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The Development of Transgender Studies in Sociology

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Abstract

The field of transgender studies has grown exponentially in sociology over the last decade. In this review, we track the development of this field through a critical overview of the sociological scholarship from the last 50 years. We identify two major paradigms that have characterized this research: a focus on gender deviance (1960s–1990s) and a focus on gender difference (1990s–present). We then examine three major areas of study that represent the current state of the field: research that explores the diversity of transgender people’s identities and social locations, research that examines transgender people’s experiences within institutional and organizational contexts, and research that presents quantitative approaches to transgender people’s identities and experiences. We conclude with an agenda for future areas of inquiry.



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INTRODUCTION

Within the sociology of gender and sexualities, feminist and queer scholars have initiated influential critiques of the ways in which dominant paradigms in the discipline center the experiences of men and heterosexuals as a norm by which to evaluate the significance and meaning of the lives of women and LGBTQ people (Gamson & Moon 2004, Seidman 1996, Smith 1987). Such critiques have effected an epistemological shift that calls into question “the orienting assumptions and conceptual frameworks” (Stacey & Thorne 1985, p. 302) underlying many of the theoretical models and data collection strategies commonly used by sociologists. In this review, we argue that a similar shift is under way around sociological approaches to the lives of transgender people. We track this transformative shift through a critical overview of sociological scholarship in this area, ranging from the publication of Harold Garfinkel’s case study of Agnes (Garfinkel 1967)—widely understood to be the first sociological analysis of a transitioning person (Connell 2009)—to the rapidly expanding area of the sociology of transgender studies in the mid-2010s.

We delineate two major paradigms that have characterized sociological writing about transgender people: a focus on gender deviance and a focus on gender difference. The central concern of the gender deviance paradigm, most prominent in the 1970s through the 1990s, was how to account for the emergence of “the transsexual” as both a medical diagnosis and a collective group identity. In this body of work, researchers and theorists took up transgender people as the *objects* of study, and positioned them as textbook exemplars of now-canonical sociological concepts, such as “passing” (Garfinkel 1967) and “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987). By contrast, the gender difference paradigm, emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s, centered transgender people as the *subjects* of study (Devor 1997, Namaste 2000, Rubin 2003, Vidal-Ortiz 2002). This paradigm positioned transgender people’s lives as sociologically important in their own right, and prioritized qualitative data collection strategies that could more fully capture the diversity of transgender people’s lived experience across institutional and interactional contexts.

In the last decade, the critical body of scholarship in the gender difference paradigm has developed into a vibrant field of transgender studies in sociology. We examine three major areas of study that represent the current state of the field: research that explores the diversity of transgender people’s identities and social locations, research that interrogates transgender people’s experiences within institutional and organizational contexts, and research that presents quantitative approaches to transgender people’s identities and experiences. We conclude with a discussion of how sociologists might use insights from transgender studies to construct a critical sociology of cisgender, or nontransgender, identities and practices. To fit our analysis within the space confines of a review article, we limit our scope almost exclusively to US-focused scholarship undertaken by sociologists. This decision means that we omit much of the interdisciplinary scholarship in transgender studies (for an overview, see Hines & Sanger 2010, Stryker & Aizura 2013, Stryker & Whittle 2006) and the growing body of research on transgender subjectivities in other national contexts (see, for example, David 2015, Najmabadi 2014, Parreñas 2011). In acknowledging that this review covers only a segment of all sociological research in the area, we intend to provide a starting point for future reviews.

To present a robust picture of the state of the field in US sociology, we include unpublished research in our discussion. Whereas we saw an increase in sociological conference presentations, theses, and dissertations on transgender issues in the 2000s, we found fewer published books and articles resulting from these works than we anticipated. From surveying the published research, we also found that transgender scholarship is rarely published in the general sociology journals with the highest impact factors (see Pfeffer 2014 for a notable exception). The gap between conducted and published research that we identify suggests that transgender scholarship, much like critical

sexualities research in sociology (Irvine 2014), faces disciplinary barriers in the publication process. The prevalence of published research in gender- and sexualities-focused journals further suggests that editors and reviewers of general journals may view the experiences of transgender people as too particular to be of interest to the broader discipline. Our claim here is that transgender studies in sociology is not merely a “special interest” issue but rather an emerging field that will continue to exert significant influence on empirical and theoretical research in proximate fields such as sex and gender, sexualities, and body and embodiment. Furthermore, the questions of identity, institutional and interpersonal inequality, and social location raised by transgender studies should be of broad interest to all sociological researchers, as should the experiences and perspectives of transgender, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary scholars working across many areas of the discipline.

To familiarize readers with the vocabulary commonly used in the transgender studies literature, we define a few key terms. It is important to keep in mind that the meanings of these terms shift over time, in keeping with dynamics of social change common to all terminology (Sumerau et al. 2016). The term gender binary refers to the use of two categories, male and female, to classify sex and gender in social and academic contexts (Sumerau et al. 2016). Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to people whose gender identity does not necessarily correspond to the sex category to which they were assigned at birth, whereas the term cisgender refers to people who feel that their gender identity aligns with the sex category to which they were assigned at birth (Serano 2013). Trans and cis often are used as shorthand adjectives. Gender nonconforming and nonbinary describe various modalities of gender identity that do not strictly correspond to transgender or cisgender categories (Fenway Health 2010). Transsexual is an antiquated term originating in early sexology literature to distinguish full-time transgender identity from cross-dressing (Meyerowitz 2002). This term has fallen out of use in the last two decades in favor of transgender due to its associations with surgical change, which does not reflect many transgender people’s experiences (Fenway Health 2010).

