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Ellen C. Daly
Moving through and beyond:
A qualitative exploration of
self-identified gender
nonconforming participants'
experiences of binary gender
regulation

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was undertaken to explore, and bring into social work discourse, gender nonconforming participants' experiences and meaning-making of binary gender regulation, specifically within relational contexts throughout their lives. Qualitative interviews were completed with 13 participants who identified with the descriptor of gender nonconforming in some way. The following questions were explored: How does the binary gender system become reproduced, maintained, enforced, and regulated through the lives of those who do not, and many times choose not, to adhere to and/or embody the constrictive and limiting expectations of this system? How is such regulation understood and internalized? What are the impacts of regulation on participants' overall sense of well being?

The findings of this research confirmed that binary gender regulation was experienced by participants who self-identified as gender nonconforming, and that experiences of such gender regulation occurred in multiple relational contexts. Furthermore, such regulation was understood by participants as meaningful and impactful in their overall understandings of self. Participants' ways of negotiating the impacts of such regulation through affirming relationships and community was also explored and present in the findings of this study.

MOVING THROUGH AND BEYOND:
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF SELF-IDENTIFIED GENDER
NONCONFORMING PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF BINARY GENDER
REGULATION

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master in Social Work.

Ellen C. Daly

Smith College School for Social Work

Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2010

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Thank you, my Love, for your unwavering belief in my process, for holding my heart so tenderly through this journey, for welcoming my tears, celebrating my laughter, and loving me so profoundly.

Thank you Sister, you are pure joy. My love for you is always present, overflowing.

My heart is full of endless gratitude and deep love for my Beloved Friends- you are my family, my community. Thank you for holding and nurturing my spirit, body, and mind with sincere compassion. You have held me up, always reminding me that I am loved.

Thank you to each participant- you have guided this transformative journey. I feel so sincerely honored, moved, and privileged to be witness to your narratives. Your voices are a true gift.

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To bravely holding hope, movement, passion, and trust in change. To fireflies and rain and midnight visions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of binary gender regulation through the narratives of participants who self-identified in some way with the descriptor of gender nonconforming. A specific aim of this study was to explore their lived interactions with and experiences of the existing binary gender system within relational contexts throughout their lives. The binary gender system is understood in this study as a socially constructed, maintained, and reproduced structure rooted in a hegemonic system of power that impacts gender nonconforming participants' psychological, social, and relational selves. Specifically this research project aimed to 1) illuminate experiences of binary gender regulation experienced by self-identified gender nonconforming people, 2) explore in what social and relational contexts such regulation occurred, and 3) explore any links this regulation may have with participants' feelings of psychological distress.

I sought to answer the following questions through this exploratory study: How does the binary gender system become reproduced, maintained, enforced, and regulated through the lives of those who do not, and many times choose not, to adhere to and/or embody the constrictive and limiting expectations of this system? How does lifelong interaction with the binary gender system, and the regulation that is inherent in this system, impact people who self-identify as gender nonconforming? How are these experiences of gender regulation understood and internalized by gender nonconforming

people? How do these experiences affect participants' overall well-being, especially within the context of significant interpersonal relationships?

Researcher reflexivity

I have committed to holding a reflexive stance throughout this project, as it is fundamental to balancing the inherent subjectivity of interview-based research. Not only is holding a reflexive stance throughout this process central to the integrity of qualitative research, it is also paramount to recognizing how my own social identities and locations influenced my interpretations and analysis of the data. Sharing some of my process of developing and engaging with this topic is important as part of my self-reflexivity and transparency as the researcher.

I approached this project informed by my interpretations of critical feminist postmodern traditions, with the desire to challenge the gender binary- to bring the voices of those who identify with transgressing the hegemonic binary gender system into social work discourse in attempt to further cultural criticism and heighten clinical awareness of the gender binary as a system of power. Much of my perspective around, and impetus for approaching this topic, was shaped by my own experiences of feeling gender nonconforming in many ways, and identifying myself within a community of many gender nonconforming people. Pursuing this topic was a way in which I began an integration of my philosophical and political paradigms with academic work in the field of clinical social work. I noted a gap in social work literature and pedagogy- an absence of a critique of the binary gender system and the inherent systems of power within. This absence to me represented a need, a space, in which I felt my privilege as a researcher, as well as my experiences, knowledge, and passion about gender as a fluid, dynamic,

complex process could be shared. I have a great deal of humility and desire to honor the voices of the participants as experts of their own experiences, and hold hope that this project may act as a vessel from which their voices can be respectfully shared. I approached sharing their voices as an ally, gender activist, a person desiring justice and social change through confronting, uncovering, and questioning the “normalcy” of the binary gender system and the inherent power structures that it maintains and reproduces.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature for this research project spans multiple disciplines. Significant and meaningful findings were gathered from empirical research that has been published thus far in regard to the mental health and well being of gender nonconforming people, however, this data alone did not prove to be comprehensive. In order to supplement the empirical data gathered in regard to this topic, theoretical works were reviewed as well to establish a solid framework from which to conduct analysis. Autobiographical literature and narratives published by people who identify as gender nonconforming have also been incorporated into this literature review in order to augment the empirical and theoretical information with the actual voices of the people who are central to the intent of the study's exploration. The following review of the literature is comprised of three bodies of work: 1) empirical studies; 2) theoretical works, and 3) autobiographical literature. The literature review for this study has been organized in this way because I began this study with an interest in exploring the idea of binary gender regulation, but was unable to find empirical literature on this subject. Thus, I drew from theoretical and autobiographical works in which binary gender regulation was discussed. That literature was then augmented with what is known about psychosocial distress among populations identified as gender nonconforming, which led me to investigate how regulation might contribute to said distress.

Several research studies conducted within the last five years have presented data revealing the degree to which gender nonconforming and transgender youth experience discrimination and victimization from their parents, peers, and school environments. D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2006) found that gender atypical or nonconforming youth experience a higher rate of mental health issues, many times correlating with symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The authors reported that in addition to finding the aforementioned psychological symptoms present among gender nonconforming youth, the prevalence of verbal, physical, and sexual assaults experienced by these youth is high. Statistics reported from the authors' sample size of 528 are striking, with 80% of gender nonconforming youth reporting verbal victimization, 11% reporting physical victimization, and 9% reporting sexual victimization (D'Augelli et al., 2006). The authors measured current mental health problems of the study's participants with the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) and the Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC), and gender atypicality was significantly associated with more symptoms on both the BSI and TSC (D'Augelli, 2006, p.1472). This study was conducted over a two year period, with each lesbian, gay, or bisexual identified 15-19 year old participant completing three, two to three hour interviews, in order to collect data in order to assess sexual orientation development, childhood gender atypicality, and sexual orientation violence (D'Augelli et al., 2006). A limitation of this study, noted by the authors, was that data was only collected from youth in one geographic area and that reliability and validity checks might have been helpful to incorporate into their self-report instruments.

This is the first study to document ages at which victimization experiences first occurred and to link lifetime sexual orientation violence (SOV) to traumatic stress

symptoms and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). "...More cases of PTSD were found among those who were gender atypical in childhood than among those who were not" (D'Augelli, 2006, p.1480). Moreover, these authors reported that the impact of early experiences of "difference, labeling, criticism by others, and victimization," as "related to their current mental health." (D'Augelli, 2006, p.1477)

Grossman, D'Augelli, Howell, and Hubbard (2005), discussed the impact of parental rejection and interpersonal victimization of transgender identified youth and children on the long-term mental health of these individuals. "The more gender nonconforming the youth, the more likely they reported that they were verbally and physically abused by their mothers and fathers" (Grossman et al., 2005, p. 3). Grossman et al. (2005) go on to discuss the coping mechanisms that abused and victimized children employ that have long-term mental health consequences such as feelings of low self-esteem, lack of trust, experiencing high levels of stress and poor mental and emotional health such as depression, anxiety, dissociative disorders, and reactive attachment disorders.

Grossman et al. (2005) assessed participant's gender expression and presentation, developmental milestones related to gender expression and parents' responses, perceptions of parents' reactions to gender expression, and gender nonconformity. A mixed-method research design was utilized, consisting of an individual interview as well as a questionnaire that measured elements of adjustment and mental health with 55 MTF and FTM transgender youth, ages 15-21. The findings of this study revealed the psychological victimization that gender nonconforming children experienced through

being taught to shame and fear a primary element of their understanding of self, as they challenged what is quantified as normative gender identity and presentation.

A majority of MTF (male to female) and FTM (female to male) transgender youth are told by their parents to stop acting like a 'sissy' or 'tomboy,' respectively, when they are children, thereby being taught to feel fear and shame about who they are (Grossman et al., 2005, p. 14).

Limitations of this study noted by its authors included generalizability not being possible due to using a convenience sample, as well as data being based solely on self-reporting.

Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2001) explored gender based violence, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by transgender people, finding that over half of their sample reported experiencing some form of violence or harassment within their lifetime, and one quarter of the sample reported experiencing a violent incident directed at them because of their gender expression and presentation. Data was collected over one year through a questionnaire distributed in person and also through the internet to a sample size of 402 adult transgender identified participants (Lombardi et al., 2001). The study's purpose was to present quantitative information about trans-people's experience with violence and harassment. "Gender based violence and discrimination acts to maintain conformity to the traditional gender system, and many people may experience a small aspect of it whenever they transgress certain gender norms" (Lombardi et al., 2001, p. 100). A major limitation of this study was that the sample was not significantly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, or age. Furthermore, the authors noted that while a wide range of choices in relation to labeling one's transgender identity were allowed, this range was still found to be too rigid, and not a strong measure of trans visibility; this was a limitation of the study because the wide range of labels did not

measure how “out” participants were, and were perceived by larger society as transgender. For instance, the authors felt that it may have been more helpful to measure how visible or “out” each participants’ transgender status was to larger society, as higher trans visibility could yield more experiences of discrimination and violence, while self-identified labels allow for a full range of expression, some being more visible than others.

Several researchers have demonstrated a clear link between high rates of suicidality, mental health concerns, and gender nonconformity. Mathy (2002) examined suicidality among 73 transgender participants, ages 19-58, in comparison to heterosexual females and males, homosexual males and females. “Significantly more transgender respondents reported suicide ideation and attempts than any group except homosexual females” (Mathy, 2002, p. 47). Through this study, Mathy (2002) hypothesized that a higher prevalence of suicidality among transgender respondents may be due in part to societal oppression and marginalization. Mathy (2002) discussed limitations of the study to include no assessment of ethnicity within the sample, and an inability to generalize the data because of the online sampling source.

Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz’s (2006) research is the first study that assessed independent risk factors for attempted suicide in MTF and FTM transgender persons, while controlling for known risk factors such as substance abuse, depression, a history or current physical or emotional abuse, as well as “hypothetical mediators of suicide risk such as self-esteem” (p.56). A primary risk factor of attempted suicide identified by Clements-Nolle et al. (2006) in this study is gender-based discrimination and victimization, with nearly half of the sample reporting one or more incident of attempted suicide. “...Societal risk factors such as gender-based discrimination and victimization

are independently associated with attempted suicide” (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006, p.63). Other results of Clements-Nolle et al.’s (2006) study found that 60% of participants were classified as depressed, 62% experienced gender discrimination, 83% experienced verbal gender victimization, and 36% reported physical gender victimization. Clements-Nolle et al.’s (2006) sample was comprised of 515 male to female and female to male identified participants, and data was gathered through interviews in which mental health, substance abuse, discrimination, and victimization were measured using assessment tools such as the Center for Epidemiology Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSEI), as well as questions about whether participants had ever been abused or harassed because of their gender identity or presentation. Consistent with the previous empirical studies reviewed, victimization and discrimination experienced by gender nonconforming people are powerful experiences that significantly impact overall mental health status and well-being.

While researchers have identified that parental rejection, low levels of social and emotional support, physical and psychological victimization, stigma, and feelings of otherness are associated in high rates with gender nonconforming people and are connected to higher rates of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality, inquiry into what it is about being “gender nonconforming” that constitutes a risk factor is less understood. The second body of work motivating this study attempts to fill that gap. Judith Butler (2000), a leading gender theorist, proposes reevaluating and reconceptualizing gender as a socially constructed phenomenon maintained by historical and cultural regulation. Butler introduces the concept of gender as cultural fiction, a construction that conceals its reproduction because it is assumed to be natural. Such

cultural regulation has remained unexamined in empirical research; through deconstruction and analysis of gender regulation that occurs primarily in relational context such as parenting and peer relationships, a root cause of victimization, stigma, and rejection experienced by gender nonconforming people may become better understood.

A major work of Butler's (2000), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, discusses the body as a cultural script from which we maintain and reproduce a hierarchical binary gender system. Butler examines gender from a performative framework, challenging our assumptions about biological determinism and gender 'reality' and argues that gender is an identity formulated by repetition of acts, that it should not be understood solely, especially within feminist theory discourse, as a stable identity. Butler's (1990) article, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," explores further her theories of gender as performance, as a corporeal style. In this article she also discusses the metaphysics of subject-verb formations in regards to our cultural understandings, and thus cultural and historical restrictions and definitions of gender. Butler (1990) introduces the concept of gender as cultural fiction, a construction that conceals its reproduction because it is assumed to be natural. For instance, an assumption of the "natural" binary structure of gender can be observed in an initial response to a new birth of, "is it a boy or a girl?" or two check boxes for qualifying one's gender, male or female, on most institutional demographic information documents (driver's licenses, passports, tax forms, etc.).

Overall, Butler (2000) emphasizes that the binary gender system is *actively enforced* through social and relational interactions. For example, the gendered categories

of boy/girl, female/male are treated as mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and without question as an unquestionable truth. Butler and other gender theorists suggest that we experience these gender categories as such in part because of a constant, overt and implicit, gender “policing” or regulation that upholds and maintains the existing gender binary. Gender regulation or policing occurs only within a social and relational context as we engage with one another, expecting and consciously or unconsciously enforcing that each of us “fits” within one easily identifiable gender category or the other. This theoretical concept has powerful implications for lived human individual experiences, as well as relational experiences, that shape our internal sense of self, suggesting that perhaps it is the policing/regulating to which gender nonconforming people are subjected that may contribute to the psychological, emotional and social stressors which they often face.

