the empowerment of every single citizen in their relationship with the state. This conversation shows that more than an issue of minorities, the debate about trans rights touches the core building of the modern state and can be the point of departure for re-imagining new bonds between nation states and their citizens. This conversation also goes against the liberal conception of rights and citizenship as abstract statuses to instead explore the need for common efforts between public policies, social movements, and civil society more broadly to make possible more enjoyable, democratic, and equal trans futures.

Finally, the dialogue gave valuable impulses in rethinking the role of academia in trans activism. As mentioned by Lohana Berkins, academia should listen to the people in the streets, to their needs, and to their embodied realities. Theories should be grounded in very specific geopolitical, embodied realities and not imported from the so-called central countries to the so-called margins. But, on the other hand, social movements should also rely on data and research to strengthen their agendas against TERF argumentation. The case of Argentina is a good example to prove that in ten years, the law has been abused only three times, having 47 million people that can make use of the law. To sum up, a multilateral, open dialogue between social movements, policy-making and academia is needed—an act of "listening and learning" (Harsin Drager and Platero 2021, 423)—to achieve broad cultural transformation and to change society and the living conditions of trans people for the better.

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# *Sex is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* by Paisley Currah

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$28.00

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I teach a senior seminar each spring semester called "The Political History of Sex and Sexuality." The students who enroll in it are an equal mix of those who need to fulfill the seminar requirement for the political science major and those who are politically active and often also LGBTQI+. Both groups, however disparate they might seem on the surface, are united in their surprise to learn on the first day that the course will not focus exclusively on sexuality or gender identity. Instead, this course is a semester-long project of thinking about the study and practice of politics through the lens of transgender studies. To start things off, we take our cues from Susan Stryker's (2006) introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, which outlines the field as inviting sustained critique of the laws, norms, and institutions that render the coercive power of gender norms invisible. This perspective views everybody as harmed by the rigid understandings of gender and sex through strictly binary concepts. The more updated introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* by Stryker and Aren Aizura (2013) extends this analysis to include the ways that race, place, and nation create the conditions for shaping those norms. With these analytic tools in hand, students sharpen their trans studies sensibilities by critiquing both the obvious culprits of gender normativity (such as sex-segregated spaces and white supremacist beauty norms) and the more insidious ones, as when several of the non-trans men in the class were united in outrage over the pressure to consume "masculine" beverages (black coffee) and avoid "feminine" snacks (flavored yogurt). What emerges from these conversations is an awareness that states, economic systems, and social norms structure and maintain sexed, raced, and classed hierarchies of belonging that carry significant material and epistemic consequences

for all members of the polity.

Paisley Currah's *Sex is as Sex Does* intervenes in these conversations—in my classroom, and elsewhere—that are made possible by a transgender studies framework, and his work applies analytic pressure to the many, and often contradictory, ways the US state leverages sex for its own purposes. Focusing on the multi-focal nature of the state allows Currah to show that decisions to designate sex in certain ways hinge less on what sex *is*—as the title suggests—to reveal the work that sex classifications *do* for the state. Currah makes these arguments by drawing on language that will be familiar to empirical social scientists. In his formulation, sex is not an *independent* variable that does the work of explaining social, political, and economic outcomes. It is instead a *dependent* variable—one upon which the state acts to produce varying understandings of what we come to think of as simply "sex." This logic sets the stage for Currah's argument that states recruit sex to achieve political goals: examples here include both asserting sovereignty and economic objectives, such as securing national identity by limiting marriages to non-trans men and non-trans women to ensure the tidy passage of property and, with it, a White, (re)productive citizenry.

In five expansive chapters that offer close readings of policies at various levels of the administrative state and court decisions pertaining to sex designation, Currah eloquently disabuses his readers of the presumed value of individual-level analysis, which he understands as political science's commitment to identity operationalized as an independent variable. Currah sets his sights on transgender identification and its uptake by political actors advancing a transgender rights agenda to make this argument. In brief, Currah examines the most visible arm of mobilizations advanced on behalf of/by transgender people that work to secure inclusion and safety for transgender and gender nonconforming members of the polity. Currah provocatively argues that what is taken to be somewhat irrelevant in these bids—sex—is underappreciated as an effect of the state's power to index and organize populations. In Currah's view, this version of transgender politics consequently fails to accomplish anything more than extending the state's capacity to enact and maintain oppressive sex norms through recognition and inclusion of ever-more versions of gender minorities under the mantle of gender identity. The costs are apparent: eliding sex distracts us from the state's power to use sex as a category in the first place. The very oppression these movements seek to upend is instead buttressed and amplified through innovations such as the X sex marker on state documents, which works hand-in-glove with state surveillance to keep tabs on the population and lock sex into place.

