



## Coming Out as Transgender: Navigating the Social Implications of a Transgender Identity

Stacey M. Brumbaugh-Johnson & Kathleen E. Hull

To cite this article: Stacey M. Brumbaugh-Johnson & Kathleen E. Hull (2018): Coming Out as Transgender: Navigating the Social Implications of a Transgender Identity, Journal of Homosexuality, DOI: [10.1080/00918369.2018.1493253](https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1493253)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1493253>



Published online: 27 Jul 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Coming Out as Transgender: Navigating the Social Implications of a Transgender Identity

Stacey M. Brumbaugh-Johnson, MA and Kathleen E. Hull, PhD

Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

### ABSTRACT

This study examines transgender coming-out narratives. Most previous studies of coming out as transgender have relied on psychological stage models of identity development, with little empirical verification. This study uses identity theory to reframe transgender coming out as a primarily external, ongoing, and socially situated process. The data were collected from 20 transgender people residing in the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota metro area through interviews and focus groups. The analyses reveal that coming out as transgender requires navigating others' gender expectations, others' reactions, and the threat of violence. The results indicate that transgender individuals do not simply decide to "come out of the closet" and then stay out. Rather, they make strategic decisions regarding the enactment of gender and gender identity disclosure based on specific social contexts. Coming out as transgender is best conceptualized as an ongoing, socially embedded, skilled management of one's gender identity.

### KEYWORDS

Transgender; coming out; identity theory; gender identity; gender; genderqueer; transitioning; identity disclosure

Although transgender studies is a rapidly expanding interdisciplinary sub-field, relatively little research addresses the experience of coming out for transgender individuals as distinct from lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) people. We use data from an interview- and focus group-based study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people to address the following exploratory research question: What are the distinctive features of transgender coming-out experiences? Deploying identity theory as a theoretical lens, we demonstrate the deeply social nature of transgender coming-out experiences and argue that transgender studies should follow the trend in LGB coming-out studies toward a more social, contextualized approach to conceptualizing and researching transgender coming-out experiences.

Attention to the distinctive features of transgender coming-out experiences is particularly important in light of the broader social context. In the contemporary U.S. context, transgender people are at a high risk to experience discrimination and violence as a result of their gender identity. Estimates put the size of the adult transgender population in the U.S. at 1.4

million, or 0.6% of adults (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). A recent survey of transgender adults exposed “high levels of mistreatment, harassment, and violence in every aspect of life” (James et al., 2016, p. 4). Fully 46% of survey respondents reported being verbally harassed and 9% physically attacked in the prior year because of their gender identity. Of the employed respondents, 30% reported experiencing some form of mistreatment in the workplace, such as firing, denial of promotion, verbal harassment, or physical assault (James et al., 2016). In such a hostile social context, the stakes are indeed high as transgender and genderqueer people make decisions about how, when, and to whom they will come out.

## **LGBT coming out**

We begin by examining existing research on LGBT coming-out experiences, noting the disproportionate attention to LGB experiences and recent trends in this literature. The process of “coming out” as LGBT has been an area of interdisciplinary study for several decades, although the large majority of research in this field has addressed the experiences of lesbian and gay (and less often bisexual) people rather than transgender people, and psychological approaches have dominated until fairly recently. The concept of coming out refers to the experience of recognizing and accepting one’s own difference from social norms in sexual orientation or gender identity terms and divulging this difference to others, including family, friends, coworkers, and broader communities. Most scholarly examinations have implicitly or explicitly acknowledged both the internal and external dimensions of coming out as a psychological and social phenomenon (e.g., Guittar, 2013; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Liang, 1997). For example, in an interview-based study of 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals, Guittar (2013) identified both “self-affirmation and the public disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity” (p. 183) as key elements in most individuals’ coming-out experience.

Early approaches to the study of coming out mostly addressed gay and lesbian (rather than bisexual or transgender) experiences and emphasized linear stage models of coming out as a developmental process, placing the focus on the individual (influential studies include Carrion & Lock, 1997; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). The details of these models vary, but an exhaustive review of stage models of LGBT identity development identified several cross-cutting themes: an initial feeling of differentness, a developmental focus that frames later stages as healthier than earlier ones, a need for disclosure to others, a stage of pride and (sub)cultural immersion, and a culminating stage of identity integration and synthesis (Eliason & Schope, 2007). Following the initial wave of models based on gay and lesbian (and less often bisexual) coming-out experiences, core concepts from LGB stage models have been modified and extended to develop transgender-

specific stage models, with limited empirical verification (Bockting & Coleman, 2016; Devor, 2004; Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Lev, 2004; Lewins, 1995).