The works of Anne Fausto-Sterling, a biologist at Brown University, a self-identified social activist, and noteworthy gender and sexuality academician, significantly contributes to the theoretical foundation of this study. One of the major claims Fausto-Sterling makes in her book, *Sexing the Body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality* (2000) is:

...that labeling someone a man or woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender- not science- can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender effect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place (p. 3).

Fausto-Sterling (2000) discusses the false dichotomies of sex/nature as “real” and gender/culture as “constructed.” For instance, Fausto-Sterling (2000) illustrates how sex, in particular the most visible external markers of gender, the genitalia, are literally

constructed by medical alteration, especially in relation to intersexed bodies. “Surgeons remove parts and use plastic to create ‘appropriate’ genitalia for people born with body parts that are not easily identifiable as male or female” (p. 27). Fausto-Sterling writes, “...to maintain gender divisions, we must control those bodies that are so unruly as to blur the borders. Since intersexuals quite literally embody both sexes, they weaken claims about sexual difference” (p. 8). The medical control and alteration of intersexed bodies, Fausto-Sterling argues, is a literal example of the regulation and construction of a mutually exclusive binary gender system in which and/both cannot exist in one body.

Bodies in the ‘normal’ range are culturally intelligible as males or females, but the rules for living as male or female are strict. No oversized clits or undersized penises allowed...by their very existence they call into question our system of gender (p. 76).

Fausto-Sterling’s work raises very interesting questions about the ‘naturalness’ of gender, the development and construction of sexuality, and the hegemonic power structures within our culture.

Furthermore, Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) aforementioned book calls for eroding distinctions between dualisms, binary structures of thinking and belief structures in recognition of a nondualistic account of the body. Fausto-Sterling (2000) recognizes that variations of aspects of human physiology do indeed affect a person’s experiences of gender and sexuality, and it becomes problematic when we reduce those experiences to existing outside of cultural, social, historical, relational contexts, as the end-all-be-all determinants of “essential” sex and gender. In order to expand upon this concept, Fausto-Sterling (2000) evokes Grosz’s (1994) metaphorical use of the Möbius strip, to illustrate a joining and merging of the biological and the social elements of self.

Grosz (1994) proposes that we think of the body- the brain, muscles, sex organs, hormones, and more- as composing the inside of the Möbius strip. Culture and experience would constitute the outside surface. But, as the image suggests, the inside and outside are continuous and one can move from one to the other without ever lifting one's feet off the ground (as cited in Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 24).

Judith Halberstam, in her work, "F2M: The making of female masculinity," (1994) focuses on the concept of female masculinity and the fluidity/transitional nature of gender and sexuality construction. In this article, Halberstam (1994) discusses genders and sexualities as a cultural fictions and styles, and as potentialities rather than fixed identities. She mainly discusses the gender and sexuality styles of F to M identified people, the multiplicity and complexity of identity, and the restrictive nature of binary, heteronormative gender systems on the lives of female to male identified people.

Judith Lorber's (2003) work also builds on the study's theoretical framework, and continues a discussion of the themes and concepts proposed by the aforementioned theoreticians. Lorber (2003) deconstructs and analyzes the biological and social components of binary gender construction and maintenance. She also discusses the body, as cultural text from which we actively create meaning, reflecting Butler's concept of "doing gender". She explains that gendering is done from birth, and continues to be reproduced, replicated and maintained throughout life, but is not exempt from change. Lorber (2003) discusses gender as a process, and the binary system of gender as part of a deliberate and purposeful stratified power structure. Inherent in her work, as well as the other theorists reviewed, Lorber deconstructs and emphasizes the culturally constructed

myth of sex and gender being pure, biologically determined, simply defined and regulated categories.

Augmenting the empirical and theoretical studies reviewed thus far are nonfiction, autobiographical works authored by people who themselves identify, in some way, as existing beyond the normative gender binary, the third body of work motivating this study. These works call attention to the relational context in which binary gender regulation is enacted throughout gender nonconforming peoples' lives. The authors of such work include: Kate Bornstein (1995), *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and The Rest of Us*; *GenderQueer: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary* (2002), edited by Joan Nestle, Riki Wilchins, and Clare Howell; and, *Transgender voices: Beyond women and men* (2008), written by Lori B. Girshick. All of these authors and compilations of narratives explore the fluidity of sexuality and gender identity, performance, and expression. These works also confront our current understandings of gender, especially restrictive, constraining gender within a binary system, and propose radical alternatives in deconstructing and working with social constructs of sex, gender, and sexuality from postmodern, phenomenological, and experiential frameworks.

The nonfiction and autobiographical literature referenced above calls attention to the relational contexts in which binary gender regulation is enacted throughout gender nonconforming peoples' lives. Specifically, the autobiographical works of Bornstein (1995) and Nestle, Wilchins, and Howell (Eds.) (2002) reflect the impact of the regulation and policing that gender theorists emphasize to be essential to the maintenance of the binary gender system. These narrative works, along with the aforementioned gender theorists' emphasis on gender regulation suggest that the psychosocial distress

with which many gender nonconforming people contend is linked to the covert and overt regulation that takes place for people who are not conforming to hegemonic gendered expectations, in particular within important relationships.

Understood through these works, binary gender policing transcends theoretical location into lived, human experience, compounded by the relational matrix in which policing occurs. Gender policing occurs between people, among people; it cannot exist outside of a social, relational context; in fact, it can only exist within the matrix of human interaction. Because of this, psychodynamic relational theory has potential to reveal some elements of the psychological impact binary gender policing may have on gender nonconforming peoples' internal self-organization. Mitchell (1988) states:

Embeddedness is endemic to human experience. I become the person I am in interaction with specific others. The way I feel it necessary to be with them is the person I take myself to be. That self-organization becomes my nature" (Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan, and Hertz, 2008, p. 206).

Berzoff et al. (2008) challenge clinicians to recognize and integrate into clinical practice as well as theory, the impact and importance of the contexts of race, gender, culture, and class on people's subjective realities and acknowledgement of the "inherently social nature of the mind" (p. 207). If we then come to understand and experience ourselves in relation to others, in *relationships* with others, it could be postulated that policing within these relationships for gender nonconforming people produces profound effects on the mind and understanding of self. In fact, relational theory grew out of a historical context in which theorists were questioning assumptions on which common concepts, like gender and other socially constructed phenomena, were based.

The idea that gender, like other aspects of self experience, was constructed in interpersonal and social contexts led to questioning the nature of gender itself, challenging the culturally assumed gender dichotomy, and considering the negotiation of gender dynamics in the clinical situation (Berzoff et al., 2008, p. 214).

Empirical research and the collected theoretical and autobiographical works reviewed, provide ample evidence of the gender-based violence and discrimination experienced by gender nonconforming people, as well as the psychological distress that are present and problematic within this population in response to such oppressions. This research is particularly pertinent to increasing knowledge about how the limitations of the normative binary gender system impact people with whom we work who do not locate themselves within this gendered binary.

Thus, through the reviewed literature, a significant amount of mental health distress is evidenced among gender nonconforming people. Binary gender regulation is integral to this population's experiences of moving through the world within social and relational contexts. Such regulation might, especially within the context of meaningful relationships, be significantly connected to the mental health distress expressed and experienced by gender nonconforming people.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH FORMULATION

The aim of this research was to illuminate self-identified gender nonconforming participants' lived interactions with, and experiences of, the existing binary gender system, specifically within the contexts of important relationships throughout their lives. Current theoretical literature in the field of gender studies suggests that people regulate each other's experience of gender, covertly and overtly, consciously and unconsciously, to maintain the existing gender binary of normatively defined hegemonic male/female gender identities. Existing literature reviewed by the researcher will be augmented with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews in order to explore participants' nuanced experiences of binary gender regulation within meaningful relationships in their lives. An intent of this research was to investigate the link between overt and implicit gender regulation within these important relationships in order to explore the potential and evidenced ramifications of binary gender regulation. This study sought to 1) illuminate experiences of gender regulation by people who self-identify as gender nonconforming, 2) to do so in the context of their important relationships, and 3) to explore any links this regulation may have with psychological distress. This research project was undertaken to fulfill the thesis requirement for the researcher's MSW degree; the theoretical and methodological framework of this project was approved in its entirety by the Smith College School for Social Work's Human Subjects Review Board (See Appendix F),

indicating its compliance with the *NASW Code of Ethics* and the Federal regulations for the Protection of Human Research Subjects.

This research study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological, exploratory research methodology to capture the subjective experiences of participants. One to 1.5 hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 open-ended questions were conducted with participants to gather data (See Appendix B). This design was chosen in order to collect saturated data, from which meaningful themes would emerge. Moreover, the interview design of this project was employed in order to give participants room to give voice to their narratives and truly speak for themselves, rather than being pushed into limited categories of response. The researcher chose this research design to uphold the participants' agencies and self-determination, honoring their shared narratives as primary truths shaping this project. This method is particularly valuable for the intent of this study because little research exists that includes the actual voices of gender nonconforming participants and their lived experiences of gender regulation within the context of important relationships. Considering that people who are gender nonconforming could be understood as a marginalized and silenced population, keeping their voices central to data shared through this project, upheld my commitment to a feminist, critical, post-positivist, and social justice research stance.

This study was shaped by the following foundational exploratory questions:

- How does lifelong interaction with the binary gender system, and the potential regulation that is inherent in this system, contribute to mental and emotional health problems experienced by people who identify as gender nonconforming?

- How are these experiences of gender regulation understood and internalized by gender nonconforming people?
- How do these experiences affect gender nonconforming individuals' overall well being, especially within the context of meaningful interpersonal relationships?

The data of this phenomenological study was analyzed through narrative thematic emergence. This method involves at its center an interest in the meaning making and process of the studied phenomena, in this case, the social construction (and lived experiences) of a binary gender system and its impact on gender nonconforming people within the contexts of the relationships that they deemed important. This method was inductive as the intended end result of this research was not to produce an empirical truth, but rather to achieve a deep understanding of these subjective, contextual, lived gendered experiences in order to posit sensitive and intentional observations around this subject. Discovering and witnessing emergent themes from interview data came from an analysis of participants' direct quotes and ideas, with great attention to subtle and nuanced details within these interactions. Themes from interview data were also woven together with literature in order to deepen and enrich my interpretations and meaning making of these narratives. From this perspective, I, as the researcher, held a self-reflexive stance, acknowledging my subjectivity in this particular production of knowledge.

Characteristics of the Participants/ Sample

I interviewed 13 individuals characterized by the following inclusion criteria. In order to be considered eligible to participate in this research project, participants needed to: (1) identify themselves either currently, or at some point in their life, as gender

nonconforming or as not fitting easily into the gender labels of boy/girl, woman/man; (2) remember having salient experiences of gender regulation, especially from an important other or multiple important others; (3) be 18 years or older; (4) be fluent in English, and; (5) live in the San Francisco Bay Area or if not, have access to a telephone. More detailed demographic signifiers of participants will be reported in the Findings chapter.

Recruitment Process

This research project's sample included participants who live in the San Francisco Bay area as well as participants who live throughout the United States. Participants were generally recruited for participation through the snowball method utilizing the researcher's social and professional contacts. Specifically, the researcher disseminated flyers describing the research project (see Appendix C) around the San Francisco Bay Area in public spaces as well as at a local community mental health agency, *New Leaf: Services for Our Community*. With appropriate permissions, flyers were posted in the staff area of the agency. The researcher also networked with her colleagues and acquaintances through an informal recruitment email. As some participants did not live in the San Francisco Bay Area, these interviews were conducted over the phone. For these participants, an informed consent was sent via USPS to the participant along with an envelope and postage to return the signed consent to the researcher. These phone interviews were recorded digitally as the interview was taking place though the speakerphone function.

The Nature of Participation

Participation in this study was voluntary and participant's confidentiality was protected. Participants in this study completed a 1 to 1.5 hour phone or in-person, semi-

structured interview of 20 questions that I read out loud to participants (see Appendix B). Participants who completed their interview in person were provided with a copy of the questions to visually have in front of them during the interview process; participants who completed their interview over the phone were emailed a copy of the interview questions prior to their interview. In-person interviews took place in public spaces that allowed for privacy, mutually agreed upon by researcher and participant. Phone interviews were completed in spaces that ensured complete privacy.

I digitally recorded all interviews and took notes on my impressions, thoughts, and observations of the interview process. I then selectively transcribed the interviews and stored the data on a password-protected computer; data was also backed up and stored on a password protected USB drive. During the transcription process I listened to each interview several times in order to record and make note of rich responses.

Demographic data of each participant was collected in narrative form at the start of the participant's interview and included the following information: their self-described gender identification(s) and expression(s); sexual orientation(s); racial and ethnic identity(s) especially those which are currently most salient in their understanding of their identity; socioeconomic status(es)/class identity of their family of origin and of themselves currently; the religious and/or spiritual practice(s)/affiliation(s) of the participant's family of origin that they found to be significant in their development; and participants' current level of education.

Risks of Participation

By engaging in this study, participants may have experienced some distress during, and possibly following, the interview process. I acknowledge that some

interview questions had potential to elicit upsetting or evocative memories, thoughts, or feelings from the participant's life and relationship history. I carefully monitored each participant during the interview process to assess how and in what capacity these aforementioned risks might be affecting the participant. I verbally discussed with each participant that the interview could be terminated at any time during the interview if they so chose. Moreover, I informed participants that they could choose to not answer any question at any time for any reason. This risk was also addressed with participants in the informed consent process prior to engaging in the interview, as well as verbally throughout the interview, particularly if I perceived the participant to be in distress or triggered by interview questions. San Francisco Bay Area and national psychotherapy and community support referrals with sliding scale fees who are affirming of gender nonconformity and gender diversity were shared with participants in the informed consent letter as well as verbally by the researcher at the end of interview process. I also verbally discussed with participants that all identifying information would be held in confidence and separated from the participants' responses.