Currah's triumph is that he brings sex *and* the state back in, and there are obvious benefits of this approach. Most notably, Currah's argument to replace our understanding of sex as an identity with a critical understanding of sex as an effect of the state reaches across the imagery trans/cis divide promulgated so vehemently by trans-exclusive feminists. He accomplishes this by underscoring that all are harmed by the state's involvement in using sex as a rubric for recognition and distribution. Those same trans-exclusive feminists might want us to believe that the Supreme Court repealed *Roe v Wade* because what it means to be a woman has been eroded by the current attention devoted to transgender women. However, applying Currah's understanding of the state as engaged in a never-ending project of regulating sex to the *Dobbs* decision disrupts the divisiveness of this version of trans-exclusive feminist rhetoric: the

logic employed by the Court's majority is revealed to be nothing more than misogyny (coupled with social control) dressed up as different readings of the protections guaranteed by the Constitution. Sex is, indeed, as sex does.

Does this mean that there is no use for gender or identity? Although Currah gives a nod early on to the sex/gender split posited by some feminists to underscore the social roots of sexist oppression—patriarchy and misogyny—his arguments require setting gender aside to focus on the state and the power it gains from defining sex. In one passage, Currah riffs on Judith Butler's oft-cited observation that sex "will be shown to have been gender all along" to explain that, "Instead of organizing this discussion around the idea that what we know about sex is an effect of gender, I want to crop the picture radically and suggest that sex is nothing but a state effect" (94). The effect of cropping the picture to focus exclusively on the state's role in shaping how sex functions socially and politically is that gender and identities are left on the cutting room floor. This includes the work done by intersectional feminists who have demonstrated the many ways in which oppressive ideologies such as white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalist productivity, and heteronormativity (among many others) are routed through institutions, laws, and policies and projected onto people (and the identities they hold) in ways that are often impossible to tease apart. Instead of drawing on intersectionality, which attempts to hold many different identities shaped by these ideologies together in a cohesive understanding of social and political problems, Currah instead invokes Adolf Reed's assertion that politics organized around demands for identity recognition operate principally to advance the neoliberal project of inclusion and reform, rather than radical disruption of the status quo. Currah also makes use of Nancy Fraser's recognition/redistribution framework to make this point, which locates sexuality and gender identity on the recognition side of the equation. The implication of this line of reasoning is that to advance a political agenda grounded in identity is to grease the wheels of capitalism, a point that is underscored in the last chapter on incarceration. There, Currah argues that an undue focus on transphobia as the explanation for the disproportionate rates of incarcerated transgender people obscures the overarching conditions shaped by capitalism, which require the organization of unproductive people out of the workforce and into prisons. In drawing attention away from these more radical goals, Currah speculates that,

> Trans, then, might occupy a different position vis-à-vis incarceration than what is suggested by its inclusion in a 'triply oppressed analytic.' It's possible that one of the identity categories held out as an axis of oppression may be complicit in the problem it has been charged with dismantling" (128). Later, Currah asserts, "If the purveyors of the transphobia explanation spent as much time denaturalizing the market as they do denaturalizing gender, the mechanisms that distribute vulnerabilities so unevenly would be more apparent. (141)

The implication here is that a more fruitful avenue for these activists would be to seek the abolition of prisons and the provision of universal healthcare. I am certainly in agreement with Currah on this point, but I was left wondering about the paradoxical role of identity in relation to incarceration. If it is the case that holding transgender alongside race and class draws attention away from the root causes of mass incarceration, then how can disentangling the classed and raced logics that give gender its

normative thrust also contribute to the endurance of mass incarceration? The message here seems to be that gender and race are particular, while class is universal.

It is here that the book's arguments come full circle: Currah suggests that centering transgender identity in political praxis is akin to being complicit in a project of reform that allows Bill DeBlasio to brag that incarceration will be more comfortable because transgender people in New York City will be allowed to choose which sex-segregated facility they occupy during their sentence. But is this assignment of culpability fair? While it might be the case that some advocates—who imagine that they are working in the best interest of transgender people—seek reforms such as the fallacy of making incarceration "more comfortable," it is also true that many vocal transgender activists vehemently espouse anti-carceral (and anti-capitalist) political agendas. The latter includes the organizers of the Brooklyn Liberation March, who convened over 15,000 people in Brooklyn during the summer of 2020 in the name of Black trans liberation. Many of the people who attended carried posters with slogans underscoring the intersectional and deeply linked nature of the issues they protested that day, such one that explained "An attack on trans women is an attack on all of us" alongside another with only a picture of George Floyd's face. The massive and diffuse anti-racist uprisings of that summer indicate that the identities that individuals hold—transgender, gender nonconforming, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, Black, Latinx, Native, poor, the list goes on and on—might serve as on-ramps to political action by replacing the costs of political activism with anger, joy, and comradery (Bernstein and Olsen 2009; Gould 2009; Reger et al 2008). Identity in this view is not divisive, but instead a resource to be harnessed by movements as they work against all odds to upend oppressive institutions, laws, and policies. Cathy Cohen's 1997 "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" posits that an undue focus on identity—even its vehement denial by those who view it as superfluous to political action—obscures shared positions in relation to power. These positions endure not despite identity-based differences, but because those differences make it impossible for excluded groups to conform to white supremacist sexual, sex/gender, and economic norms.