More recently, studies of coming out have taken a sociological turn, with greater attention to the social features of the coming-out experience. This sociological turn has taken several forms. Cox and Gallois (1996) argued that social identity theory, which is similar to identity theory (see Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000), provides a more complete picture of LGBT coming-out experiences by highlighting the social nature of identity formation and management. They highlighted how identities are developed and maintained in varying social contexts, and minority groups, such as sexual and gender-identity minorities, engage in identity enhancement strategies that are themselves dictated by social conditions. Thus Cox and Gallois concluded that social identity theory attends to the power dimension of social identities in a way that is missing from early identity-development models. In line with this focus on coming out as a socially embedded phenomenon, several recent sociological studies have reframed coming out to focus less on linear identity development and more on the ongoing process of identity management. Based on analysis of essays by gay male young adults, Orne (2011) developed the concept of strategic outness, highlighting how sexual minorities deploy various disclosure strategies and motivational discourses that are responsive to particular social contexts: "Strategic outness is the contextual and continual management of identity in which people are never fully 'out' or 'closeted'" (p. 698). In a similar vein, Guittar and Rayburn (2016) argued that LGBQ coming out is best conceptualized as "a *career* based in the perpetual management of one's sexuality" (p. 337), rather than as a discrete process with a clear endpoint. A study of Canadian LGBTQ youth highlighted contextual factors that influence whether coming out and being out is important or even possible for such youth (Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015). Based on their findings, the authors rejected linear models of coming out and the presumption that outness is more healthy or advanced regardless of the social circumstances faced by LGBTQ individuals: "Coming out is a socially complex process that is mitigated by too many contextual factors to be understood linearly or moralistically" (Klein et al., 2015, p. 324). Other studies have foregrounded the social dimensions of coming out by framing it in a broader political context (Armstrong, 2002) or highlighting place-specific sexual identity cultures (Brown-Saracino, 2015).

While the trend has been toward a broader social focus in studies of coming out, some scholars have suggested that rapidly changing social conditions, at least in the contemporary American context, render the experience of coming out and, thus, the closet metaphor less socially significant. The basic argument is that increasing acceptance and assimilation of sexual minorities means that the closet is no longer a life-defining structure, and identity-management

practices have become more situation-specific (Savin-Williams, 2006; Seidman, 2002; Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999). Other scholars, however, have expressed skepticism that social change has been far-reaching enough to usher in a “post-gay” era that has diminished the significance of the coming-out experience (e.g., Coleman-Fountain, 2014).

A relatively small number of recent studies have empirically investigated the transgender experience of coming out. These stand in contrast to earlier scholarly investigations that theorized transgender coming-out models based on LGB models and nonsystematic empirical observations in clinical and other settings (e.g., Bockting & Coleman, 2016; Devor, 2004). Gagne et al. (1997) interviewed 65 male-to-female (MtF) transgender people. Participants included crossdressers, individuals who sought or completed genital reconstruction surgery, and male-bodied individuals with nonbinary gender identities. The sample reflected some of the diversity encompassed by the transgender label.<sup>1</sup> The authors observed that interviewees felt intimidated about coming out based on both fear of how others will treat them and anxiety about others’ ability to cope with their identities. Different MtF transgender individuals had different identity-management goals; crossdressers mostly sought to be perceived as women temporarily, those who desired or obtained genital reconstruction surgery mostly sought to be accepted as women permanently, and nonbinary individuals were not invested in this outcome. The authors conclude that MtF transgender coming out mostly does not pose a significant threat to the dominant gender binary: “Given the limited range of identities available to them, it is interesting, but not surprising, that the overwhelming majority of transgendered [*sic*] individuals adhere to traditional conceptualizations of sex and gender” (Gagne et al., 1997, p. 504).