Benefits of Participation

A primary benefit of participating in this study was that participants had the opportunity to contribute their voices and experiences to an area of research that has few published empirical studies directly addressing the impact of enforcement of the gender binary system on gender nonconforming peoples' lives. Moreover, research that does exist currently addressing the issues faced by gender nonconforming people primarily presents data quantitatively and does not highlight the voices of the participants themselves, as this study does through a qualitative research design. Because of this,

participants may have benefited from knowing that they are contributing to the development of knowledge that may be helpful to other people and may increase general understanding about the relational experiences of gender nonconforming people.

Participants in this study may have also benefited from their participation as the interview process offers space to give voice to their experiences, and understandings of gender regulation within important relationships. This study also offered an opportunity to express these experiences to an empathic and nonjudgmental researcher, and this may have been beneficial and validating to participants.

Participants did not receive tangible or monetary compensation for their participation in this study.

Informed Consent Procedures

Informed consent for this study was obtained from participants as a requirement for participation in this research. In the recruitment phase, participants contacted me, the sole researcher for this study, through the research project's email address or at my work phone number published on the recruitment flyer (see Appendix C). I responded to the potential participant via phone or email, depending on how the potential participant contacted me, and I then acquired, if possible, the potential participant's email address. I emailed the potential participant the informed consent (Appendix A) as a hard copy document attachment in order for them to review prior to our interview meeting. If the potential participant did not have an email address, I mailed the informed consent letter to a physical address determined by the participant. I also gave the informed consent letter to the participant at the beginning of our interview, answered any questions the participant has about the informed consent, the informed consent was then signed by the

participant and put in a secure place by the researcher. Finally, I verbally rearticulated to the participant that their consent to participation was completely voluntary, that if they choose to consent they may refuse to answer any question at any time, and that they may withdraw from the study at any time until March 1, 2010.

For participants who completed their interview via phone, I sent an informed consent to them via USPS along with an envelope and postage to return the signed consent form to me prior to their interview. I reviewed the informed consent with the participant at the beginning of the phone interview, and stored the signed informed consent of that participant in a secure location.

Precautions Taken to Safeguard Confidentiality and Identifiable Information

As the sole researcher of this study, I took all necessary precautions in order to keep identifiable information of participants confidential. The precautions included, 1) keeping signed informed consents separate from completed interview recordings, 2) removing names from all data collected except for the signed informed consent forms and, 3) assigning pseudonyms to participants instead of using their given names or initials. In order to ensure participants' confidentiality as much as possible, I conducted in-person and phone interviews in spaces that allowed for privacy, mutually agreed upon between the participant and myself.

My researcher advisor through Smith College School for Social Work, Elizabeth Kita, LCSW had access to the data obtained after I had removed all identifying information of the participants.

Data collected during this research, as well as results of this research may be presented in colloquium form to the Smith College School for Social Work community,

may be used in the future for journal publication, and future professional presentations. In any form of dissemination of this research data, all possible identifying information will be concealed, protected, and illustrative vignettes or quotes will be disguised.

All data collected during this research project will be stored securely for three years as required by Federal regulations. Any data collected in paper form will be stored in a locked file cabinet and any electronic data including digitally recorded interviews and interviews transcribed into Microsoft Word will be stored as password protected files on my computer. After completing the MSW thesis for which the data was collected, I will either destroy data or I will continue to securely keep the data for as long as needed. When I no longer need the data, it will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Rubin and Babbe (2010) discuss “fittingness” and “transferability” as measurements for qualitative studies, as reliability and validity are used for quantitative studies (p.233). This project employs these concepts to measure the emergent and saturated themes within the data. I listened to each interview several times and selectively transcribed rich responses; these responses were then coded by themes that emerged from the data. Process notes were also written on my observations, thoughts, and emotions during the transcription process for each participant. The general process of data analysis employed in this study aimed for gathering depth of information during the participant interviews, attentively listening for themes within this data, transcribing these themes located within participant narratives, weaving this information together with reviewed literature and theory, and keeping a self-reflective and reflexive stance as the researcher

with her own subjective realities and contextual frameworks at the basis of this academic exploration.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the following primary questions through participants' narratives: How does lifelong interaction with the binary gender system, and the potential regulation that is inherent in this system, impact people who self-identify as gender nonconforming? How are these experiences of gender regulation understood and internalized by self-identified gender nonconforming people? How do these experiences affect participants' overall well being, especially within the context of significant interpersonal relationships? The research project aims to 1) illuminate experiences of binary gender regulation by self-identified gender nonconforming people, 2) explore in what social and relational contexts such regulation occurs, and 3) explore any links this regulation may have with participants' feelings of psychological distress.

Qualitative data was collected from interviews with 13 participants who self-identified as gender non-conforming. A significant shaping factor for the researcher in employing a phenomenological, qualitative research design was to create space within research literature for the voices of people who self-identify as gender nonconforming, as these voices are strikingly absent from existing research literature. Making participants' voices central to the information disseminated from this project, upholds the researcher's social justice and feminist research stance.

As part of the researcher's transparency, the shaping of this chapter- how data is reported, as well as what data is in the foreground and background, respectively- are

certainly influenced by her subjective experience of the research project process.

Therefore, themes reported are those most salient to the researcher, and by no means an exhaustive report of data shared by participants. As a qualitative research project, the researcher feels it imperative to attend to each participant's narrative while presenting the data in its aggregate form; vital to this is identifying themes central to the experiences of participants as a group while still holding space to adequately represent and report the "edges" of the experiences of individuals.

The nature of the subject under study has made finding language to accurately represent it a challenge. Using personal pronouns to contextualize participants' voices called for language that moved beyond the binary labels of he/she and him/her. Binary pronoun labels universally did not represent many participants' understandings of their gendered selves as situated outside of the binary gender system. Thus, the personal pronoun "their" has been used in this study to represent participants' gendered identities that are not located within the gender binary.

Three broad, yet cohesive theme constellations emerged from the interview data. Within each of these constellations emerged two to four sub-themes that deepened the researcher's understanding and analysis of participants' lived experiences of self-identified gender nonconformity. The major themes are as follows: 1) participants' multidimensional understanding of their nonconforming gendered self, specifically, how, when, and why they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way, 2) how participants feel the outside world- larger society, peers, family, and important others, in general- relates to and interacts with the gender nonconforming element of self and what meaning participants make of these understandings, and 3) the impact of how

others relate to their gender nonconformity (on their psyches, and on moving through the world, in general).

The findings reported in this chapter will be broken down into the following sections: 1) participant demographics, 2) participants' multidimensional understandings of their self-identified nonconforming gendered self, specifically, how, when, and why they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way, 3) how participants feel the outside world- larger society, peers, family, and important others, in general- relates to and interacts with their gender nonconforming element of self, 4) participants' feelings and thoughts about how messages (subtle, overt, intended, unintended) received from the outside world, as well as the ways in which others have interacted with their gender nonconforming element(s) of self, have impacted their whole selves, in other words, how these messages have been internalized. Also, narrative data around how participants *themselves* actively interact and relate to the outside world as self-identified gender nonconforming people will be shared.

While the interview data for this study have been separated into three major theme constellations, all of these themes are connected and interdependent on one another. Each theme constellation, while distinguished from one another, is connected with, to, between, and in relation to other themes.

Participant Demographics

This chapter will present data from 13 interviews with individuals who identified themselves and/or their experiences in the world, in some way, as gender nonconforming. The researcher collected demographic data for each participant, asking each individual to describe themselves in the following areas: gender(s), racial and ethnic identity(s),

socioeconomic/ class understanding of yourself currently and your family of origin, sexual orientation(s), the religious or spiritual practice(s)/ affiliation(s) of your family of origin, and current level of education. The researcher collected this demographic data in narrative, unstructured form, giving room for participants to spend as much or as little time describing these aspects of themselves as they felt was important. Therefore, several areas of demographic data, in particular participants' descriptions of their gender(s) were shared in great detail and depth. As the majority of participants did share narratives around their understanding of their gender(s), the researcher feels this is integral to the study as a whole, and will lend a significant amount of space to sharing these narratives in this chapter. The data collected on participants' religious or spiritual practice(s)/ affiliation(s) of their family of origin will not be collectively reported as the researcher did not observe it as significant to the sample group as a whole.

Participants self-selected to be part of this study; each participant expressed to the researcher an interest and desire to further their process around understanding their experiences of binary gender regulation and their gender nonconforming elements of self through participation in this study. Each participant shared that understanding themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way was an integral part of their overall understanding self. Identifying themselves, or parts of themselves, as gender nonconforming were expressed as cohesive and salient, as a primary lens through which participants' shared viewing the world.

Nine participants self-identified their racial identity as White; three participants described their racial identity as African American or Black; one participant self-

identified as being of “mixed race ancestry.” Five participants identified their ethnic identity as Jewish.

Five participants described their socioeconomic status (SES) currently as “middle class,” with two participants elaborating on what that means for them, both of whom connected their sense of SES with their educational privileges. Two participants described their current SES as “poor.” One stated that “I’m poor now, but privileged as a student” and the other stated that “I’m poor now, but comfortable.” One participant described their SES as “living on student loans.” One participant described their current SES as “in my first year of graduate school, and have, for the past 10 years, been working in blue-collar jobs and making artwork (for little to no pay).” Four participants did not identify or describe their current understanding of their SES.

Three participants described their understanding of their family of origin’s SES as “upper middle class.” One participant described their understanding of their family of origin’s SES as “educated” and “wealthy”. One participant described their family of origin’s SES as a “privileged economic background.” Three participants described their family of origin’s SES as “middle class”, one specifying that their understanding of this included that their family was “rich with cultural capital but with massively limited funds.” Two described their family of origin’s SES as “lower middle class”, one elaborated that, “we still had our needs and wants always taken care of.” One participant described their family of origin’s SES as “poor”; one participant described their family of origin’s SES as “working class, a single parent household.” One participant did not share their understanding of their family of origin’s SES.

Participants described how they understand or identify their sexual orientation with depth and detail in narrative form. Five participants described their sexual orientation as queer, many of whom expanded upon what this particular label means to them. One participant stated, “I identify as queer...I like to have sex with men, women, and all those in between, but form relationship with female-bodied folks.” Another shared, “I am queer...I am attracted to people of many genders, mainly femmes or pretty boys or gender queer people.” One participant identified their sexual orientation as “gay”; one participant identified their sexual orientation as “straight.” Two participants identified as a “lesbian”, another as a “lesbian, butch dyke.” One participant described her sexual orientation as “pretty pansexual...and I definitely identify as being a dyke too.” One participant identified their sexual orientation as “bisexual, my own definition.” One participant described their sexual orientation as, “men are OK, but I like women.”

Four participants reported having completed a Master’s degree; five participants reported having completed their undergraduate degree, two of these participants now enrolled in graduate school; one participant reported having completed ½ of her PhD; one participant completed their Juris Doctor (J.D.), and one participant reported completing a post-Master’s degree. One participant reported their highest level of education as completion of ½ semester of undergraduate coursework.

Participants’ diverse and varied narrative descriptions of their gender expression and/or identity, that in some way they self-identified as gender nonconforming, are foundational to this study’s area of inquiry. Less than half of the participants described their understanding of their gender with only a few words. The descriptions used by these participants included: Gender Queer (n=2), Stone Butch (n=1), Masculine-presenting

Butch Dyke (n=1), male (n=1), and female (n=1). The majority of participants described with depth and detail about how they understand their gender; several of these descriptions acknowledge the limitations of the binary gender system on language available to describe one's gender, and also the active creation and formation of available language to describe their gender in a way that feels most cohesive with their internal selves:

How I think of my gender is ambiguous because there are only two choices that we historically have, male or female, and sometimes I feel I can fit into one or the other categories but sometimes I feel like I'm somewhere in between or somewhere outside of it, so it's really hard for me to give a specific answer...I've been playing with the terms a-gender, a-female, a-male, kind of like a-sexual, but the long in short answer is that it's very difficult to identify not very easily as either/or.

Another participant explained how she uses language to best describe how she understands her gender, from a multidimensional perspective:

I'm female bodied and I identify as a woman but also tongue-in-cheek, one of my friends gave me the moniker of aging-andro-femme-twink...I feel like part of me is very feminine in certain traditional ways but I always have grappled with, especially growing up, never feeling feminine enough, or and never feeling sufficiently feminine enough in certain spaces, I don't feel that as much, consciously anymore, so the andro part gives respect and pride & acknowledgement in my own androgyny. I also have a very strong masculine part of me, the twink part is in some ways identifying with feeling kind of faggy, and I definitely identify as a dyke too...so the twink part is also a playfulness of having a flexible and somewhat youthful spirit.

These participant narratives share the complexity, depth, and level of engagement that many participants had in naming and giving voice to their understanding(s) of their gender nonconforming element(s) of self.

For several participants who described their genders as Gender Queer and/or Trans, a theme of fluidity, movement, and multiplicity of gender descriptive labels

became emergent in their narratives. One participant stated: “I could see taking a step further to be more masculine in my gender...and now, I guess Trans, but it’s fluid really.”

Another participant described:

I identify as gender queer---I feel that my gender is different. I love looking andro, feminine, masculine, I love I can pull from both gender presentations in order to create something that works for me and I really like doing it...*gender is something that you do*...I can be who I want to be... I don’t feel like I’m stuck in the box. I do feel that I fit under the Transgender category, and I do identify as Transgender also...to me being Trans is—beyond, and through, and above, and I don’t feel I fit one gender, or one gender presentation, and that’s just who I am...and I can move beyond the box that was created for me and move to other boxes if I want to, and move outside of the box, or put the boxes together if I want.

A third participant shared:

Trans- that’s my first gender identity. I feel like I’m Trans more than anything else; I like leaving it as Trans because it implies the beyond and through movement process. I also sometimes identify as F to M but more as a clarification for other people...sometimes I identify as male, but that’s problematic because I don’t identify as a man by any means, although I can be perceived as one, I feel more comfortable calling myself a boy, but that seems not fully fitting also.

Another participant described the complexity of their gendered self as:

Trans- what that means to me right now is that I don’t feel like I’m in the process of transitioning genders, but I’m holding that process is possible, that my gender is not fixed or complete. I experience myself as female-bodied masculine presenting individual, and embracing crossing biological sex and gender best fits.

Again, through these narratives an active level of engagement with participants’ understandings of their gender nonconforming elements of self is present. Furthermore, participants’ relationship with their gendered self opens possibilities of embodied gender as a site for transformative possibilities, as well as multiple or fluid expressions of their gender(s).