MAPPING SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO TRANSGENDER LIVES: TWO PARADIGMS

Prior to the 1970s, the bulk of empirical research about the lives of transgender people appeared in the pages of medical and psychiatric journals (Bryant 2006, Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker 2008, Vidal-Ortiz 2008). Such studies typically took the form of individual psychiatric histories and demographic analyses of patients who had undergone what was then termed “sex reassignment surgery.” As transgender people began to organize in support groups and activist movements and more autobiographical accounts about the transition experience became publicly available (Stone 1991, Stryker 2008), sociologists and critical social theorists began to take up the diagnosis of “transsexualism” and the medicalized process of gender transitions (and, in particular, genital surgery) as objects of study. The books and articles that make up this first wave of sociological research, most prominent in the 1970s through the mid-1990s, emerged from social constructionist critiques of medical knowledge, feminist theory, deviance studies, and ethnomethodological approaches to gender. What unifies this diverse body of research is a shared understanding of people who seek or undergo medicalized gender transitions as theoretically useful exemplars of gender deviance that illuminate the “normal” social construction of gender more broadly and an absence of attention to transgender people’s subjective experiences (for a detailed overview of this paradigm, see Ekins & King 1996, Hird 2002, Namaste 2000, Vidal-Ortiz 2008).

One body of scholarship in this gender deviance paradigm interrogates the increasing visibility in the 1970s of “the transsexual” as an identity group and the cultural significance of medicalized

gender transitions. Janice Raymond, a professor of women's studies and medical ethics, is a central figure in this line of argument. Drawing on an analysis of medical literature and short interviews with transgender people, Raymond (1979) posits that a patriarchal and capitalistic medical establishment invented transsexuality and surgical possibilities for gender transitions to create new medical markets and to normalize homosexual and gender nonconforming people (for an early sociological critique of this argument, see King 1987). Although Raymond is not a sociologist, her book, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Raymond 1979), was the first major "left-wing" critique of transsexuality and, as such, influenced the sociological framing of transgender people by New Left and feminist sociologists. In their ethnographic study of doctors who evaluated candidates seeking access to genital surgery, Dwight Billings and Thomas Urban echo Raymond's critique, arguing that "the legitimation, rationalization, and commodification of sex-change operations have produced an identity category—transsexual—for a diverse group of sexual deviants and victims of severe gender role distress" (Billings & Urban 1982, p. 266). Demonstrating the longevity of this frame, prominent feminist social psychologist Sandra Bem advocates a similar position in 1993: "Transsexualism would be much better conceptualized as a social pathology than as an individual pathology . . . as the underside of the same process of gender polarization that also produces highly conventional males and females" (Bem 1993, p. 11).

In this theoretical framework, individuals who seek out genital surgery and hormone treatments are "impressionable and susceptible people" (Sagarin 1978, p. 252) who become overly invested in the medical establishment's offerings of high-price commodities (e.g., genitals) that will inevitably fail to transform their lives. In an argument that was widely reproduced in anthologies of feminist sociology in the 1980s, sociologist Margrit Eichler offers a strong critique of the medicalized aspects of gender transitions: "From a strictly physiological viewpoint, we must designate sex change operations as bodily mutilation—the willful destruction of physically healthy portions of the body for purely social reasons" (Eichler 1980, p. 87). For these authors, the medical legitimization of genital surgeries created what they saw as a dangerous cultural illusion—the idea that biological sex was mutable. Highlighting this perspective, Raymond (1979, p. 11) argues:

Can we call a person transsexed, biologically speaking, whose anatomical structure and hormonal balance have changed but who is still genetically XX or XY? If we don't recognize chromosomal sex as determinative . . . what are we really talking about when we say female or male?

To emphasize the essential nature of biology, Raymond adopts the terms "female-to-constructed male" and "male-to-constructed female" to talk about transgender people. This idea that transgender people could change gender (e.g., what is culturally produced) through surgery and hormone treatments but not sex (e.g., what is biologically determined) shaped sociological representations of transgender people in feminist sociology well into the 1990s (see, for example, Lorber 1994).

Raymond and others argued that people who felt out of step with cultural gender expectations should embrace androgyny in an effort to destabilize gender categories rather than support what they positioned as a normalizing surgical intervention designed by a patriarchal medical establishment to reinscribe sexist gender expectations. For Billings & Urban (1982, p. 276), "transsexual therapy, legitimated by the terminology of disease, pushes patients toward an alluring world of artificial vaginas and penises rather than toward self-understanding and sexual politics." In these works, people who elected to undergo medicalized transitions were detrimental to a liberal emancipatory project—the "Uncle Toms of the sexual revolution" (Kando 1973, p. 145). Raymond (1979, p. xix) makes the most extreme argument in this direction, positing that transgender women were threats to the sanctity of "women-only" spaces who "not only coloniz[e] female bodies but also

appropriat[e] a feminist ‘soul.’” This representation of transgender people as cultural dupes who were harmful to feminism would be widely critiqued and debunked in later years by transgender scholars—most famously in Sandy Stone’s now-canonical rebuttal to Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*, titled “The *Empire Strikes Back*,” in which she argues that “as with men theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency” (Stone 1991, p. 292; see also Connell 2012, Namaste 2009, Serano 2007). Despite these critiques, Raymond’s argument still finds some advocates today (Jeffreys 2014).