I want to end this review where I began. Last spring, I gave the students in my Political History of Sex and Sexuality the opportunity to design their own final project. After much deliberation, they decided they would work together to create a map of trans studies. The main nodes would be important quotes from the texts they read throughout the semester and branching off each would be a collection of applicable historical and contemporary events. They spotlighted policies and laws alongside marketing campaigns and young adult literature. The completed project underscored the main take away from the seminar: we are all imbricated in sex, gender, race, class, and nationalism, regardless of whether or not each individual in the room indexes those features using the language of identity. Our current moment of democratic backsliding has put those groups who are perceived as outside of dominant sexed, raced, and classed norms at the front and center of far-right discourse. Currah's book accurately predicts this by showing us how the more quotidian aspects of the state can be leveraged to create a more violent and conservative social landscape in the US. And yet, opposing those forces will require taking up all the tools of political activism that bring people together—including identity—to target the state so we can collectively push through the moment we are currently mired in.

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BOOK REVIEW

# *Supporting Success for LGBTQ+ Students: Tools for Inclusive Campus Practice* by Cindy Ann Kilgo

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$25.00

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Cindy Ann Kilgo's *Supporting Success for LGBTQ+ Students: Tools for Inclusive Campus Practice* contains a preface and six chapters. Following an introductory chapter and a purported update to Renn's 2010 article, *LGBT and Queer Research in Higher Education: The State and Status of the Field*, the next three chapters take a positivist and linear student involvement model (Astin 1993) as an organizing framework. In the final chapter, the author provides some concluding thoughts about creating change in higher education for LGBTQ+ student inclusion.

We imagine, for institutions just beginning a journey towards queer and trans inclusivity, this book might serve as an initial touchstone, at least more contemporary than *Our Place on Campus: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Services and Programs in Higher Education* (Sanlo et al. 2002). Within these pages they will find some literature to do their own research, which could springboard them into more critical thinking about the policies and practices of inclusion. In this way, the text offers a place to begin for institutions that have yet to take any steps, or significant steps, towards queer and trans inclusivity. Kilgo (2020, ix) offers that the text is meant "to serve as a one-stop resource for faculty and staff in higher education settings who are seeking to enhance their campus climate and systems of support for LGBTQ+ student success." From the onset, Kilgo intends to offer applicability for various institutional types with an investment in LGBTQ+ inclusion with limited knowledge.

Structurally, the book uses an organizing model composed of three elements (input-environment-outcomes). *Input* refers to students' demographic information (assumed known, measurable, and static), as well as their pre-college experiences (assumed to be high school). *Environment* is meant to account for students' collegiate experiences (assumed to be linear, neutral, and contained), while *outcomes* point to who students become and their knowledge and belief system post-graduation (altogether pointing to "traditional" students' trajectories). This is a traditional approach to share content with an audience with an assumed variety of knowledge levels. At the same time, this approach frames queer and trans student experience through normative assumptions: a white, middle or upper income, abled, nonimmigrant, and documented one. The book offers surface-level change suggestions (e.g., database management) that will be a helpful initiative for institutions without adequate options for student self-identification. The bullets at the ends of the chapters offering opportunities to bolster reader reflection are too amorphous and decontextualized to provoke nuanced thinking for more complex institutional changes. Absent from the text is content that would engage readers in their advancement of their thinking about conceptual and theoretical dynamics of gendered language, investment in whiteness that reify gender and sex binaries, and the historical legacies of cis- and hetero-normativities.

Kilgo references data from the Campus Pride Index (CPI), a self-reporting mechanism which institutions use to neoliberally position themselves as "LGBTQ-friendly" spaces, as evidence of rigor or valid data. Kilgo also names how CPI has significant limitations, which is an important recognition of the extreme limitations of the dataset itself. Unclear in the text is how Kilgo reconciles their notation of the CPI's issues as a data source with their use of CPI as a data source, which could contribute to troubling educational initiatives readers may develop because of reading the book. While the book includes campus-based examples, the overall dynamic of the book does not create any synergy between those examples, ways to trouble how those practices might not fit at any other institution, or how to connect those practices to the pages that precede them. For instance, Kilgo utilized Johnson and colleagues' (2013) research on suicide prevention to discuss ally training programs without contextualizing the relationship, which had the troubling effect of equating queer and trans identities with suicidality.