Lastly, one participant included in her description of her gendered understanding of self, the dissonance between her internal sense of self and how she is received and

perceived moving through the world. “I identify as a girl, I am a biological female, and in my head identify as a girl, although I recognize that I have many expressions of gender that are not conforming to that identity from an outsider’s perspective.” Within this participant’s description of her understanding of her gender, was recognition of transgressing the hegemonic gender binary and her understanding of this in relationship to others.

The subjective construction of the gendered self

The first constellation of themes that emerged from the interview data, surrounds participants’ multidimensional understandings of their self-identified non-conforming gendered self, specifically, how, when, and why they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way.

Gender nonconforming lens

Interestingly, the phrase “what to pick?!” or “how do I choose?” when asked how participants understand themselves to be gender nonconforming was repeated throughout the narrative data. These participants shared a felt sense of gender nonconformity permeating multiple facets of their lives- that understanding themselves to be gender nonconforming is a present awareness and complex, multi-layered process that is lived as an ongoing constant, not just in one isolated area. Understanding the impact of the gender binary on their felt and lived gender expressions and identities was a constant presence in their lives, and figuring out how and what exactly to parse out to describe themselves as gender nonconforming merited the aforementioned questions.

Many participants, when asked how they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming, described having an internal feeling of being gender nonconforming as

well as a sense of this nonconformity being evidenced by their external expressions. “I don’t dress like a girl, my haircut isn’t a girl’s haircut, I don’t use feminine lady-like language...I don’t conform to the script.” Another participant shared, “...I continue to challenge what it means to be a girl or look like a girl.” Participants as a whole described this understanding as encompassing their full self, as an active interplay between their minds and bodies.

I feel gender nonconforming and I look gender nonconforming, and it’s something I think about a lot. I view the world through a nonconformative gender lens, by that I mean that I’m born with a female body, but I don’t identify as female, and I don’t identify as male—I feel that my gender is something other than those things or a combo of them at the same time.

This participant’s narrative illuminates a theme present in much of the interview data, in which understanding oneself to be gender nonconforming in some way is a multilayered experience that shapes and develops a gender nonconforming lens through which the world is understood and interacted with. The following is a poignant piece of narrative that another participant shared that further illuminates this theme:

These days it is obvious to me with every step I take through the world that my whole self (the way I look and feel and what I think, what I see, and how I see it) defies the prevailing, practically hegemonic cultural narrative that asserts what a “woman” is. On some days, I feel wholly connected to the word “woman”, and on others, less.

A theme of consciously and unconsciously challenging hegemonic, normative gender expectations within the current binary structure was very much alive in participants’ narratives. “I don’t intentionally do things to be gender nonconforming, it feels like an integral part of me more than it does a conscious understanding.” Another participant shared how she consciously understands her embodiment of gender as challenging hegemonic gender expectations situated in the existing gender binary:

The way I see myself as gender nonconforming is probably more subtle than some people. I do identify as female, which is sort of in accordance with my biological sex, but I definitely don't embrace all the roles that the American or White culture would describe women. I don't believe that gender difference is essentially related to biological sex, and I do believe that gender is at least partially socially constructed.

Many participants felt an internal sense of "always knowing" that they were gender nonconforming. This was coupled with a sense of this understanding changing over time, as a major process in their understandings of self. "I followed some inner something to become the person I am today." In fact, the majority of participants used the word *process* to describe their understanding of self-identifying as gender nonconforming. "It definitely feels like something that is still in process. I don't know if it's a process with an end...I understand it as new everyday, because it changes too, it's too fluid to have a definition." Another participant shared: "I really like being nonconforming, I've never conformed, and I'm much more comfortable in who I am now and I am still learning..." This experience of active engagement with the gendered self as a process is a salient theme throughout participants' narratives that inherently challenges the hegemonic notions of gender, rooted in the binary system, as fixed and static.

The majority of participants reported that they had a felt sense or realization of being gender nonconforming early in life, before or right around hitting puberty, even though this internal sense was not yet connected to words to describe that internal feeling. Participants described having an awareness of these childhood feelings as early as age three through the age of thirteen. Furthermore, many participants described a heightened awareness of this element of themselves as youth in middle and high school as well as college.

I tried to conform to traditional versions of femininity throughout middle school. It was obvious by age 14 that I only felt comfortable in boy clothes. By age 16 I had cropped hair and had started wearing boxer shorts and boxer briefs. By 19, I was binding my chest and attempting to pass as male in the world outside my college's walls. I identified as Trans (meaning, at the time, not male *or* female) for years after that and worked to shape my body into one that blurred distinctions between male and female (without using hormones or surgery) by ways of dress, walk, posture, and voice, almost unconsciously—both for safety reasons and as an attempt to inhabit a body that felt fitting.

This internal understanding was generally understood through participants' relationships to their bodies as a site in which gender moves from a social construction to lived experiences.

Childhood memories were frequently shared by participants to capture their understandings of their gender(s) as nonconforming. In many of these recalled memories, participants connected this internal sense of their gender nonconforming self with their external, physical self and body. For example, a participant who self-identified their body as female shared, "Around 7 or 8, I can think back to instance when I thought I had a certain body, I absolutely imagined myself to have a male body, it didn't disturb me, I didn't know what to make of it, it just was the way I was." Another participant echoed a sense of gender nonconformity felt within their body early in life: "I grew up feeling really uncomfortable in my body. I was overweight and believed that I was never a pretty or good-enough girl because I was fat." For this participant, body shape and gender were inextricably linked. For many participants, the body was experienced as a primary site of nonconformity, often the place where regulation became a lived experience.

While memories of an individual, internally-located sense of being gender nonconforming were vividly recalled by participants, many of them also shared how their

awareness of being gender nonconforming took place in the context of relationships with others, such as parents, peers, siblings, or strangers.

A felt sense of difference

Participants not only described feeling apart, distanced, and different from peers but also suggested that these experiences were central in the development of their own understandings of their gender nonconformity during childhood and adolescence. The memories that participants shared were both cognitive and affective. “I had been outside traditional gender expectations for years before college. I had, in some ways, never quite fit in.” Feeling this sense of difference emerged through several participants’ narratives as they shared memories of recess at school:

I was definitely a tomboy as a kid, but that didn’t seem weird or problematic until about 4th grade, when the play at recess seemed to get very gendered...I was much more interested in running around with the boys, but I felt a sense of difference for wanting this, so I ended up hanging out with the girls and feeling sad.

Several other participants shared memories of their childhood play and how now looking back on it, gender divisions were very much a part of the play structure. Thus, such findings indicate that participants who felt gender nonconforming in their childhoods experienced a process and heightened awareness around peer groups and play that gender conforming children may not experience. While themes of feeling different certainly include those affective memories of sadness, several participants shared memories of feeling this difference in terms of gendered play as positive: “I’d always play what the boys were playing- and it wasn’t a problem at all for me because I was as good as them- I felt comfortable there, and didn’t feel at all comfortable playing with the

girls.” Another participant echoed this feeling: “I felt like there was something lesser or wrong with other girls more than I thought something was wrong with me.”

Multiple participants described feeling a sense of “not knowing where I fit,” in the larger world, specifically, in their adult lives.

I am overwhelmingly freaked out by how my gender understanding (or lack there of) affects me. I struggle daily with being out as Gender Queer in my work place, in the larger community, and with my parents...more often than not, I am silent because I still can't quite figure out where I fit into the Transgender spectrum...I silence myself around my own gender ambiguity.

A few participants described a sense of “not fitting” as a constant throughout their lives, a piece of their ongoing narratives and lived daily experiences:

...for me, I am who I am, I've always performed this way...anywhere I've gone I know I've ever really fit what anyone has looked like #1, and I've never really been mirrored in that way either...

The feelings of discomfort and acknowledgment of “not fitting” shared by participants added a strong affective element to their gender nonconforming narrative.

These feelings were tied to receiving external messages about not conforming to hegemonic binary gender expectations or transgressing the binary in some way.

Finding language, giving voice

Every participant shared feelings and experiences in their adult lives in their processes of understanding themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way.

Themes of understanding this part of self to be a process were repeated. “I'm still trying to make sense of myself as gender nonconforming.” A specific thematic element of this process that the majority of participants described was finding language that began to give voice to their lived experiences of gender nonconformity.

I think I found language around it in college, started to try to name it...I felt a whole world open up when I discovered language and community and theory and activism around my gender presentation. I felt like I had found home base.

Another participant described a salient memory of gaining language to give voice to this experience that was held within an activist context.

I went to a workshop put on by GenderPAC (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition) and I the term Gender Queer was introduced to me there...I remember having this clear 'coming to Jesus' moment where all of a sudden somebody had put words and a dialogue and definition to these feelings that I had been having. I had never thought about these feelings, analyzed them, or been confused by them, but the only word I had to describe myself before this was tomboy...and now all of a sudden I didn't just have to be tomboy, I could be Gender Queer, I could consider myself to be gender fucking, I could be gender nonconforming, I could be Trans. I now had so many more options...that was the beginning of this ten-year journey for me.

Participants shared that finding language to give voice to their experiences and understandings of their gendered self existing outside of the hegemonic binary system was a powerful and empowering process.

The gender nonconforming self in relation to others

The second major constellation of themes illuminate how participants feel the outside world- larger society, peers, family, and important others, in general- relates to and interacts with their gender nonconforming element(s) of self. Emergent themes within this section include:

- Experiences and memories of subtle and overt messages received from others, specifically from family and larger society.
- Acknowledgements of affirming and supportive relationships in their lives (specifically, in regard to their gender nonconforming element(s) of self).

- Public restrooms as a physical space in which hegemonic binary gender regulation is enforced, enacted on, and experienced viscerally by participants.
- Experiences of threatening harassment directed at participants due to presenting as, being read as, gender nonconforming.

Societal regulatory messages

The themes that were most prominent throughout all of the collected narrative data were participants' understandings and experiences of social messages that took various forms (subtle, overt, experienced, perceived), directed at, or interpreted as about, their gender nonconforming element(s) of self. The majority of messages were felt as negative responses toward their gender expression(s). Most participants reported that they felt that these messages were shaming, hurtful, othering, angering, and marginalizing when asked how their gender nonconformity has been received and reflected throughout their lives by family, peers, important others, and society at large. These messages were repeatedly quantified by the majority of participants as frequent, constant, and experienced as part of their daily experiences of moving through the world. While such regulatory messages showed up in different ways for participants, a dominant theme of these messages revolved around confronting each individual's transgression of the compulsory "rules" of the existing gender binary.

Most participants tended to report a distinct felt sense, as well as lived experiences of receiving messages about their gender nonconformity from the general public, society, or people with whom they did not have a relationship. Participants emphasized that many times, these regulation experiences of their gender directed at

them by larger society and strangers were more salient and constant than those regulation experiences felt and received from people with whom participants had relationships. A powerful element of such messages revolved around nonverbal communication directed at participants. For example:

I got stared at a lot in graduate school, no one said anything- I'm hypersensitive to it too- stranger's lingering looks, or feeling like someone was listening less to what I'm saying and thinking more about, "why does she have to look like that?"

Another participant shared some of her feelings and experiences of the ways in which she, as a self-identified gender nonconforming person, is received by general society.

I see this reflection back that I'm a little shocking or weird in some way...I do feel often times, and maybe I'm making all this up but I don't think so...I feel often like I'm an exotic other to people. I had this feeling the other day- I felt this fatigued feeling of looking weird, or having people look at me, doing that othering thing and I don't know how to interpret it sometimes, but I feel like people look at me and feel like, 'whoa, what are you?' kind of thing...

In these reflections on how participants felt they have been and are received by general society are themes of othering, a calling attention to participants expressed and/or perceived transgression of the gender binary.

More than half of participants described memories from childhood in which others, outside of their family of origin, made comments about their gender presentation, sending messages about "not-fitting" into normative expectations of their assigned gender.

The earliest memory I have of my gender presentation having been commented on is when people would ask if I was a boy or a girl when I was 5 or 6. I remember the comments being pretty frequent, and I remember not liking them. I did start growing my hair out after that, and I remember it specifically being in response to people's confusion about my gender- I'm not sure whether it was my decision or

my mother's to grow out my hair, but I do think I kept it long for the next 12 years because of those experiences.

Other participants shared similar experiences in which others, generally adults in their childhoods outside of their families of origin, directed negative messages at them for being perceived as not conforming to hegemonic binary expectations. These memories were salient and shaping in participant narratives and were connected to understanding their gendered childhood self.

As discussed previously, many participants identified an internal knowing about feeling and/or being gender nonconforming early in life. Many participants also reported that they came to an understanding of themselves as gender nonconforming in some way through messages received by others that they did not conform to what was expected of their assigned gender. Some participants reported this understanding coming exclusively from external messages, while others described a complex interaction of the internal knowing with external messages shaping their understanding. For example, one participant shared:

...in HS [High School] I hit this time in my life when I was in a hyper feminine, hyper sexual phase, when I was really trying to be the white girl in my HS- it was an over emphasis of what I thought it was to be feminine, to be a girl in society. So that experience told me that the gender that I wanted to express was nonconformative, and the dissonance that I experienced also elicited, the feeling of what you're doing isn't what everyone else is doing... That process was utterly humiliating, no matter how I tried it didn't really work, and people knew that, people told me. That really hit when I was 13-15, I was really struggling.

Another element of these messages from others that was shared by several participants, was the process of others putting labels onto participants in order to contain *their* confusion about the participant's gender nonconformity. "I feel a conflict around how I'm perceived, how I present- I don't want to be put in a box of just one thing

(gender).” For another participant, a felt sense of a label being put on them early in life was true, and an active reclaiming and owning labels to match that felt internal sense is present:

In the early part of my life I was called a tomboy- that label came from other people, other people were telling me I was nonconforming...but more recently I think I’ve started to own that label and place it on myself...the ways I sometimes now want or like to be addressed can go him/her, she/his, sir, so it’s kind of this idea that I’m not fitting to and don’t want to fit into one way of being recognized because I feel like I don’t fit necessarily into one or another, and so if they’re (labels) are going to be put on me anyway, I’d rather have them interchange according to the way I feel.