A second body of scholarship in the gender deviance paradigm uses the concept of deviance in its more classic sociological sense—as a deviation from a norm that can result in social stigma. One such line of inquiry emerges from the tradition of critical deviance studies. Locating transgender people within studies of other cultural “outsiders” (Becker 1963), these works outline the social organization of transgender groups and the stigma management strategies of transgender people (Driscoll 1971, Feinbloom 1976, Kando 1973). A related line of inquiry emerges from the ethnomethodological tradition developed by Garfinkel—and, in particular, from Garfinkel’s (1967) case study of a transitioning woman he names Agnes. Analyzing how Agnes navigates the world as a woman without the expected “biological credentials” (e.g., genitals) for her social identity, Garfinkel (1967, p. 180) frames her as a “practical methodologist” whose experiences reveal the taken-for-granted social processes that maintain and reproduce common-sense beliefs about sex and gender. Whereas these two bodies of work adopt different conceptual frames—“outsiders” or “practical methodologists”—they share an orientation to transgender people as sociologically interesting only for what they can reveal about the “the common [or] the usual” (Feinbloom 1976, p. 7) and the “day-to-day social construction of gender by all persons” (Kessler & McKenna 1978, p. 113).

A central preoccupation in these works is “passing,” a sociological term for an interactional strategy that social actors can adopt to hide a stigmatized identity or characteristic from others (Garfinkel 1967, Goffman 1963). Utilizing ethnographic observations and interviews, researchers working within the sociology of deviant behavior examine how transgender people manage their gender history with family members, coworkers, and strangers (Kando 1973), and the “tricks of the trade” (Driscoll 1971) that they use to “pass” as “natural born” (Feinbloom 1976, p. 152) men and women in everyday interactions. Scholars working in the ethnomethodological tradition, in contrast, examine how passing is possible within a social structure that is predicated on and assumes an innate, static male/female binary. Drawing on an analysis of solicited letters from transgender people (Kessler & McKenna 1978) and a reanalysis of Garfinkel’s case material (West & Zimmerman 1987), feminist ethnomethodologists argue that in cases where transgender people are able to pass, it is because they are in social interactions in which the biological aspects of sex assignment (e.g., chromosomes, hormones, and genital configurations) are not visible. In most social interactions, they posit, behavior and appearance—the visible cues of gender attribution—become a proxy for sex status, a kind of “cultural genitals” (Kessler & McKenna 1978, p. 155). From this research comes an ethnomethodological model of gender as an interactional (rather than biological) achievement for all people, an argument that is encapsulated in West & Zimmerman’s (1987) now-canonical concept of “doing gender” (see O’Brien 2016 for a reevaluation of this body of theory in relation to the field of transgender studies).

The concept of doing gender problematized the understanding of sex as an innate and invariant binary exempt from societal influence that had pervaded much of the other feminist and sociological research on transgender people at the time. Yet, the distinction between doing gender (what everyone does) and passing (what only transgender people do) links this research with the other epistemological traditions within the gender deviance paradigm. Within this body of scholarship, as in popular cultural images about transgender people (Meyerowitz 2002), passing often

is synonymous with masquerade, as evidenced in Kando's (1973, p. 5) assessment of the transgender women he interviewed for his book, *Sex Change*: "While feminized transsexuals [e.g., trans women] may sometimes pass quite successfully as natural females, we know that they are not, and so do they." Texts in the gender deviance paradigm also pay little attention to the subjectivities of transgender people, or to the different consequences that cis and trans people might face if they do not "live up to normative conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity" in everyday interactions (West & Zimmerman 1987, p. 136). For people who identify as women, for example, being viewed by others as not female has different economic, social, and interactional repercussions than being viewed as unfeminine (Bettcher 2007, Namaste 2000). Within some of these works is also an assumption that although gender passing was a sociologically useful concept, the practice would become socially irrelevant in the next decade. Some scholars believed that feminist social change around gender norms would eventually create more legitimate social space for androgyny and, as a result, demand for surgical gender transitions would die away and the "transsexual" would cease to exist as a social category (Bem 1993, Kessler & McKenna 1978, Raymond 1979).

The prediction that transgender people would fall into the dustbin of history proved to be far off the mark. In the 1980s and 1990s, vibrant activism by transgender and gender nonconforming people around their economic and social marginalization, the medical regulation of their identities, and the legal restrictions on cross-dressing in public that were still on the books in many cities and states gained more visibility (Sears 2014, Stryker 2008). In parallel, transgender scholars created a counterdiscourse to feminist, medical, and social science research that pathologized transgender people (Bornstein 1995, Stone 1991, Stryker 1994). This emerging field of transgender studies critiqued and expanded the insights of queer theory—a body of poststructuralist theory that located gender and sex as performative and fluid rather than innate and static (Butler 1990, Seidman 1996). Within sociology, these shifts in activism and scholarship influenced a new wave of researchers who championed the study of sexual difference rather than sexual deviance, and problematized the "rhetorical, institutional, and discursive mechanisms needed to ensure that heterosexuality maintained its taken-for-granted status" (Namaste 1994, p. 228). Researchers extended these theoretical insights to gender, generating empirical studies of diverse identities and practices that made visible the constitutive relationship among sex, gender, and sexuality (Ekins & King 1996, Gagné & Tewksbury 2002). These seismic changes initiated a paradigm shift in sociological approaches to studying transgender people—a shift from gender deviance to gender difference.

The gender difference paradigm challenged the framing of transgender as a deviant gender identity defined in opposition to a normative, stabilized binary of male/female, and called for empirical documentation of the ways in which the diversity of gender identities and practices, including those of cisgender people, are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life. The research of Viviane Namaste and Henry S. Rubin is central to the development of this new paradigm "forged in relation to sociology, feminism, and queer studies" (Rubin 1999, p. 190). In a series of books and articles published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Namaste and Rubin call into question the reduction of transgender people to "exemplars of the universal work of all people in culture who must do gender work" (Rubin 1999, p. 177)—a pattern they identify in most of the existing scholarship in sociology as well as in humanities-based queer theory. For Namaste (1996, p. 183), "these works have shown very little concern for those who identify and live as drag queens, transsexuals, or transgenders" and rarely discuss "the implications of an enforced sex/gender system for people who live outside of it." She argues that building theory without accountability to real, embodied people and their lives "enacts familiar binary oppositions between academics and 'our' objects of inquiry. [Trans people] are those figures 'we' look at; they are not those people with whom 'we' speak. And 'they' are certainly not 'us'" (Namaste 1996, p. 190). To disrupt this "figural use of transgender identities and practices" (Namaste 1996, p. 194),

she calls for the use of ethnographic and interview research methods to examine the complexity of the “real, lived, viable experience” (Namaste 1996, p. 189) of transgender people. Rubin (2003, p. 12) underscores the political implications of this project: “Since transsexuals have been regarded as monstrous, crazy, or less than human, it is doubly important to make their experiences matter.”