Kilgo's efforts to compress gender/sexuality into an easily digestible list of best practices and policies are successful. Given the book seeks to "normalize [LGBTQ]

identities and experiences" (2020, 64), it seems to advocate for an assimilationist perspective instead of elucidating emancipatory possibilities. The challenge of such an approach is how it flattens out dynamics and complexity of queerness and transness and denies the work of queer and trans activists, scholars, and people to cultivate lives that move beyond—or altogether deny—easy codification or legibility from nonqueer and nontrans people. Moreover, given the ongoing reality of queer- and trans-antagonism in the United States, there is ample opportunity to recognize how movements toward normalcy have never worked.

Kilgo's text falls in line with a paradox Duran, Blockett, and Nicolazzo (2020, 17) highlighted, namely that "the scholarship on queer and trans* people continues to oppress those most marginalized in these communities (e.g., trans* women of color) in favor of centering those with privileged identities (e.g., white individuals and cisgender men)." This oversight is a misreading of the literature on queer and trans students in college, especially given scholarship focused on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs; e.g., Means and Jaeger 2013; Patton 2011), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs; e.g., Vega 2016), and queer and trans students of color (e.g., Duran 2021; Jourian and McCloud 2020). Furthermore, this misreading has the effect of centering whiteness as the genesis of how to engage in practice, which then means most interventions derived from this text may well not work for queer and trans people who are not white and do not attend four-year institutions. The vibrancy and incoherence of queerness and transness are absent in the text as it tries to demonstrate palatability for populations who are under assault and constant political disenfranchisement.

The aforementioned descriptions, evaluations, and critiques of Kilgo's book led to a clarity about how reading it evoked disappointment with the genre of LGBTQ+ educational texts. We see a repetition of form (structure of the text) and function (assumed or perceived audience of cisgender and/or heterosexuals) that fails to queer thinking about campus climates and student success. We recognize that what we seek in writing about LGBTQ+ campus populations, even for those nascent in their thinking, is a more capacious and liberatory approach that offers an abundance of multitudes of transformative strategies. It bears saying that all of us who write academic scholarship make decisions about who to cite. Ahmed (2014, 2017) and McKittrick (2021) discussed these choices in terms of political leanings and epistemological orientations, respectively. However, the main critique of this genre of LGBTQ+ educational tomes is the promulgation of omissions of citation and how those omissions advanced fictions about who LGBTQ+ college students are, what we know of college environments, and how this then leads to (mis)directions for readers about how to work toward better, more inclusive college spaces.

Kilgo's book highlights how disciplinarity limits potential connections with the multitudes of scholarship that conceptually, empirically, and practically addressed queer and trans oppression beyond the narrow focus of higher education literature (e.g., Mayo 2013; Muñoz 1999). What harm does it cause to trans and queer people with multiple marginalized identities when scholarship focuses on a desire for acceptance that reifies norms (e.g., cis, hetero, white, etc.)? Furthermore, as Gossett, Stanley, and Burton (2017) pointed out in their necessary anthology, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, the increase in queer and trans visibility is uncomfortably situated alongside heightened threat, risk, violence, and death, especially

for trans women of color, who remain some of the most vulnerable people in broader queer and trans communities.

It also bears stating that one's holding a queer identity does not equate to one's conveying a queer epistemic orientation and/or ethic. This feels important to state because queer people are often seen as experts on queer issues, even if—as one of our own's scholarly work suggests (Catalano 2015)—we are not and/or desire not to be. So, while it is vital to recognize the author of this text as a part of the queer community, we worry that overly sanitizing our commentary about this book due to our—the author, us as reviewers, and perhaps many of the readers of this review—shared queer identities may further a form of epistemic violence to queer—and especially queer of color—ways of knowing and being in the world.

The audience for *Supporting Success for LGBTQ+ Students: Tools for Inclusive Campus Practice* will benefit from the basic ideas and practice suggestions within its pages. However, we could not help but want more from the text; in its framing, critique of normativity, and desiring and demanding the worlds queer and trans students need beyond the confining conditions they currently have. While we recognize the book's attempt at concision—this is, after all, something many authors strive for in their work—we worry that the form of the book may have curtailed elucidating vital possibilities for queer livingness, especially in this moment and place. In other words, there are unintended consequences when texts pose conciseness and readability as opposed to possibilities and complexity; while these need not be mutually exclusive, we worry their being posed as such through this text may limit its overall efficacy.

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