A study of the experiences of transgender men in workplaces (Schilt, 2010) found four main responses to workers openly transitioning from female to male: pushing transmen out of the workplace, coercing transmen to continue to self-present as women, treating them as tokens, or incorporating them as males. The response of incorporation—treating transgender men “as one of the guys” (Schilt, 2010, p. 130)—was most common, and especially likely in professional workplaces, but Schilt (2010) noted that all four responses effectively neutralize “the potential threat to the stability of the male/female binary” posed by a transitioning transgender coworker (pp. 130–131).

In an interview study of nine transgender men and women, Zimman (2009) highlighted the ways transgender coming out differs from LGB coming out. Specifically, Zimman noted that transgender people may disclose their identity as transgender (i.e., having a sense of oneself as a man or woman that runs counter to the gender assigned at birth) either before or after transitioning from one gender to another. Zimman proposed calling the assertion of transgender identity prior to transitioning “declaration” and the

sharing of one's transgender history after transitioning "disclosure," and noted that interviewees overwhelmingly understood the concept of "coming out as transgender" to refer to pre-transition declarations of identity. Because transgender experience includes these two distinct forms of identity sharing, and because transgender people understand "coming out" to refer to pre-transition declarations rather than post-transition disclosures, Zimman concluded that the transgender coming-out experience is distinct from LGB coming out. LGB people may experience coming out as a lifelong process (or "career"), but for transgender people who transition, it represents a particular time-limited experience (i.e., it is something one does in the pre-transition period). Also, Zimman noted that interviewees did not necessarily feel an obligation to disclose their transgender history in the post-transition period, whereas many lesbian and gay people feel a moral imperative to be "out" as much as possible.

A more recent study of 17 transgender participants found that coming out was motivated by the need to communicate an authentic self to others, but attempts at authenticity were constrained by social, economic, and political factors (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Transgender participants faced discriminatory laws, limited material resources, limited language surrounding gender, the risk of bodily harm, and a general lack of social support. Levitt and Ippolito (2014) concluded that due to these contextual limitations, the development of a positive transgender identity may involve significant compromise in order to also maintain social relationships, physical safety, and economic security.

Other recent studies have examined the transgender coming-out experience in the context of friendships, in the college student population, and among transgender men who identify as gay or bisexual. Galupo, Krum, Hagen, Gonzalez, and Bauerband (2014) used online survey data from 536 transgender or gender-variant respondents to study the experience and impact of transgender identity disclosure to friends. Their study identified a range of reactions from friends, including affirming, negative, mixed, and emotional reactions, and they noted that transgender identity disclosure can produce distancing or termination in some friendships but increasing closeness in others. Responses of existing friends can also prompt transgender individuals to seek out new friendships within transgender communities. Garvey and Rankin (2015) conducted a quantitative analysis of national survey data to compare the experiences of three categories of college undergraduates: cisgender GBQ men, cisgender LGBQ women, and trans-spectrum individuals. Their results showed that trans-spectrum undergraduates are less likely to be out than cisgender LGBQ women and have more negative perceptions of campus and classroom climate compared to cisgender queer students. Bockting, Benner, and Coleman (2009) conducted a mixed-methods analysis of the experiences of 25 female-to-male (FtM) transgender

individuals who self-identify as gay or bisexual, providing insight into the intersection of minority status in terms of both gender identity and sexual orientation. The authors concluded that being transgender and gay/bisexual presents additional challenges regarding coming out, especially to family and coworkers. In particular, respondents found it difficult to come out to parents as gay/bisexual after coming out as transgender, and some avoided this step. Some respondents chose to come out as gay/bisexual but not transgender in their workplace, and respondents reported mixed experiences of acceptance in gay and lesbian communities. A minority of respondents challenged the gender binary by not seeking to pass as men in various settings.