Shifting the question from “what is the matter with someone” to “what matters to someone” (Rubin 2003, p. 11), Namaste and Rubin make a case for an empirically centered sociology that generates an understanding of transgender people’s lives from their own perspectives. Rubin (2003) illustrates how such an approach could challenge the prevailing assumption in much feminist and sociological research that transitioning people inherently reproduce gender inequality. Drawing on in-depth interviews with transsexual men, Rubin (2003, p. 145) makes a case for the importance of agency in sociological analyses: “Transsexualism itself does not necessarily subvert or affirm dominant forms of masculinity. Transsexual men have the potential to generate either alternative or hegemonic forms of masculinity.” Bringing a critical lens to the concept of passing, he also examines why some trans men might choose not to disclose their gender history to others. He finds that many of his respondents express a desire to make visible their sense of being “always and already” male, and to attain “ordinary lives unmarked by suspicions and hostility” (Rubin 2003, p. 3)—a desire that many cisgender people take for granted. From this research, Rubin (1999, p. 190) argues that sociologists must “learn to theorize a desire for realness or authenticity rather than critique it.” Namaste and Rubin also call for more empirical documentation of the range of “gender blending” (Ekins & King 1996) identities and practices that could challenge, shift, or reproduce normative constructions of gender in order to make “space for alternatives to a single transgender formation forged dialectically with the medico-legal regim[e]” (Rubin 1999, p. 190). They argue that such research should always be centered within a sociological analysis of the ways in which the social construction of gender “varies in different social, historical, political, and regional locations” (Namaste 1996, p. 192).

Merging empirical sociological methods with critical insights from feminist, queer, and transgender theory, this new generation of scholars created a research agenda for the empirical study of transgender subjectivities within institutional contexts, such as health care and prison, and across social locations, such as race, class, and region. The guiding principles of this agenda shaped the trajectory of much of the empirical research about transgender people within sociology in the last decade (see Devor 1997, Lombardi 2001, Perkins 1983, Vidal-Ortiz 2002 for early examples of this trans-centered approach). In the next section, we provide an overview of three current areas of research within the field: identities and social locations, institutional and organizational contexts, and quantitative approaches.

THREE AREAS OF RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF TRANSGENDER STUDIES

Identities and Social Locations

An extensive body of empirical research examines the diversity of transgender people’s identities and social location. Prior to the 2000s, sociological research focused almost exclusively on the experiences and “narratives of self” (Mason-Schrock 1996) of transgender women (Vidal-Ortiz 2008)—a focus reflected in popular media images of transgender people (Meyerowitz 2002). The publication of Devor’s (1997) *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* and Rubin’s (2003) *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* broadened the sociological conversation by examining the lives of transgender men. Similar to trends within gender and sexualities scholarship in sociology (Collins 2015, Gamson & Moon 2004), this empirical research on

transgender subjectivities has maintained an “attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities” (Collins 2015, p. 3) that is at the heart of intersectionality theory. Intersectional research in transgender studies considers how aspects of social location and identity, such as gender, race, sexual identity, and class, shape transgender people’s interactions and experiences (Abelson 2014; Broad 2002; Collier 2016; Dozier 2005; Lombardi 2009; Nordmarken 2014; Schilt 2010; Vidal-Ortiz 2002, 2009; Westbrook 2016). More recent research has begun to consider how reactions to and social perceptions of transgender people’s identities and gender expressions shift across urban versus rural regions of the United States (Abelson 2016, Crawley 2008, Gray 2009).

Within this body of work, researchers examine what some transgender people’s experiences of having lived socially as both men and women can illuminate about the ways in which categorization as male or female in everyday interactions “is a process of differentiation and constructed meaning that are bound in social context” (Dozier 2005, p. 298). Examining trans men’s accounts of how their social interactions change as their bodies masculinize, Dozier (2005, p. 297) demonstrates the centrality of gendered appearance cues for “doing sex in a gendered world.” In many social interactions, trans men find that people perceive them as male due to the presence of facial hair and the absence of visible breasts. With this social attribution of maleness, some trans men find that behaviors for which they were once sanctioned are now rewarded (Dozier 2005). They can also feel the need to learn new interactional strategies for navigating interactions safely as men (Abelson 2014). Demonstrating the importance of taking an intersectional lens to transgender studies, trans men of color and gay trans men can find that gaining maleness in social interactions also brings new risks of harm and harassment (Schilt 2010, Vidal-Ortiz 2002). Research also reveals that trans women of color have a higher risk of becoming murder victims than white trans women and all trans men (Westbrook 2016). This body of scholarship makes visible the interactional and structural processes that support particular forms of discrimination and violence against transgender and gender nonconforming people.