As a majority of participants self-identified as queer, many of these participants shared their feelings and experiences of their gendered self being received within that community. Each participant who shared these feelings of gender regulation within the queer community, also shared how being connected to the queer community is an important element, in some way, of their support network and sense of self. For example:

In some ways, I’ve had to work to also continually defy the confines of some gender theories, boxes that queer culture creates to generate culture and language and its own conformity. The great thing about queer culture is that it expects defiance, it cultivates its own shape-shifting, so queerness still feels like home to me. It ever expands and shifts and morphs and contradicts itself.

When sharing how she feels that her gender is regulated within the queer community, one participant described, “It’s hard. I can feel lonesome, invisible, and angry about this...so it hasn’t only been the heterosexual community that’s narrow minded about my gender.” Another participant shared: “People police each other, unfortunately. I have experienced subtle policing from within my own community. I steel myself from feeling hurt by this kind of policing. I try to out it, make light of it, and move

on.” One participant described not conforming to gender boxes that she feels are present in the queer community in addition to heteronormative society:

I feel nonconforming in part because of things people say to me, and that’s when I realize that how I’m perceived is not how I feel, and that happens pretty often...I realize in a lot of different arenas that I don’t conform, especially when traveling and such, but even within the queer scene or community that I don’t feel like I conform to whatever the boxes are...

These elements of participants’ narratives share that some of their experiences within the queer community are impacted by binary gender regulation, and that this regulation persists even within a community that these participants identified as being a part of.

Regulatory messages from families of origin

Many participants described receiving messages about being gender nonconforming, in childhood and in adulthood, from family members. Several participants reported these messages to be overt, and many described them as subtle, masked in jokes or within complex relational dynamics. More subtle messages received by participants from family members around being gender nonconforming early in life generally precipitated from participants’ choice of clothing or refusal of gender conforming clothing. A participant whose twin was also gender nonconforming in childhood shared, “...even by elementary school I didn’t feel comfortable in dresses, and I remember there were little family jokes about going to somebody’s event and we’d be the only ones not wearing dresses.” Several participants shared receiving overt negative messages from parents in particular, especially in adolescence and early adulthood, that their choice of clothing was not conforming to traditional expectations of their assigned gender. “I got those messages all the time, all the time. My mom would say, ‘I’m not

going to buy you a boy's shirt...what are you doing that for, you're not a boy...there was a constant questioning of me because I 'wasn't a boy'." Another participant shared: "I remember clearly her (my mom's) discomfort when I started wearing men's briefs and she did my laundry on a visit home. She asked me, sort of light-heartedly, but with a little mocking, 'honey, did you forget that you're a girl?'" Several participants shared their experiences of subtle and overt messages that they didn't fit their parents' gender expectations, that they felt were integrated into the dynamic of their relationships, in particular with their mothers.

Unconsciously there were always inklings that I got from my mother that I was not feminine enough for her, because (she said these things to me) I 'had the potential to be a really pretty girl,' and instead I 'chose to be a dark cloud'. Within a stereotypical framework of femininity, my sister is much more feminine than me, and the attending stereotypes of passivity and doing what my mom said, and I was strident and just really contentious with my mom and a lot of that had to do around gender stuff- what I was wearing or how I looked. My mom is really progressive and brilliant woman...and yet, at the same time she's complex and is obsessed with female beauty, and it's disturbing and superficial. It's to the core. My mom basically withheld love and affection if I didn't look a certain way and if I did, I got a lot of affirmation and support. A lot of that had to do around the gender part, because I did not want to wear little jumpsuits and dresses, and my hair in braids.

Another participant shared a feeling of constantly receiving messages that she should present her gender differently from her mother:

My mom, from the time I was sort of dressing myself, until pretty much the day she died, had an opinion about my haircut and my clothes, and shared them with me multiple times a week. She would say sometimes nasty, and rude and cruel things to me about it...I think her intention was genuine, I think she was saying these things to me not because she was trying to be mean, but because she was afraid for what would happen to me if I didn't fit, so she was trying to make me conform so that I didn't get teased or beat up or whatever... I also think she wanted a family that looked a certain way, and I didn't fit it, and I think that was frustrating for her...and I really believe that I broke her (my mom's) heart every time I walked down the stairs, every morning, no matter what I was wearing.

The public restroom

A majority of participants described intensely feeling and experiencing messages from strangers about being, or being perceived as, gender nonconforming when using public restrooms. Participants described the public restroom as a physical space in which the binary gender system is actively enforced and those who do not conform to hegemonic gender expectations receive messages of many kinds that they do not fit, and are not welcome. One participant shared:

I have a bazillion bathroom stories, there are so many various kinds of people who take double takes, and who are scared at first, and who think they're doing the right thing by ushering me toward the men's restroom, or they think they're doing the right thing by pulling their child a little closer, because they're not sure *what* I am, but probably think "it must be a freak"...right now, I think the most feedback I get about my gender is fear...one particular memory I have is walking into the women's restroom at my university, and the woman washing her hands saw me in the mirror screamed at the top of her lungs and ran out the door past me...so what was reflected back to me then about my gender was a scream, outburst, and sprint.

Most every participant who described experiences in or around the public restroom shared in depth their emotional response to these experiences, as well as the frequency at which they receive these regulatory messages. "...Frequently I get rude responses in restrooms, people will be really rude, and that happens at least once a month, often." Fear and anxiety were the most frequent messages that participants reported feeling directed at them from strangers in public restrooms. Fatigue and anxiety were the most prevalent and emergent emotions shared by participants around using public restrooms. For example:

...a very big issue for me is restrooms- I have anxiety all the time, every time I go to a public bathroom- it's horrible, so horrible...when I go in or out of the bathroom, women do a double-take, they always do, clearly confused, they look at

the sign to see if they're going into the right bathroom, of if I'm going to the right bathroom...

Some participants described attempting to alter their presentation, to perform, in a way, a conforming embodiment of gender, in order to interrupt or reduce these messages from strangers.

I am most frequently conscious of the way I present myself (in terms of my gender) when I use women's restrooms in public; almost anywhere I go I will sort of put my shoulders back and stick out my chest to emphasize my breasts in an attempt to reassure the frequent nervous women who stare, pull their children away, or turn around and run out of the bathroom upon seeing me.

The public restroom was overwhelmingly talked about by participants as a physical site in which binary gender regulation is enforced, regulated, and maintained—that this physical site is a powerful location in which the hegemonic binary system is fully active, undeniably present, and a regularly impactful lived experience of regulatory gender messages.

Gendered violence and harassment

Several participants shared experiences of violence and harassment directed at them by people with whom they did not have a relationship. Participants who shared these experiences felt that these experiences of violence and harassment were directly correlated with presenting as, and/or being perceived in some way as gender nonconforming.

Some negative memories are, I was pushed off a bus when I was in Austin, there are a few things that stick out that were violent and nasty just based on how I look, based on aesthetics only, from people who don't know me...I felt I was going to get shot when I drove across the country with my friend recently because of the way I look, my gender presentation—we didn't sleep a lot of nights, we'd just keep driving because of the way we'd get treated in gas stations.

Another participant shared:

It is incredibly strange to be treated with regularity as a social pariah, as a pervert, as prey. Though I have avoided being on the receiving end of someone's physical aggression (goddess bless), I have had a gun waved in my face, a café stool lifted up to be thrown at me, suffered too many instances of verbal harassment to count, been followed, intimidated, stalked, have had multiple men tell me they were going to rape me after learning I was female, was once serenaded with the song "Boys Don't Cry" on a sidewalk by a huge frat boy (just after the film on Brandon Teena's murder was released), and have been gawked at pretty consistently for the past million years (so much so I made up the game "they're staring at us because we're so beautiful" to play with my other gender non-conforming friends and with my lovers).

One participant described feeling that an experience of aggressive violation was connected in part to her gender nonconforming elements of self:

When I was a preteen I was raped by a boy from school. I remember feeling at the time that he recognized the dissonance between expected gender norms for a girl, and my actual being. I perceived that he saw this as a challenge and I felt at the time that I almost attracted violence from him, like I had drawn that attention to me.

The aforementioned violence, harassment, and overt oppression shared by participants was directly linked by them to their understanding of moving through the world transgressing the hegemonic expectations of the gender binary- that through their gender binary transgressions, others enacted violence upon them in an attempt to regulate their nonconforming element(s) of self.

Affirming and confirming relationships

Another theme that was as prevalent as negative messages received by participants about being or being received as gender nonconforming, was around relationships in participants' lives that they understood and/or experienced as affirming, supportive, and confirming of their self-identified gender nonconformity. Within this thematic section in which participants discussed these relationships, were consistent

acknowledgements by participants of how “lucky”, “blessed”, and “fortunate”, they feel to have these relationships in their lives. In fact, every participant shared some acknowledgement of at least one affirming and supportive relationship in their life, and subsequently, shared eagerly how important the affective impact of the shared relationship(s) was on their overall sense of themselves as gender nonconforming.

For the most part, I feel that I am invisible as a Gender Queer person- rather, people see me as a “strong lady” or often refer to me as a “girl”. It is such a relief to come home to my partner and my friends and not be referred to as girlfriend, or woman. Instead, gender is much more fluid and expansive...my closest circle of friends really let me be the complicated person I am...I feel completely whole with my closest friends and partner.

The fluidity described by many participants in understanding their gender nonconforming element(s) of self was mirrored and reflected by participants’ described affirming relationships. Participants described the dominant external narrative of othering and gender based oppression directed at their gender nonconforming element(s) of self, as interrupted and challenged through such relationships.

Several participants described how these positive and affirming relationships were absolutely crucial in maintaining internal strength as they felt constantly bombarded with negative messages about being gender nonconforming from the outside world.

The relationships I’ve had for the longest time- my mom, my sister, my close friends, have been affirming and I’m really lucky for that...I think having that makes me confident in myself...I think I feel a sense of safety from the support of those people has helped me feel that I don’t ever have to change for somebody else just because they’re uncomfortable with me.

Many participants described relationships with former and current romantic partners as affirming and confirming of their gendered sense of self.

A paramount relationship in my development, my understanding of myself as gender nonconforming, was with someone who was so affirming and confirming-

she was willing to allow me to not be sure and test my own boundaries- the relationship gave me confirmation of the things I was feeling.

Another participant shared:

It was really affirming for me to have my first partner really like me for being an “in-between-er”, and for both of us to be “in-between-ers” even though she was definitely more masculine, but she recognized and liked it.

While the majority of participants did share that romantic relationships and partnerships were affirming of being and/or feeling gender nonconforming in some way, several participants did share that romantic relationships were in fact, places where they felt their gender regulated and received messages that their gender nonconformity was not affirmed within that relationship.

Repeatedly, participants shared that an essential element of their support structure is participation and active formation of community in which their gender nonconforming element(s) of self is validated and many times mirrored. Participants emphasized actively choosing affirming people to surround themselves with, and building community as a container for affirming and supporting relationships was significant and emergent throughout interviews. Furthermore, this active participation in and building of supportive and affirming community, similar to supportive meaningful relationships described by participants, interrupts the dominant negative narrative of othering and binary gender-based oppression that participants shared as constant lived experiences. “I have had to use sheer will to seek out the spaces my community has carved out to hold us. I use those spaces as balm.”

The impacts of regulation

The third constellation of themes illuminates how participants have internalized these messages of gender regulation. Participants talked about how the messages that they received – whether overt or covert, intended or not – about their nonconformity affected their behavior, consciousness, and the way they moved through a world that characterized by a binary gender system. One participant described the impact that such messages had:

It feels frustrating and invalidating, those words aren't sufficient. Maybe I guess in some contexts it's made me feel a real need to be declarative about who I am...in a host of contexts I felt this need to make these statements of you don't know me and feel defensive of my identity.

Another participant echoed this feeling of protection and defensiveness around their gender nonconforming expression and sense of self:

I feel like I have to have my cards on the table because people will come at you from every angle...I still feel really protected, defensive about this part of myself...I almost feel that if anyone asks me directly about it (my gender), I feel it as being critical...

A third participant elaborated on this feeling of defensiveness and protectiveness around their gender nonconforming element of self, connecting it to feelings of being generally misunderstood in life:

I have had instances where I feel distinctly misunderstood by friends. When that's happened I feel kind of sad, and defensive, like now I have to explain myself... I don't have some intense need for everyone to understand me, except for the people that I'm close with...despite that, I do feel hurt when people don't understand me, and I don't totally know what to make of that...I think because my base assumption is that people will not understand me... I can operate under that assumption, but when it gets thrown in my face, and I have to address that assumption I make all the time, that it might be true. I'm sure it's not wonderful to operate under that assumption but it's really how I feel...even when somebody I don't really care that much about says something that makes me know (my assumption is true), like something transphobic, I wonder what they think of me.

A level of protection around participants' gender nonconforming element(s) of self proved to be present throughout interview data. Many participants identified this protectionism as a response to life-long negative regulatory messages.

Many participants described how gender regulation messages have been internalized for them and manifested in their own regulation of their embodied gender expression(s). This internalization was observed in both conscious and non-conscious practices. For many, these processes of conscious and unconscious self-regulation (in response to external messages) were not mutually exclusive, and in fact, they informed one another. For example:

I have noticed that I shape my behavior in public in so many ways I don't even know where to begin. Walking through the larger world involves a constant practice of passing/not-passing, gauging, altering, responding, protecting, turning on/off, avoiding, addressing. Recently I noticed a tic I had been unconscious of. When entering a public bathroom, I recently noticed myself humming. I realized that I do that every time I enter a public women's restroom. By humming, I "out" myself as a female. People hear my women's voice. I can only imagine how many such tics I still have yet to discover in myself.

Another participant shared:

I regulate my gender to make others more comfortable...I struggle with my internalized homophobia and conditioning as a girl when I am interacting in social settings. I often try to over-please or apologize too much. I also feel that I haven't fully embraced my gender queerness because my work puts me in the public eye so much. I spend too much time, consciously and unconsciously, worrying about what other people think or their comfortability.