### **Identity theory**

Consistent with the trend in existing research on LGBT coming-out experiences, we conceptualize coming out as primarily a social act. Thus we use identity theory, which focuses on the social roots of identities, as a lens for our study. Identity theory asserts that individuals hold multiple identities, and each identity consists of the meanings individuals attach to the specific roles they play or the social categories they belong to (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Group-based identities stem from roles that originate from specific group membership, such as “group leader.” Social identities are based on belonging in broader social categories, such as gender (Stets & Burke, 2000). The expectations attached to the positions individuals hold within their social groups or categories provide the roles that individuals enact. Identities are internalized role expectations (Stryker, 1980). Behavior is then guided by the meanings individuals attach to their identities (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). People assess whether their behavior gives the desired meaning through the reflected appraisals of others. If an individual’s behavior is inconsistent with the meaning of their identity, they are likely to change their behavior to be in sync with the identity, and when the perceived meaning of the behavior matches the meanings attached to the identity, “identity verification” is achieved (Powers, 1973). For example, a transgender man may behave according to the role expectations of men in our society in an attempt to be perceived as a man. This gendered behavior includes dress, voice tone, mannerisms, social interactions, and so on. If others do not interpret his behavior as that of a man, they will provide negative reflected appraisals, and the transgender man will likely adjust his behavior in an attempt to be more masculine. The transgender man would then achieve identity verification if the behavior change resulted in positive reflected appraisals, indicating that others interpreted his behavior as that of a man.

Identity theory may also help us understand pre-transition gender performances and the necessity of transitioning. Identity theory purports that if

identity verification cannot be achieved, and attempts to alter behavior are unsuccessful, then the identity itself is likely to be altered (Stryker, 1980). Of course, identities based on social categories, such as gender, are not so easily altered. Identities that are attached to some social structures have more pressure to conform to a set of behaviors compared to other social structures, giving individuals less discretion in the enactment of the role (Serpe, 1987; Serpe & Stryker, 1987). Gender is obligatory (Thoits, 1992), and the social structures surrounding it invoke high levels of conformity. Gender identities arguably have strict boundaries surrounding cultural meanings and expected behavior, creating immense pressure for female-assigned people to enact femininity and male-assigned people to enact masculinity. As such, for transgender individuals, the enactment of pre-transition gendered behavior may not be an attempt to align their behavior with internalized gender role expectations (gender identity), but rather an attempt to align their behavior with the role expectations attached to their at-birth sex assignment. In this case, identity verification would never be achieved, regardless of how positive the reflected appraisals were, because the meaning of the behavior would not correspond to the expectations attached to their gender identity, but rather the gender role others presumed for them at birth. Thus attempts to achieve identity verification by altering behavior would be futile. While identity verification would not be guaranteed, transitioning would be necessary to achieving it.

Identity theory has been used to study gender identities, although the studies have been focused primarily on cisgender identities (see Burke & Cast, 1997; Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988; Stets & Burke, 1996). One study of transgender sex workers used identity theory to examine the link between identity verification and mental health (Nuttbrock, Rosenblum, & Blumenstein, 2002). Nuttbrock et al. (2002) asked 43 transgender women sex workers about the extent to which their family, friends, and partners accepted their female gender presentation. Respondents also completed an 8-item depression screening. Lower levels of acceptance among family members and friends were correlated significantly with greater depressive symptoms. Levels of acceptance from partners, which were generally high, were not related to depressive symptoms, which the authors speculated was due to the social selectivity of those relationships. Nuttbrock et al. (2002) concluded that depressive symptoms are “affected by the extent to which transgender identity is successfully incorporated in social roles and relationships” (p. 1).

Identity theory provides a useful lens for understanding the social dynamics of transgender coming out. The transgender coming-out process is one of both adopting and communicating a new gender identity. It is intrinsically social, involving not only the specific interaction of declaring one's gender identity to others, but also the social pressure of adhering to certain gendered meanings and behavior, the assessment of enacted

gender meanings through the reflected appraisals of others, and the broader social implications of changing one's presumed gender identity.

## Method

The findings we present are from a study of close relationships and conceptions of family among LGBT people. Because the main purpose of the study was to explore the meanings LGBT people attach to the close relationships in their lives, qualitative methods were employed. Specifically, the study employed in-depth, semistructured individual interviews and focus groups to elicit discourse that gives insight into the “mental maps” (Luker, 2008, pp. 176–177) or “landscapes of meaning” (Reed, 2011) used by study participants to make sense of their close ties to other people. We view these data through an interpretivist lens, treating participants' discourse not as straightforward reports on an underlying objective reality, but as moments of cultural production that both constitute and reflect participants' own perceptions of reality.