Another line of inquiry examines the identity practices and “bodywork” (Schrock et al. 2005) of transgender people. In his interview study of trans men, Rubin (2003) highlights variation in their “transition choices.” For some men, genital surgery is an essential part of developing a sense of authenticity in their gendered embodiment. Other men find that the masculinizing effects of testosterone and chest reconstructive surgery are sufficient for them to feel that they have aligned their body and their gender identity in their desired way (see also Dozier 2005, Schilt & Windsor 2014, Williams et al. 2013). Other research examines how changes in gendered embodiment can shift what seems possible and desirable for transgender people in regard to sexual identities and sexual practices. For example, some transgender men who identified as lesbians prior to transitioning “find that their object attraction expands to include both sexes” (Dozier 2005, p. 311; see also Devor 1997). Although they may have had attraction to men in the past, they were uncomfortable with being positioned as women in heterosexual relationships. Being able to enter into intimate relationships as men allowed them “to interact with men on a sexual level that felt free of the power dynamics in heterosexual relations” (Dozier 2005, p. 313).

Research also examines the social and institutional constraints on transgender people’s identities and bodily practices. People who seek surgical or hormonal body modification may have to contend with competing opinions and pressures from romantic partners, family members, employers, or religious leaders (Rubin 2003, Schilt 2010, Whitley 2016). Furthermore, research shows that transgender people often face institutional constraints and interpersonal discrimination from medical and psychiatric health care professionals that severely limit their autonomy and embodiment (Lombardi 2001; Nordmarken & Kelly 2014; Windsor 2006, 2011, 2017). Parents of transgender and gender nonconforming children may encounter social stigma and, in some cases, face investigations by child welfare services for helping their children begin social and/or

medically supervised transitions that confirm their gender identities (Meadow 2011a). Taken together, these lines of research highlight the diversity of identities and practices among transgender people and underscore the importance of focusing an analytic lens on both the interpersonal and “institutional dimensions of trans lives” (Namaste 2005, p. 17).

An emerging body of work explores gender identities and expressions that complicate a transgender/cisgender binary, including gender fluid, genderqueer, gender ambiguous, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary (Collier 2016, Factor & Rothblum 2008, Lucal 1999, Miller & Grollman 2015, Nordmarken 2014, Stone 2013). Qualitative research examines how particular spatial contexts, such as drag communities (Rupp & Taylor 2003, Shapiro 2007) and “queer spaces” (Stone 2013) that valorize the liberatory potential of gender and sexual fluidity and flexibility, may “function as a form of consciousness-raising and a site of identity transformation for participants” (Shapiro 2007, p. 251). Other research examines the growing visibility of parents who affirm their children’s gender fluidity and/or trans identity (Meadow 2011b, Rahilly 2015). Within university settings, students who identify as gender nonconforming and nonbinary are fighting for greater institutional recognition of gender-neutral pronouns (ze/hir) and third-person plural pronouns (they/them) (Wentling 2015). Although some higher-education institutions are adopting inclusive gender identity policies (Scelfo 2015), educators do not always validate their students’ identities in the classroom (Wentling 2015). Research drawing from survey data further suggests that gender nonconforming people may experience additional trans-related discrimination, and that these experiences may be associated with higher rates of behavioral health risk factors than in the broader transgender community (Miller & Grollman 2015). Further research that considers the experiences of gender nonconforming and nonbinary people could help to address some of the disparities identified by respondents.

Institutional and Organizational Contexts

The sociological understanding that social contexts enable and constrain people’s subjectivities and experiences shapes the focus of a great deal of research in the sociology of transgender studies. One line of inquiry examines how the dominant cultural logic of an invariant and innate male/female binary in the United States affects transgender people’s experiences both across institutional and organizational contexts and within interactional spaces. In the context of the law, the social categories of male and female are constituted into a legally binding M or F sex marker, or “legal gender” (Spade 2008), that is displayed on government- and state-issued documents, such as birth certificates, driver’s licenses, passports, and Social Security cards (Currah & Moore 2009, Meadow 2010). Depending upon their state of birth and their state of residence, transgender people can be denied the possibility of realigning their government documents with their gender identities. Such “administrative misrecognition” invalidates transgender people’s gender identities and “can result in exclusion from vital support services and institutions, detainment or incarceration, or refusal of benefits” (Kelly 2012, p. 141). The cultural logic of the gender binary also maintains and reinforces the justification for gender-segregated institutions and public spaces in ways that negatively affect transgender people. For instance, transgender inmates may be assigned to a prison that reflects the sex marker on their birth certificate rather than their gender identity and expression (Jenness & Fenstermaker 2014, Stanley & Smith 2011). Transgender and gender nonconforming people also face opposition and, at times, violence from cisgender people around inclusive access to gender-segregated public restrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams (Cavanagh 2010, Cavanagh & Sykes 2006, Lucal 1999, Mathers 2016, Westbrook & Schilt 2014).

The workplace is a gendered organizational context in which transgender people can face harassment, discrimination, and, at times, violence. Data from the National Transgender

Discrimination Survey, the largest sample of transgender respondents to date ($N = 6,450$), reveals that the US transgender population experiences double the rate of unemployment of the general population—and transgender people of color have an unemployment rate that is four times the national average (Grant et al. 2011). Qualitative studies further show that transgender employees can face a unique set of issues in the workplace, such as policies that prevent them from accessing a bathroom that aligns with their gender identity and expression, restrictive dress codes, and employers and coworkers who refuse to acknowledge their preferred name and pronoun (Bender-Baird 2011, Connell 2010, Schilt 2010). The presence or absence of workplace protections for gender identity and expression, the gender expectations for workers in a particular occupational context (e.g., blue collar, professional, service), and regional context all shape transgender people's workplace experiences, as well as their ability to seek legal redress for discriminatory treatment (Schilt 2010).