Several participants described understanding regulating their gender as an element of how they are actively engaged in their process and understanding of their gendered self. The interview data suggests that although self-regulation might be negative at times, it is not exclusively so. While participants felt and acknowledged normative gender expectations to be influential in their understandings of self, regulation of their own

gender identity and expression was also described as a source of personal power and agency, not solely as a response to negative messages from the outside about being gender nonconforming.

I feel like I don't want to be a walking contradiction...and that's the way I've been conflicted all of my life, because I know I was born a woman, or what we view as a woman...and I know that is the way a lot of people perceive me, but I also know that isn't necessarily how I feel, and so trying to regulate that on a daily basis and not exaggerate, to make sure I'm presenting in a way that I want to present, not exaggerating and also not subduing or hiding some parts of me. So the long and short answer is that it's exhausting and frustrating!

Other participants shared that conscious regulation of their gender presentation was in effect, to subdue others' anxieties around gender nonconformity.

I do feel kind of policed going to family events, like my sister's Bat Mitzvah. My grandmother was there and I wore an androgynous suit, and didn't wear a tie on purpose, and I felt kind of weird, and I kind of hate myself in those pictures. When I see those pictures I don't like them, and that was recent. But I'll do that because I don't want to, at something that isn't my event, draw attention to myself or upset anybody, so I just try to get as close as I can to feeling comfortable without making other people uncomfortable.

Transphobia

Multiple participants, some who self-identified as Trans and some who did not, described experiences of transphobia, and subsequently described internalizing elements of transphobia in their framework of understanding their gendered self. Broadly defined, transphobia can be understood as pervasive fear, hatred, and violence directed at people who transgress and/or challenge the hegemonic gender binary. One participant, who does self-identify one of his genders as Trans, described the meaning of transphobia as such:

In a simple way I see it as disowned parts of the self that involve fear and shame and guilt that are projected onto trans people and it's scapegoating and blaming and cause further alienation and unnecessary suffering to everyone involved.

Transphobia was understood by participants who shared experiences of this oppression as a larger societal regulatory message, based in the hegemonic binary gender system. One participant, when asked to reflect on how his transition was received in relationships as well as general society shared:

Thinking about that now, brings up so much sadness and grief for me...my framework for that is that when I came out as trans for myself for most of the time at the beginning for the first few years it was so much, so much anxiety and fear, internalized transphobia, exposure to externalized transphobia, and hyper vigilance around safety and not feeling safe in the world and having diff traumatic events happen in public that exacerbated my sense of hyper vigilance and PTSD, so much anxiety that I wasn't able to feel all of the sadness and what is underneath anxiety and now that that anxiety is so much less than it was before and I'm starting to experience that sadness in a much raw-er way... I feel like a lot of internalized transphobia has to do with shame or guilt in some way, and it's really hard for me to not feel somewhat responsible for how this is so hard...

Another participant shared their experiences and meaning making of transphobia:

If I had to name it, I've actually experienced a lot more anxiety, a lot more PTSD, as a result of trans related mental health neglect. I think that internalization is a big piece of that and how people cope with that...Dealing with the external world's perception, it's hard holding it...they're locating that fragile, unheld piece within me and they count on that for me to hold their negative messages. I feel like I feel that there's something wrong with me because everyone else has told me there's something wrong, and I know that's wrong, but I was socialized that way, and it can't be undone in a day. It's their messages of telling me that something is wrong, and what I'm dealing with is their perception of me—their denigration of the Other...the Black part of me that has been fighting the color wars from day one, and gender is a similar battle—their way of trying to make sense of me and control me is to tell me that something is wrong...

The impacts of gender regulation on the psyche

Participants' also reflected on how such internalization impacted their mental health and well being. Many participants shared that they do feel they have experienced mental health distress that they connect in some way to moving through the world as gender nonconforming. However, participants did not share that such distress stemmed

from their wanting to be gender conforming. They did not believe that their sense of being nonconforming was the cause of psychological distress but rather that such distress arose from the responses that they got from other people about their nonconformity. One participant shared their sense of this early in life:

I withdrew and became more isolated and alone, with this idea of being different...I was sad a lot, I would say probably I was depressed a lot as a kid, but I labeled it as being a loner, not necessarily that people didn't condone it (my gender)...I saw that I didn't really fit into any of these categories and it was very distressing and confusing—I'm OK with being different, but it was very hard to find any outlets and/or affirmation or confirmation that said you're not crazy, it's OK being different- not different, bad, just different- and there were no places that I got that affirmation or confirmation.

This described sense of difference felt by this participant was compounded by feeling that there were no supportive structures in place that validated her gendered experience. This felt difference, being outside and Other was repeated throughout interview data, and was central to participant's understandings of how responses to their gender nonconformity impacted their overall well being. The following participant described understanding that this felt sense of difference, compounded by regulatory messages and experiences early in life, as fundamental to understanding why she experienced psychological distress. The impact of regulation on her psychological well being was significant:

I think having such a distinct sense of difference when I was young did a lot of damage to me, or at the very least triggered some persistent depression and self-harm. I think the gender regulation that occurred early in my life impacted the way I presented myself...

The following participant shared her reflections of these messages of not fitting into prescribed boxes as a process throughout her lifetime. This participant's described process around experiencing regulation early in life continues to impact her current self-esteem as an adult.

When I cut my hair short as a kid, I faced a lot of derision. I was taunted and teased every day...I was definitely pretty distraught and distressed, and I became an outcast... More recently, the mental health stress that I've had some of the time is like a feeling of estrangement...if I'm feeling depressed or down on myself I will go to that place of feeling like I'm a freak...

The following narrative unfolds reflections on this participant's experiences of gender regulation, the felt collective impact of these experiences on this participant's psyche, as well as this participant's emotional process around understanding and holding these experiences. This participant narrative holds experiences of regulation, the emotional, internalized impact of regulatory messages and experiences, and shares a theme of growth and strength in the face of such regulation. Moreover, this narrative highlights the theme observed throughout the interview data of regulatory messages being internalized by participants as negative assaults that impose upon their overall sense of well being and increase their psychosocial distress.

While some relationships have been strained by others' discomfort with my gender, I think that what weighs more heavily on my psyche is the constant policing, regulating, sexualizing, categorizing, and violence that is done to my gendered body day in and day out, every day. I am never ever relaxed in public. My body always feels braced for an attack. I always feel mis-seen, unseen, hyper-visible...I see mothers pull their children away from me... Teenagers laugh, balk, point. Men look at me with fury in their eyes. What does it do to a body, to a psyche, to live in this way? I feel like I see more—have access to harsh truths that so many others don't see...I see this life of mine, this manifestation, as a tremendous gift. I carry with me a knowing, a wisdom, because of it. I feel like a warrior. I have had to learn how to un-armor myself. I have grown suspicious, untrusting, guarded in my time. I am angry. No, I am rageful. I have had to learn how to channel my rage...I have had to battle self-loathing, self-abuse that creeps in to affirm what our culture deems as "normal"...

This particular piece of narrative exemplifies the powerful and multifaceted impacts of binary gender regulation as experienced by participants of this study. The voice of this participant encapsulates the manifold ways in which such regulation is powerfully

shaping and meaningful with multiple affective dimensions. Furthermore, this participant's narrative illuminates the theme of participant agency and process around engaging with and deepening their understandings of their personal manifestations of gender outside and beyond the binary.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The problem is not that we don't know the gender system well enough but, that we know it all too well and can't envision any alternative... (Gender is) like glasses worn from childhood, it's like a lens through which we've always seen and can't remember how the world looked before. And this lens is strictly bifocal. (Wilchins, 2002, p.13)

This exploratory qualitative study sought to delve into the experiences of hegemonic binary gender regulation through the voices of participants who self-identified in some way with the descriptor of gender nonconforming. A specific aim of this study was to explore self-identified gender nonconforming participants' lived interactions with and experiences of the existing binary gender system within relational contexts throughout their lives. A particular emphasis of this research was on exploring the effect of living in a society that enforces the binary gender system- a socially constructed, maintained, and reproduced structure rooted in hegemony- on self-identified gender nonconforming participants. This study sought to illuminate the impact(s) of the binary gender system on self-identified gender nonconforming participants' psychological, social, and relational selves.

The researcher found three broad, yet cohesive, theme constellations as emergent from the collected interview data. Within each of these constellations surfaced two to four sub-themes that deepened the researcher's understanding and analysis of participants' lived experiences of self-identified gender nonconformity. These theme constellations are as follows: 1) the multidimensionality of participants' understandings

of themselves, specifically, how, when, and why they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way, 2) how participants experience the outside world relative to their gendered selves, and, 3) participants' feelings and thoughts about how messages (subtle, overt, intended, unintended) received from the outside world have impacted their whole selves, in other words, how these messages have been internalized by participants. This chapter discusses my synthesis and analysis of the findings of this study in the following order: 1) major findings, 2) questions and suggestions for future research 3) limitations of this study, 4) implications for clinical social work, 4) conclusion.

At the heart of this research endeavor are questions around concepts and lived experiences of power, identity, difference, and language. Exploring gender, in particular the narratives of people who self-identify in some way as gender nonconforming, feels (and is lived) like a construct that is deeply connected to these concepts. The body is a site in which these pieces of human existence become enacted, and through deconstructing and exploring gender, power, difference, identity, and language become undeniably present and influential as we move through the world. This project shares the voices of 13 people who identify as being or feeling gender nonconforming in some way, their narratives around how their gender(s) are felt, experienced, embodied, performed and done by them, and similarly, done unto them by others. Each participant's voice shared with me for this project holds its individual truths—each experience and voice is dynamic, complex, in process, growing, confirms and contradicts simultaneously. There was no singularly defined, one-dimensional, easily categorizable experience of participants' understandings of their nonconforming gender(s). Participants shared that their understandings of self as gender nonconforming are composed of multidimensional

lived experiences of the mind, body, and spirit, unique to each participant. At the same time, the voices of participants together do create a larger group narrative of feeling the gender binary as palpable and salient, interacting regularly with their nonconforming gendered selves. I will analyze and expand on themes that arose as part of this larger group narrative within this chapter; I will also share in what ways literature reviewed for this project connects to the themes within this particular project.

Major Findings

Three constellations or clusters of themes were reported in the previous chapter: the multidimensionality of participants' understandings of themselves - specifically, how, when, and why they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming in some way; how participants experience the outside world relative to their gendered selves, and; participants' feelings and thoughts about how messages (subtle, overt, intended, unintended) received from the outside world have impacted their whole selves, how these messages have been internalized by participants. Each of these constellations I envision as cyclical - moving, interacting and bumping into one another in a way that produces knowledge about this particular group of participants, located in the historical, social, and political contexts in which these interviews took place. I will share my synthesis of some of the themes reported in the Findings chapter of this paper that connect with and confirm some literature reviewed, primarily addressing the psychological and corporeal consequences of moving through the world as a gender nonconforming person.

As this research offers several new and unique themes shared by participants suggests that an existing narrative, particularly within mental health literature about gender nonconforming people, is interrupted. Participants overwhelmingly chose to give

voice to the strength, vitality and authenticity that they have found via their nonconforming gender expression. The themes that emerged with salience revolved around participants' agencies and self-determination- their acts of transgression against the binary, actively engaging with their understandings of themselves as gender nonconforming as processes rather than static conditions, and building community and relationships to affirm and confirm their gendered selves. This is not to minimize the impact of discrimination that gender nonconforming people face, and I hope that readers will hold in mind that despite this group of participants' focus on resilience, methodological factors may have favored these narratives over the many that might have spoken to the psychosocial problems that arise when the gender binary is imposed on those who located themselves outside of it.

Theoretical perspectives

Current theoretical literature in the field of gender studies suggests that people regulate each other's experiences of gender covertly and overtly, consciously and unconsciously, to maintain the existing hegemonic gender binary of male/female, either/or gender identities (Butler, 2000; Wilchins, 2004; Bornstein, 1995). The findings of this study confirm that messages of gender regulation are directed at and received by participants who identify, present, and/or are perceived as gender nonconforming. Judith Butler (2000), a predominant gender theorist, emphasizes that the binary gender system is actively enforced, policed, and regulated in subtle and overt, yet constant, ways that uphold and maintain the existing gender binary. Butler (2000) writes of "doing gender"; the findings of this study confirm that when gender is embodied outside of the restrictive binary system, messages of doing one's gender incorrectly are directed at the

nonconforming person by the outside world. The majority of participants shared that understanding themselves as gender nonconforming many times stemmed from interaction with the gender binary, in particular ways in which they were received by others and were given messages that they don't fit. These messages took a multitude of forms, many nonverbal micro-communications, many overt, some intertwined with harassment, threats and/or experiences of violence.

Lorber (2003) discusses gender as a process, like Butler (2002) a “doing,” and the binary system of gender as part of a deliberate and purposeful stratified power structure that attempts to regulate that process. Understanding one's lived gender experience(s) as a process, a dynamic, transformative, and consistently present element of self, was a piece of participants' collective narratives that is critical to this discussion. As participants shared the ways in which they understand themselves to be gender nonconforming, I observed a heightened understanding of their gendered self in relation to others. Even in the narratives of participants who described an internal knowing, a deep and many times early feeling of their gendered selves as existing beyond the binary gender system, an element of deepening this understanding of self in relation to others was present.

Mitchell (1988) writes:

Embeddedness is endemic to human experience. I become the person I am in interaction with specific others. The way I feel it necessary to be with them is the person I take myself to be. That self-organization becomes my nature (as cited in Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan, and Hertz, 2008, p. 206).

These words speak to the relational matrix in which we all exist, create meaning, and produce knowledge about ourselves and others. Understanding ourselves as gendered

beings is certainly part of this relational matrix, and for the participants of this study, a complex interaction between the self and others develops an awareness of not conforming to binary gender expectations. The relational contexts that emerged from interview data, in which participants' experienced and/or felt gender regulation were instrumental in their meaning-making process around their gendered selves, did include relationships with important others. However, a major theme that came forth throughout participants' narratives around gender regulation, were their felt, lived, and perceived relationships and interactions with society at-large; many negative experiences of gender regulation reported by participants were directed at them by individual people or groups of people with whom they did not have a relationship.