Survey and interview data show that transgender people experience high levels of mistreatment and harassment within health care settings (Grant et al. 2011, Nordmarken & Kelly 2014)—a risk that is more prevalent for gender nonconforming people (Miller & Grollman 2015). Doctors and mental health providers often lack knowledge about the transgender community and fail to provide culturally competent care (Lombardi 2001). Transgender people report encountering health care professionals who refuse to use their preferred name or gender pronoun, ask invasive questions about their bodies that are not related to their treatment, regard them as objects of curiosity, and/or refuse to treat them at all (Grant et al. 2011, Nordmarken & Kelly 2014, Windsor 2006). A study by Coutinho-Sledge (2016) demonstrates that transgender men who seek preventative care in gynecology offices receive more negative treatment from doctors and nurses than do cisgender men who access similarly women-centered medical spaces for breast cancer treatment. Another study by Windsor (2011) reveals that transgender people who seek surgical body modifications, such as breast augmentation, face a time-consuming and precarious process of gaining psychiatric and medical clearance that cisgender people seeking similar surgeries are less likely to encounter. Taken together, these studies show that discriminatory health care experiences negatively affect the mental and physical health of transgender and gender nonconforming people.

Within the sociology of the family, researchers have analyzed the dynamics of transgender people's family roles and relationships in relation to other family members, and how these dynamics may shift as a person begins a physical transition. An interview study by Hines (2006) focuses on how people navigate disclosing their decision to begin a medically supervised transition to family members. Qualitative research centered on cisgender women who are partnered with transgender men addresses the processes of negotiating the division of household labor and emotional labor, and navigating everyday interactions within the existing gendered and heteronormative expectations for family roles and behavior (Pfeffer 2010, 2012; Ward 2010). These studies also examine how cisgender women experience and manage cultural assumptions about their own sexual identities because of their partner's transgender status (Pfeffer 2014, Ward 2010). Recent qualitative research on the parents of transgender and gender nonconforming children provides detailed sociological accounts of the varied ways they make sense of their children's gender identities, and their strategies for expanding the possibilities for their children's gender expression at home and in social contexts organized around the cultural logics of a male/female binary, such as schools and doctors' offices (Meadow 2011a,b; Rahilly 2015).

Researchers are beginning to assess transgender people's experiences in relation to religious communities and institutions (Sumerau et al. 2016). Work focusing on individual-level transgender subjectivities has analyzed how Mormon and Christian transgender people navigate their religious beliefs and approaches to broader society alongside their relationships to religious communities (Schrock et al. 2004, Sumerau et al. 2016, Wilcox 2000). Sociologists have also documented how

religious beliefs and community norms surrounding transgender inclusion may affect relationships with family members (Whitley 2016). Concurrently, research at the institutional level has found that many religious organizations have been slow to develop official positions on transgender identity, as many of the religious institutional changes on LGBTQ issues have revolved primarily around responding to same-sex attraction and marriage (Wilcox 2000). However, some research on LGBTQ-focused religious organizations suggests that these groups are beginning to address transgender inclusion and, in some cases, exclusion as institutional goals (Fuist et al. 2011). More research is needed that explores transgender experiences in relation to non-Christian faiths in the United States.

Quantitative Approaches to Transgender Identities and Experiences

Most sociological knowledge about transgender people's experiences comes from qualitative data collection methods. The prevalence of qualitative studies reflects in part an epistemological commitment, as interview and participant observation data can more readily capture the phenomenological dimension of people's worldviews and feelings (Compton 2015, Rubin 2003). Prior to 2010, there was also an absence of quantitative data about transgender people because most of the large-scale surveys commonly utilized in sociological research provided respondents with only male and female options for gender identity (Westbrook & Saperstein 2015). In the last five years, social scientists have made efforts to make survey data more inclusive to transgender respondents.

These attempts run into several issues. It cannot be overstated that transgender as a category does not fully capture gender differences between trans men and trans women's experiences, or the diversity of noncisgender identities (Grant et al. 2011). As gender nonconforming people experience more discrimination than the general transgender population (Grant et al. 2011, Miller & Grollman 2015), options beyond male, female, and transgender are important for developing policy interventions. Yet, respondents may be reluctant to select a transgender or gender nonconforming category on a survey due to fear of the possible consequences, such as loss of family and employment (Pew Res. Cent. 2013) or concern about being recognized as a gender minority by the state, given the many discriminatory legacies of state regulation of transgender and gender nonconforming people (Spade 2011). Accordingly, scholars and activists have expressed ambivalence about the political implications of collecting and encouraging further use of state-collected data on transgender populations (Thompson & King 2015). Some scholars contend that the collection of such data might serve as a preliminary step toward increased visibility, recognition of population-specific needs, and resource allocation (Currah & Stryker 2015, Schilt & Bratter 2015, Tobin et al. 2015, Westbrook & Saperstein 2015). Critics of this approach point out that even seemingly neutral or benevolent forms of documentation used in legal advocacy have a hand in administrative violence against transgender people (see Currah & Stryker 2015, Spade 2011 for a longer discussion).

The methodology and protocol for collecting information about transgender, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary identities are in a state of continuous development, with various techniques being proposed and tested in order to increase the quality of data (Baker & Hughes 2016, GenIUSS Group 2014, Inst. Med. 2011, Lombardi & Banik 2016, Westbrook & Saperstein 2015). Most major surveys used by sociologists currently provide only male or female gender identity options. But several large-scale surveys oriented toward public health have added questions that ask respondents if they identify as transgender or gender nonconforming, including several federal surveys conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Baker & Hughes 2016, CDC 2015, HHS LGBT Issues Coord. Comm. 2014, Tobin et al. 2015), and state-specific surveys of transgender populations (Xavier

et al. 2007). In addition to these federal and state-sponsored surveys, transgender and LGBTQ organizations often conduct their own data collection efforts. These organizations tend to recruit large numbers of transgender respondents (Grant et al. 2011, Kosciw et al. 2010, Rankin & Herman 2016, Tobin et al. 2015). Drawing from sample sizes that enable statistically significant analysis, these surveys have produced findings that corroborate qualitative data about the prevalence of discrimination toward gender minorities in institutional settings, as well as the impact of race, class, gender, and geographical region on transgender and gender nonconforming people's experiences.

One major project taken on by researchers using transgender-inclusive survey data has been to estimate the prevalence of transgender people in the population to serve as a starting point for further research and policy interventions. Drawing from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a 2016 study estimates that approximately 1.4 million adults, or 0.6% of the US population, identify as transgender (Flores et al. 2016). Although these surveys do not sample respondents who are institutionalized, the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Inmate Survey has included gender category options for transgender and gender nonconforming respondents in its survey of US prisons and jails since 2012, using these data to provide information on prison sexual abuse against transgender women (Beck 2014). Given the disproportionate likelihood of incarceration among transgender people, particularly transgender women of color (Grant et al. 2011, Stanley & Smith 2011), incorporating institutionalized respondents into sociological research is essential to obtaining a representative picture of transgender life in the United States.

Another step toward transgender inclusion in survey research has been the collection of data on knowledge and attitudes held by cisgender people towards transgender people, and on the factors that may influence these attitudes. Cragun & Sumerau (2015) found that survey respondents who took a literalistic view of the Bible and self-identified as religious had less favorable attitudes toward gender minorities than people who self-identified as spiritual. In a study that uses feeling thermometer ratings, researchers found that levels of favorable attitudes among cisgender people toward transgender people are lower than favorable attitudes toward cisgender gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, particularly among heterosexual cisgender men. Less favorable attitudes toward transgender people are associated with attitudes such as sexual prejudice, authoritarianism, and antigalitarianism (Norton & Herek 2013). Conversely, research indicates that a majority of US residents were able to identify the meaning of the term transgender without assistance, and a strong majority supported legal protections for transgender people (PRRI 2011). In a field experimental study, researchers found that cisgender people who engaged in a 10-minute conversation with canvassers about transgender discrimination reported long-term attitudinal changes, such as more positive attitudes toward transgender people and increased support for nondiscrimination laws, regardless of whether the canvasser was transgender or cisgender (Broockman & Kalla 2016). Taken together, quantitative approaches to documenting transgender people's living conditions and the dominant social attitudes toward transgender people can indicate patterns of social change and inform the strategies of activists. Sociologists have utilized similar forms of data to contribute to legal debates around gay and lesbian rights (see, for example, American Sociological Association 2015).

CONCLUSION: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The visibility of transgender people, and related public and political discussion about transgender rights and social inclusion, has increased exponentially in the United States in the 2010s. The work of transgender activists and scholars has brought about major changes in some arenas of social life. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission now includes "transgender status" in its definition of protected classes in Title VII—an inclusion that provides some avenues of redress

for transgender and gender nonconforming workers who experience employment discrimination while living in states or cities that offer no protections for gender identity and expression. In the summer of 2016, the US military overturned its ban on transgender people serving openly in the military (Brydum 2016), and the Obama administration released a statement directing public schools and universities to allow transgender students to use the bathroom that fits with their gender identity (Davis & Apuzzo 2016). These important cultural changes are still precarious; one of the first acts of the Trump administration was to withdraw the Obama-era supports for students (Kreighbaum 2017). But the vibrant protests that emerged after Trump's decision signal a greater legitimation of transgender people as full social and political participants in life in the United States and help to raise awareness about the ways in which discrimination and social exclusion disadvantage gender minorities.

Sociological research has been keeping pace with these enormous cultural changes and bringing much needed empirical data to bear on the status of transgender people in the United States. As discussed above, there is vibrant research on the diversity of gender identities, as well as the effects of social locations on transgender people's experiences of discrimination and risk for violence, and the impact of institutional and organizational contexts on their lives. We are starting to see more discussion about including a wider array of gender identity options in survey research, and more quantitative analyses of survey data from transgender and gender nonconforming respondents (Grant et al. 2011, Miller & Grollman 2015). Transgender research has made inroads into the sociology of gender and the sociology of sexualities, and it is gaining a foothold within the social movements literature (Ghaziani et al. 2016, Stone 2009, Westbrook 2008), medical sociology (Coutinho-Sledge 2016, Shuster 2016, Windsor 2017), and historical sociology (Bryant 2006, Ferguson 2016, Sears 2014). There is also greater attention to teaching strategies that can broaden the inclusion of transgender scholarship and transgender and gender nonconforming identities in the sociology classroom (Nowakowski et al. 2016, Wentling et al. 2008). To address the historical erasure of noncisgender sociologists, the American Sociological Association expanded its gender options for members in the demographic profile to include transgender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming—and these options will likely be expanded in the future.

We end with some ideas about the gaps in knowledge in the field, and some possible future directions. As we note, most of the large-scale surveys utilized by sociologists currently include only male and female options for gender identity. Although large-*N* surveys conducted by LGBTQ nonprofits have provided opportunities for considering the ways in which race, ethnicity, and class shape transgender and gender nonconforming people's experiences (Grant et al. 2011), we need more qualitative research that takes up these social locations as a central issue. Qualitative research about the experiences of transmasculine people filled a lacuna that existed in social science research until the 2010s. Yet, more research about the experiences of transfeminine people is needed, as transgender women—especially women of color—experience some of the highest rates of discrimination, incarceration, and violence among the transgender population (Grant et al. 2011; Namaste 2005; Vidal-Ortiz 2008, 2009; Westbrook 2016). And while there is a growing body of work on transgender and gender nonconforming children, we know comparatively little about the experiences of aging and elderly transgender people (for an exception, see Fabbre 2014, Porter et al. 2013). We see much room for growth in the inclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming people's experiences—and the crucial insights of transgender sociologists—into fields such as critical race studies, urban sociology, work and occupations, sociology of education, and transnational sociology, as well as within the discipline as a whole.