Participants described experiencing many instances of negative binary gender regulation while moving through the world - traveling, walking down the street, being in stores, at work, in school - interacting with people who as one participant described, are always looking for "a clue into some 'truth' of me". Throughout the interviews I experienced a message from participants around feeling a gendered dance of invisibility and hyper-visibility, moving through the world doing, and being read as doing, gender in a nonconforming way. A sense of not being seen or understood that was present in participants' gender nonconforming element(s) of self was coupled with being over-seen by the world as gender nonconforming - read and interacted with as an other, through subtle and overt regulatory messages - especially in public spaces in which dichotomous gender separation is built into physical space, as in the case of public restrooms.

Connections to empirical research

Lombardi, et al. (2001) write, “Gender based violence and discrimination acts to maintain conformity to the traditional gender system, and many people may experience a small aspect of it whenever they transgress certain gender norms” (p. 100). Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz (2006) echoes this analysis of gender-based violence and discrimination reported by participants in their study who transgress hegemonic gender norms. The interview data of the present study shared this element of these authors’ findings. Participants, as a whole, shared experiences of their gendered selves being received negatively, at discrete points in their lives or consistently throughout. These messages took different shapes and were directed at participants from many sources, anywhere from parents to strangers, but the meaning making of the messages were consistently reported by participants as powerful and memorable.

Several participants shared too that while they could recall a handful of memories and experiences of gender regulation consciously, they recognized that they take in messages of regulation every day as they move through the world, that many of them are subconscious or not consciously acknowledged because of their constant, inescapable presence; in the words of one participant, “I think that what weighs more heavily on my psyche is the constant policing, regulating, sexualizing, categorizing, and violence that is done to my gendered body day in and day out, every day.”

This project’s findings confirm a part of D’Augelli, Grossman, and Starks’ (2006) research in which they found that gender atypical or nonconforming youth experience higher rates of mental health issues, which many times correlate with symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress. While these authors studied the mental

health impact on gender nonconforming youth who described negative messages received from parents, peers, and school environments, my findings show that participants' feelings of stigma, which they attributed to impacting their mental health, come more prevalently from general society than from important individuals in their lives. Participants shared that overall, these messages did have some impact on their mental health. Some participants identified specific emotional responses to individual messages, as well as the emotional impact of experiencing collective societal messages. Also, while participants did share that negative binary gender regulation occurred for many of them in childhood and adolescence, the majority of participants shared that such othering persists and is very present in their adult lives. These experiences were more dominant in participants' narratives and seemed to hold a greater level of meaning and saliency in their consciousness.

Notably, while participants shared experiences of criticism, othering, labeling, discrimination, and victimization, only a few named these experiences as traumatic. When describing the influence of such regulation, the majority of participants described it as having a lasting impact on how they understand themselves, and that these experiences have shaped how they understand relationships and how they move through the world. To clarify this finding, I did not specifically prompt participants to qualify whether their regulatory experiences were traumatic; instead, I asked them to describe how they felt these experiences were impactful. Based on my experience of the interviews, I believe that while only a few participants described their experiences of gender regulation as traumatic, many more may have done so if I had asked specifically about trauma. Participants' focus on survival suggests growth and development of skills, such as

building community and affirming relationships, to make meaning of and live through gender regulatory experiences. Considering this, it may be important to keep in mind that a stress response is not the only outcome of exposure to trauma or conflict.

Grossman et al. (2005) discuss coping mechanisms developed by gender nonconforming youth who have experienced parental rejection and interpersonal victimization that have long-term mental health consequences, such as feelings of low self-esteem, lack of trust, depression, and anxiety. Some of these emotional coping mechanisms were confirmed in the present study, though findings diverged in some ways, mainly in that participants did not attribute them solely to parental relationships. In fact, the majority of participants shared that they felt “lucky”, “blessed”, or “fortunate” that their parents have been generally supportive of their gender nonconforming element(s) of self. The researcher finds this to be a unique theme within the interview data, because while this group of participants did not report violence or abuse directed at their gender nonconforming element(s) of self by parents, especially in their childhoods or adolescence, there was a collective recognition in their statements of feeling “lucky”, “blessed”, or “fortunate” that other gender nonconforming people have been victimized by parents for transgressing the binary. While most participants did not share that their parents were abusive or overtly rejecting of their nonconforming gender expression, participants did express that gender nonconformity was something that parents didn’t necessarily embrace fully. Participants shared a range of emotions that seem to have resulted in part from parents’ ambivalent reactions to their gender nonconformity and also from explicit gender regulation messages from parents.

Most participants, however, described feelings of shame, lack of trust, depression, anger, pain, frustration, fear, guilt, and anxiety as complex reactions to the ways in which they feel received, and subsequently regulated, as gender nonconforming people by general society, and did not necessarily identify these feelings as stemming from relationships with important others. Several participants shared that they believed such feelings did stem from early parental rejection and regulation of their nonconforming gender expression, and that these interactions shape how they perceive the rest of the world receiving their gendered self.

The feelings of shame, humiliation, and fear are not the result of personal failing. Nor are they the inadvertent side effects of a benign system of gender norms. Such feelings are the gender system at work: enjoining us in policing ourselves, reminding us of our place, shaming us into submission, and making our gender appear natural, seamless, and voluntary (Nestle, Howell, & Wilchins, 2002, p.14).

Not only did participants not identify many instances of direct regulation from important people in their lives, many of them also emphasized the presence of confirming and affirming relationships in their lives to an extent that I did not expect. I found that participants were expressive, insightful, and generally glad to share with me the relationships in their lives that do feel holding of their gender nonconforming element of self. Interestingly, I felt a push from participants to bring more focus to these affirming and confirming relationships throughout the interviews. The existing empirical literature that was reviewed for this study focused, as much clinical work does, on the problems experienced by gender nonconforming people. Even while several studies did explore that relational victimization and trauma were the primary cause of participants' mental health distress, there still seemed to be a focus on what was wrong with the individuals within the sample; a narrative of gender nonconforming people being broken or wounded

was perpetuated, without recognizing their strengths and ability to survive through relational trauma. While I wanted to explore participants' supportive relationships, I underestimated the push that I felt from them to identify these supportive relationships as large and powerful elements of their experiences. The message felt from this push toward talking about positive relationships within the interview data seemed to be a way for participants to honor their ways of survival and empowerment, one of them being affirming, holding relationships.

Developing, maintaining, actively seeking out community and relationships to confirm and affirm their gender nonconforming element(s) of self became emergent as protective factors and defenses against the obtrusive, invasive gender binary, or rather, the ways in which the gender binary is actively regulated and enforced in participants' lives. In the words of one participant: "I have had to use sheer will to seek out the spaces my community has carved out to hold us. I use those spaces as balm." Validating participants' many experiences of binary gender oppression by sharing such experiences can be balanced by sharing the ways participants have found ways to successfully survive outside of the binary. Likewise, finding ways to survive through experiences of regulation and harassment based solely on participants' gender nonconforming element(s) of self are powerfully meaningful.

The gendered self in process

Prominent among participants' narratives was a sense that they experience gender as a process - an ongoing, experiential, negotiated, fluid aspect of the self. I heard from participants a feeling of engaging with gender(s), this understanding of self as gender nonconforming as ongoing, experiential, emotional, and physical processes. This

understanding and acknowledgement of the body as a container for gender as fluid and dynamic processes, and for several participants as a conduit for transformation and growth, brought a critical lens onto the restrictive and marginalizing gender binary system. The dominant narrative around gender as made up of concrete, oppositional categories is challenged by these participant experiences - through these narratives the cultural fiction of gender as binary becomes interrupted and deconstructed.

Participants understood their gender(s) as active, subjective experiences. Shifting our understanding of gender from a compulsory fixed, static binary to dynamic and active processes, gives voice to an empowering framework from which to approach and participate in the world. We transition from objects to subjects, nouns to verbs. In approaching life from a process-oriented, accretive framework, the self becomes an active/interactive verb, being and becoming at all times. In deconstructing the restrictive binary gender system, and living this experience, the mind and the body interact within a reciprocal relationship, rather than as two separate entities or essences.

These experiences and understandings of participants' genders represent an element of actively constructing, actively engaging with self-agency, and self-identifying as gender nonconforming is a major element within such self-agency. For example, if a person "fits" into the binary gender system, if they do not understand themselves as transgressing the binary and are not transgressed upon by others in order to maintain the binary, then a curiosity and engagement with one's gender very well may not be present. If, however, a person identifies oneself as moving through or beyond the binary gender system, then one cannot take a hegemonic binary gender system for granted. There becomes a certain "work" that must be done in order to move against and exist outside

the limitations of the binary, especially when constantly confronted with regulatory messages.

Participants shared that there is an active process of understanding this piece of self, and subsequently a development and maintenance of gender nonconforming affirmation and confirmation support structures that sustain locating oneself outside of the limitations of the gender binary. Building these support structures, actively working to affirm and confirm their nonconforming element(s) of self because the gender binary inherently denies these things, was very present throughout participants' interviews.

Questions & suggestions for future research

I have several suggestions for further research on this topic. One theme that came up in many interviews was participants' focus on the intersection of their gender nonconforming understanding(s) of self with their other social identities, particularly in regard to racial identity(s), socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Research on this topic could be greatly deepened with attention called to the intersectionality of identities of gender nonconforming people. Exploring intersectionality within this population may lead to a more complex and dynamic understanding of gender regulation and participants' understanding(s) of themselves as gender nonconforming. No identity can be constructed without the interplay of others, and due to the scope of this project, exploring the intersecting identities and the meaning of these intersections for participants could not take place. Furthermore, exploring intersectionality of identity could lead to deeper insights and findings about the power structures inherent within the binary gender system, therefore leading to a better understanding of why the binary gender system gets reproduced, regulated, and maintained. Incorporating intersectionality into future

research on this topic may also create more space to honor participants' complex realities that are significantly shaping in understanding their self-identified gender nonconforming element(s) of self.

Generally, the topic of this study is not one that has been explored at great length, particularly through a qualitative research methodology within the field of social work. Continuing to explore this topic, especially in terms of working to understand how to improve clinical practice with people who self-identify as gender nonconforming would be beneficial to the field as a whole. Moreover, further research in this area could broaden clinical social work's understanding of gender, particularly while using a postmodern lens to analyze data and shape therapeutic practice. Also, integrating years of pivotal work from the fields of gender studies, queer theory, and feminist theory would further deepen future qualitative explorations into this subject.

Further research in this area may be deepened through narrative data from a clinical sample of self-identified gender nonconforming people. This study's sample was nonclinical, and it is likely that if a clinical sample of this population were to share their experiences of binary gender regulation, more connections to psychosocial problems and trauma may be present. Incorporating the impacts of binary gender regulation in psychosocial assessments of clients who self-identify as gender nonconforming is important; working to understand how the environmental, social, and relational experiences of regulation contribute to presenting clinical symptoms is integral to social workers' assessments of self-identified gender nonconforming clients.

Limitations

Throughout the scope of this project several significant limitations of this research have been observed and experienced. A major limitation to this study is that its participant sample was not well representative of the voices and experiences of people of color who self-identify as gender nonconforming, as the majority of participants, nine out of thirteen, identified their racial identity as white. Another major limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in participants' education levels and socioeconomic statuses of their families of origins. It is also a consideration that this study's sample was non-clinical, that the people with whom this project was conducted were not recruited into this study through a clinical setting. If a clinical sample had been utilized for this study, more links between mental health distress and gender conformity/nonconformity may have been present.

When exploring and writing about gender, in particular the binary gender system, language must be considered as a potential limitation, in which escaping binary expressions becomes challenging. Even in working to identify a group of people who find and experience their gender(s) as transgressing and subverting the gender binary, language has the power to limit, exclude, and reduce such experiences, to impose a group label of nonconformity that reifies a notion of either/or dichotomous thinking. The lack of analysis around social and institutional power systems such as heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990) as inherent elements of the maintaining and reproducing the binary gender system, the author considers to be a limitation in this study. Due to the scope and time limitations of this project, these limitations were not able to be resolved.

Implications for practice

The potential implications of this study's findings on the field of clinical social work are significant. The research project's findings will contribute to growing knowledge of practice considerations for clinical social work with gender nonconforming people, and will also add a new analytic dimension to the body of literature that currently exists on this topic. Furthermore, it is the hope of this researcher that the presentation of this project's findings will bring gender further into social work's framework of analysis an emphasis on the social construction and maintenance of the binary gender system that is assumed to be "normative" and a fixed, biological "truth". This project's findings affirm that binary gender regulation is not just a theoretical concept, but is rather a set of lived, meaning-filled experiences that exist in order to uphold the binary gender system.

This research is particularly pertinent to increasing knowledge about how the limitations of the normative binary gender system impact people with whom we work who do not locate themselves within this gendered binary. Upholding the significance of environmental, social, and relational contexts in understanding the challenges experienced by gender nonconforming clients is essential to more deeply understand the psychological impact of a socially constructed and regulated binary gender system. Specifically, in order to better meet the needs of gender nonconforming clients, clinicians must recognize the profound impact of a gender nonconforming person's environment, one that is not affirming or accepting of expressions outside of the gender binary, on the issues being presented by the person. It is necessary to broaden and deepen clinicians' understandings of the binary gender system and the relationally based reproduction and maintenance of this system as a potential risk factor for gender nonconforming people.

Moreover, this study may also bring attention to how social workers, as important others in the lives of some gender nonconforming people, may inadvertently regulate gender nonconforming peoples' gender expression or identity, and potentially contribute to the psychological distress experienced by these people.

A primary reason I chose to explore the impact of the binary gender system on gender nonconforming people for this project was to help guide the study's readers into a deeper engagement and process with their embodied gender(s) as well as to strengthen their analysis and exploration around gender in their lives. By this I mean that by bringing focus onto the regulation that gender nonconforming people experience relationally, readers might consider that they too exist within the gender binary system. Gender, whether one self-identifies as gender nonconforming or not, is inescapable as a powerful social structure, and gender regulation occurs within the relational matrix that connects all people. Everyone is located, makes meaning, and exists within this system. How then can people who do not identify as gender nonconforming, especially those clinicians with whom self-identified gender nonconforming people might work, unpack and expand their understandings of gender, in particular the binary gender system, in their own lives, in the lives of their clients, and as present in therapeutic space? It is a hope of mine that this study will spur clinicians to engage with and deepen their curiosity about gender as a social construct that is embodied, reproduced, maintained, and regulated as a binary system. This system is a powerful, shaping element of day-to-day life, and the impacts of regulatory messages in the lives of self-identified gender nonconforming people are deeply present and meaningful; social workers who are

committed to social justice have responsibility in challenging and interrupting this binary system.

The findings of this study also bring into the discussion problematic diagnoses in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2000) that are based upon hegemonic notions of the binary gender system, such as Gender Identity Disorder. This diagnosis assumes a fixed, static, dualistic gender structure and does not allow for a matrix of gender expressions, experiences, and identities in this limiting framework. This research recognizes and draws attention to the multiplicities of gendered experiences, positions, and identities of participants that challenge the binary gender system. This work calls for destabilizing the gender binary, to question a diagnosis that reinforces this system, and to uphold the rights of self-identified gender nonconforming people to self-determinism and a full range of desired gender expression. Moreover, this work names the gender binary and a society intolerant of gender diversity, and the inherent regulation that occurs therein, as pathological and damaging, rather than gender nonconformity itself.

Further implications for clinical social work from this study's findings include practice considerations as well as suggestions for clinical social work pedagogy. In order to further develop clinical social work's framework of understanding in regard to the experiences of binary gender regulation among self-identified gender nonconforming people, social work pedagogy must include a deep and critical analysis into the binary gender system, asking questions like: Who does the binary gender system serve? Who defines the binary? How is it enforced and maintained? How is the gender binary historically, culturally, and politically located? (McPhail, 2004) Including more

postmodern and queer theories in social work pedagogies to question identity binaries may also facilitate deeper growth for developing clinicians in exploring and processing their own gender(s) and where they are situated in the relational structure of binary gender regulation.

Implications of this work for clinical practice lead the researcher to consider the use of narrative therapy approaches to challenge the dominant narratives that gender nonconforming people may experience of feeling stigmatized and shamed. Naming the gender binary in clinical work with nonconforming clients may begin a process of interrupting such negative elements of narratives that are internalized through regulatory and rejecting messages. Working alongside self-identified gender nonconforming clients to strengthen their own narratives, to journey with clients to give voice and language to their lived experiences, especially around binary gender regulation, seems paramount to developing a supportive and validating therapeutic relationship. This study identifies focusing clinical work on supporting a nonconforming client in holding and processing the stresses and traumatic impact of living in an intolerant society as necessary for an affirming and validating therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, in upholding a social work commitment to social justice around binary gender oppression, social action is needed to contribute to larger social change and challenging of the gender binary.

Further recommendations for practice indicated by the findings of this study inform the researcher that a focus on supportive relationships in gender nonconforming clients' lives might be just as important as creating space to talk about the negative impacts of regulation. Participants of this study emphasized that supportive relationships were integral to surviving and externalizing binary gender regulation, that these

relationships provided structure to feel affirmed in their gender nonconforming elements of self. In clinical work, without minimizing gender-based othering and regulatory assaults, strengthening gender nonconforming people's narratives around supportive relationships should be attended to. Moreover, clinicians are recommended to hold a heightened awareness of the importance of actively building support around clients' gender nonconforming elements of self. Working in partnership with clients to build such support could be actualized in the clinical relationship in the following ways: 1) provide a validating and affirming relational structure from which clients may strengthen existing supportive relationships and community, and 2) provide resources and referrals for clients, in which such support and community around gender nonconformity is present.

Conclusion

Giving voice to the narratives of this study's participants is critical for social workers to begin confronting the binary gender system in their commitments to social justice. Participants' narratives offer insight into the active and lived presence of the binary gender system through regulatory messages and the power of these messages on participants' meaning making of their gendered selves. Their voices bring into social work discourse the fact that we are all entwined in the relational matrix in which the binary gender system is a powerful element. In fact, the regulation of gender expression, identities, and behaviors is what produces and maintains the binary gender system. This study highlights the relational nature in which hegemonic gender expectations are produced, that we all exist within this binary, and that we all have the potential to challenge, question, and interrupt the power of this system. Riki Wilchins (2002) writes:

If gender is a doing and a reading of that doing, a call-and-response that must be continually done and redone, then it's also unstable, and there are ways I can disrupt it. Maybe universal and binary genders are not so inevitable after all (as cited in Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins, 2002, p.24).

More deeply engaging with and feeling one's own experiences of gender will help bring social workers closer to understanding that in some way each of us most likely rubs up against hegemonic gender norms, even if this is not a daily experience. This questioning and engagement is crucial for a vision of liberation to be actualized, to transform society and fight binary gender-based injustice and oppression.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Letter

January 4, 2010

Dear Research Participant:

My name is Ellen Daly. I am conducting a study about the experiences of people, ages 18 and older, who have felt that either currently or at some time in their life, their gender expression did not fit easily into “normative” gender categories, she/he, woman/man, masculine/feminine, or who identify their gender as nonconforming. Specifically, I am interested in hearing about experiences you may have had of feeling encouraged or pushed to fit into this either/or gender system by important people in your life, or through significant relationships in your life such as those with parents, siblings, family members, teachers, and peers. I am also interested in collecting experiences from you about significant people in your life who have been affirming of your feelings or presentation of your gender not neatly fitting into a male/female, either/or binary. People in this study will be asked to take part in an audio recorded, 1 to 1.5 hour, in-person or phone interview with me to talk about these experiences and the emotional meanings those experiences have for you in your understanding of yourself. I will be asking questions of you that include sharing memories from early life and familial experiences as well as questions about your life currently. This study is being conducted as a thesis for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work. In addition, the data collected here may later be used for presentations at professional meetings, or publications in scholarly journals.

The risk of participating in this study may be that some of the interview could elicit upsetting or evocative memories, thoughts, or feelings. A list of psychotherapy resources and community support referrals with sliding scale fees that are affirming of gender nonconformity and gender diversity will be provided if you experience psychological distress of any kind as a result of your participation in this study.

There are several benefits to participating in this study. Becoming a participant in this study provides an opportunity to offer your voice as a gender nonconforming person in creating a greater understanding of how gender regulation occurs in gender nonconforming peoples’ significant relationships. You have an opportunity to contribute to an area of research that very much needs the voices of gender nonconforming people and their understandings of gendered experiences within their important relationships as these voices are strikingly absent from empirical research literature. Therefore, you have a unique opportunity to contribute your experiences to a field of research that very much needs the voices of the people that it is attempting to understand. The experiences you share have potential implications for social, cultural, and clinical changes for more affirming support of people who feel that they have been encouraged or forced in some

way to conform to the existing gender binary or who identify as gender nonconforming in some way. Unfortunately, I am not able to offer you payment for your participation.

Participation through phone or in-person interviews will be confidential. In-person interviews will be conducted in public spaces such as private study rooms at local public libraries in the Bay Area or private counseling rooms at New Leaf: Services for Our Community in San Francisco. I will label all audiotapes and interview notes collected during our interview session with a numerical code instead of your full name to protect your confidentiality. After information has been labeled with a numerical code, my research advisor, Elizabeth Kita LCSW, will have access to the data collected. I will lock consent forms, audiotapes, and interview notes in a secure location during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. Any material collected digitally will be stored on a USB Drive and will be locked in a secure location during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. After such time, I will either maintain the material in its secure location or destroy it. In the written thesis, I will not use identifying information to describe any individuals. When brief illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, potentially identifying data will be carefully disguised to protect your confidentiality. This study will be presented as a whole and/or in parts for future publications and dissemination of the findings.

Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question(s) at any time. If you have participated in a phone or in-person interview, you may withdraw from the study at any time until the date of March 1, 2010 when I will begin writing the Results and Discussion sections of my thesis. If you wish to withdraw you may email me at sw.gender.research@gmail.com or phone me at (415) 626-7000 x446. At that point, all materials pertaining to you in any way will be effectively destroyed within 24 hours of your notification. Should you have concerns about your rights or about any aspect of this study, you are encouraged to contact me, using the contact information listed above, or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of the Participant

Date

Signature of the Researcher

Date

Again, if you have any questions about this study, participation, your rights as a participant, or the consent form, please feel free to contact me at sw.gender.research@gmail.com or at (415) 626-7000 x446.

Thank you very much for your time and energy in collaborating with me for the completion of this study. I greatly look forward to having you as a participant and co-creating a meaningful narrative.

Sincerely,

Ellen C. Daly

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Please describe how you identify your gender(s), racial and ethnic identity(s), your socioeconomic/class understanding of your family of origin and yourself currently, your sexual orientation(s) or sexuality(s), the religious or spiritual practice(s)/ affiliation(s) of your family of origin, and your current level of education.

How do you understand yourself to be gender nonconforming? In what ways do you see yourself as gender nonconforming?

When in your life do you feel that you understood yourself to be gender nonconforming? How do you feel you came to have this understanding of your gender? Can you please reflect on how this understanding affected you?

How do you feel your gender identity has been received and reflected back to you in your life? Can you tell me about some of your most memorable moments, both positive and negative, of feeling this? Can you reflect on those experiences affected you?

In what ways do you feel you received or receive messages, verbal or nonverbal, specifically from caregivers, family, teachers, peers, and important others that your gender does not “fit” into “normative” gender expectations? Can you reflect on how these messages affect you?

Do you feel that you have had relationships in your life that were/are affirming of your gender nonconforming identity? What was it like for you when an important other in your life did not expect you to fit into one gender category?

If you feel that you were gender nonconforming in your childhood, were you directed to a professional helper of some kind (therapist, counselor, clergy member) when your caregiver identified you gender nonconforming? What about your gender presentation do you feel your caregiver identified as problematic? Can you tell me about this experience and how you feel it affected you?

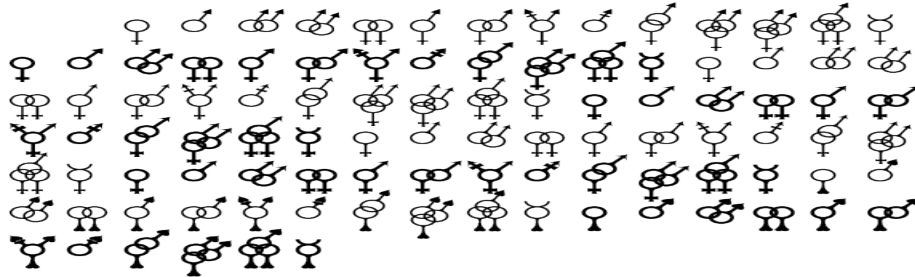
In what ways do you feel that being pushed or encouraged or regulated in your gender have impacted the way you behave, or are in your consciousness, on a regular basis?

Some existing research shows that children and youth who are gender nonconforming experience more mental health challenges than their gender conforming peers because of rejection and negative judgment from parents and peers. Do you feel that you have experienced mental health distress due to your gender nonconforming identity? Can you reflect on how your experiences of having your gender regulated in important relationships may connect to any mental health distress that you experienced later in life? If not, how do you feel these experiences have affected your psychological well-being?

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

Have or do you ever feel like you don't fit into one gender box or the other?



Are There Really Only Two Choices?!

If you are 18 and older and feel that you:

- 1) Identify as gender nonconforming (Gender Queer, etc.) in some way, either now or at some time in your life
- 2) Have felt pushed or encouraged to not be gender nonconforming by important people in your life (parents, family, teachers, significant others)
- 3) Possibly, have felt affirmed or supported in being gender nonconforming by important people in your life (parents, family, teachers, significant others)

...Then I would like to talk with you!

Interested in Participating?

Please contact the researcher through the contact info listed below. Participants should expect to spend 1- 1.5 hours completing an in-person or phone interview with the researcher. All efforts will be made to ensure confidentiality for all information disclosed while participating in this research.

To Learn More About Participation Please Contact:

Ellen Daly
Second Year Masters Student, Smith College School for Social Work
(415) 626-7000 x446
sw.gender.research@gmail.com
1390 Market Street, Suite 800
San Francisco, CA 94102

Appendix D

Referral Sources in the San Francisco Bay Area

The Center: San Francisco LGBT Community Center

1800 Market Street
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 865-5664
center@sfccenter.org

Gaylesta, Psychotherapy Referral Services Website

www.gaylesta.org
contact@gaylesta.org
(888) 869-4993, Therapist Referral Service

New Leaf: Services for Our Community

103 Hayes Street (near Market St.)
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 626-7000
intake@newleafservices.org

The Pacific Center

2712 Telegraph Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94705
(510) 548-8283
info@pacificcenter.org
Drop-In Hours: Monday through Friday,
4pm to 8pm

Lyon-Martin Health Services

1748 Market Street, Suite 201
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 565-7667
info@lyon-martin.org

Trans:Thrive

815 Hyde St., 2nd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94109
(415) 409-4101
www.trans thrive.org

Dimensions Clinic

Castro-Mission Health Center
3850 17th Street
San Francisco, CA 94114
(415) 934-7789
www.dimensionsclinic.org
dimensions.clinic@gmail.com

Appendix E

National Referral Sources

The National GLBT Help Center Hotline

Toll-free: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

Hours:

Monday thru Friday, 1pm to 9pm, Pacific Time

Saturday, 9am to 2pm, Pacific Time

Monday thru Friday, 4pm to midnight, Eastern Time

Saturday, Noon to 5pm, Eastern Time

All services are free and confidential.

Affirmations: The Community Center for LGBT People and Their Allies

Toll-free Helpline, 1-800-398-GAY

Tuesday-Saturday, 4pm to 9pm

All services are free and confidential.

Gay & Transgender Hate Crime Hotline

1-800-616-HATE

All services are free and confidential.

World Professional Association For Transgender Health

1300 S. Second Street, #180

Minneapolis, MN 55454

(612) 624-9397

wpath@wpath.org

Gender Education and Advocacy

www.gender.org

Transgender Law and Policy Institute

info@transgenderlaw.org

Appendix F

Human Subjects Approval Letter



SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

January 29, 2010

Ellen Daly

Dear Ellen,

Your amended materials have been reviewed and they are fine. You did a wonderful job gathering the national resources. We are glad to know about those. We are happy to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your very interesting project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ann Hartman DSW".

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Beth Kita, Research Advisor