We are excited by recent scholarship that problematizes the transgender/cisgender binary through an examination of the experiences of gender-fluid, gender-ambiguous, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people within institutional and interactional contexts (Collier

2016; Meadow 2011a,b; Miller & Grollman 2015; Wentling 2015). Such research pushes the gender difference paradigm further by destabilizing binary classifications and extending knowledge about the diversity and fluidity of gender identities. To this work, we suggest adding a deeper investigation of cisgender people's responses to transgender and gender nonconforming people, and to the cultural logics that uphold "cisnormativity," an "ideology and assumption that assumes and expects that all people are and should be cisgender" (Sumerau et al. 2016, p. 294; see also Nordmarken & Kelly 2014; Serano 2007, 2013). This ideology is embedded in institutional contexts and shapes social interactions in ways that privilege the experiences of cisgender people and erase or devalue transgender lives. Some emerging research in this area has investigated the attitudes and practices of cisgender doctors who develop treatment protocols for transgender and intersex patients (Davis et al. 2016). Another body of work compares the experiences of transgender and cisgender patients to make visible the cisnormative logics embedded in medical settings (Coutinho-Sledge 2016, Windsor 2011). Some recent research also examines cisgender people's reactions to the inclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming people in gender-segregated and queer spaces (Mathers 2016, Stone 2013, Westbrook & Schilt 2014). Such work is crucial for understanding cultural change around transgender rights and developing policies that address transgender discrimination.

Similar to the growing body of work in the sociology of sexualities that problematizes heteronormativity and heterosexuality (Schilt & Westbrook 2009, Ward & Schneider 2009), empirical attention to cisgender identities and practices offers an agenda for an intersectional analysis of the cultural mechanisms through which cisnormativity is produced, maintained, and reproduced across social institutions and in everyday interactions in the United States. Such research challenges the unmarked, or taken-for-granted, status of cisgender identities and calls into question what it means to speak sociologically about "men" and "women." We see such critical investigations as having the potential to transform and broaden sociological understandings of gender identity—as well as how the social meaning of gender identities varies across social locations and cultural contexts—by decentering the experiences of cisgender people as the "yardstick" by which to measure the significance and legitimacy of transgender and gender nonconforming people's lives and experiences.

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Contents

Prefatory Article

- A Life in Sociology
Robert M. Hauser 1

Theory and Methods

- Data ex Machina: Introduction to Big Data
David Lazer and Jason Radford 19
- Field Experiments Across the Social Sciences
Delia Baldassarri and Maria Abascal 41
- Genealogical Microdata and Their Significance for Social Science
Xi Song and Cameron D. Campbell 75
- Network Sampling: From Snowball and Multiplicity to
Respondent-Driven Sampling
Douglas D. Heckathorn and Christopher J. Cameron 101
- New Developments in Survey Data Collection
Mick P. Couper 121
- Replication in Social Science
Jeremy Freese and David Peterson 147
- Studying the Digital: Directions and Challenges for Digital Methods
Keith N. Hampton 167
- Theorizing in Sociological Research: A New Perspective, a New
Departure?
Richard Swedberg 189

Social Processes

- Decision-Making Processes in Social Contexts
Elizabeth Bruch and Fred Feinberg 207
- Social Networks and Macrosocial Change
Emily Erikson and Nicholas Occhiuto 229
- Toward a Sociology of Privacy
Denise Anthony, Celeste Campos-Castillo, and Christine Horne 249

Formal Organizations

The Social Bases of Philanthropy <i>Emily Barman</i>	271
---	-----

Political and Economic Sociology

The Demand Side of Hiring: Employers in the Labor Market <i>David B. Bills, Valentina Di Stasio, and Klarita Gërxbani</i>	291
--	-----

Differentiation and Stratification

Categorical Inequality: Schools as Sorting Machines <i>Thurston Domina, Andrew Penner, and Emily Penner</i>	311
--	-----

Gender Quotas for Legislatures and Corporate Boards <i>Melanie M. Hughes, Pamela Paxton, and Mona Lena Krook</i>	331
---	-----

Graduate Education and Social Stratification <i>Julie R. Posselt and Eric Grodsky</i>	353
--	-----

Wealth Inequality and Accumulation <i>Alexandra Killewald, Fabian T. Pfeffer, and Jared N. Schachner</i>	379
---	-----

Individual and Society

Skin Color and Colorism: Global Research, Concepts, and Measurement <i>Angela R. Dixon and Edward E. Telles</i>	405
---	-----

The Development of Transgender Studies in Sociology <i>Kristen Schilt and Danya Lagos</i>	425
--	-----

Demography

Social Structure, Adversity, Toxic Stress, and Intergenerational Poverty: An Early Childhood Model <i>Craig A. McEwen and Bruce S. McEwen</i>	445
---	-----

The Second Demographic Transition Theory: A Review and Appraisal <i>Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan</i>	473
--	-----

Urban and Rural Community Sociology

Ethnographies of Race, Crime, and Justice: Toward a Sociological Double-Consciousness <i>Victor M. Rios, Nikita Carney, and Jasmine Kelekay</i>	493
---	-----

Explicating Divided Approaches to Gentrification and Growing Income Inequality <i>Japonica Brown-Saracino</i>	515
---	-----

Policy

The Social Safety Net After Welfare Reform: Recent Developments
and Consequences for Household Dynamics
Laura Tach and Kathryn Edin 541

Indexes

Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 34–43 563
Cumulative Index of Article Titles, Volumes 34–43 567

Errata

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Sociology* articles may be found at
<http://www.annualreviews.org/errata/soc>

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