The larger study includes 74 individual in-depth interviews and seven focus groups with 31 participants, for a total sample of 105 LGBT participants. Twenty participants identified as transgender. Data from 13 of these participants were obtained through individual in-depth interviews. Data from the other seven participants were obtained through two focus groups, one consisting of three transgender women and the other four transgender men. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in 2007–2008 and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average length of the individual interviews was 1 hour and 28 minutes, and the average focus group lasted 2 hours and 2 minutes. Topics covered in the individual interviews and focus groups included participants' personal background and coming-out story, their current relationships (including their three closest adult relationships and broader social networks), their conceptions of family and marriage, and their views of the mainstream LGBT rights movement. This article focuses on participants' descriptions of their coming-out experiences. These descriptions occurred primarily in response to a set of questions about coming out asked near the start of the interview: “Could you tell me about your coming-out process?” (Possible follow-ups: “When did you come out to yourself? To family and friends? How “out” are you today?”) We also include any interview or focus group data related to coming out that was embedded in responses to other questions. Demographic information, including gender identities, was collected at the end of the interview through an information sheet.

All participants resided within the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro region or rural areas within driving distance of the metro area. Participants were recruited through several methods. Approximately one third of the

participants were recruited through a booth at the 2007 Twin Cities Pride Festival, a large two-day event held in a Minneapolis public park in conjunction with the annual Pride parade. The rest of the participants heard about the study through a variety of LGBTQ community organizations, fliers posted in spaces frequented by LGBT people, advertising, and unsolicited referrals from other participants. Potential participants were asked to fill out a screening form, and study participants were selected with the goal of achieving sample diversity along key dimensions, including race/ethnicity, social class, place of residence, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

If a participant marked “transgender” on the demographic information sheet or verbally indicated a transgender identity during the interview, we included them in our analysis. Because we limit our analysis to participants who identified as transgender at the time of data collection, this article does not reflect the experiences or perspectives of individuals who have transitioned in the past but no longer identify as transgender. While the overall study sample was more diverse than samples in many similar studies, the transgender participants were predominantly White, urban, well-educated, and non-heterosexual; see [Table 1](#) for demographic characteristics of the transgender-identified participants. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality, and participant names in this article are pseudonyms. Each participant was paid \$25 for taking part in the study.

Our general analytic strategy in this study parallels the approach described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), which is heavily influenced by, but not identical to, grounded theory. The initial analytic phase is open coding, which identifies a broad range of themes and ideas embedded in the data. Particular themes are selected for more intensive analysis through focused coding, which “involves building up and, in some cases, further elaborating analytically interesting themes” (p. 191) by drawing connections among the data as well as identifying subthemes to highlight variations within the broader theme. The results of the focused coding form the basis for analytic memos that describe relationships and patterns in the data, and these memos are the building blocks for writing up the findings.

For the current analysis, we examined all passages in the transcripts for the 20 transgender participants that received a code of “coming out” during the initial open coding of the data. We focus-coded these passages with more detailed descriptive codes, such as “adhere to gender expectations,” “passing,” “family response,” and “level of outness.” This step produced 19 focused codes. We then inductively organized the focused codes into three broad themes. For example, “anticipated support,” “anticipated lack of support,” “family response,” “friend response,” and “other response” were put together into a theme of navigating others’ reactions. Analytic memos on each of the three themes formed the basis for the findings we present here. In summary, we followed an inductive analytic process that resulted in a thematic content analysis.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants ( $n = 20$ ).

Name	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Age	Race	Education	Income*	Residence**
Debra	Transgender	Lesbian	52	White	Bachelor's	40-59K	Suburb
Monica	Transgender	Bisexual	58	White	Associate's	100-199K	Suburb
Ryan	Transgender	(no response)	42	White	(no response)	20-39K	Suburb
Steven	Transgender	Queer	38	White	Master's	80-99K	City
Robin	Transgender, Genderqueer	Gay, Queer	31	White	Master's	60-79K	Suburb
Sylvia	Transgender	Questioning	38	"Mixed"	Bachelor's	10-19K	City
Brianna	Transgender, "Post-Op Transsexual"***	Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer	54	White	Master's	60-79K	City
Helen	Intersex, Genderqueer	Asexual	55	White	Bachelor's	100-199K	City
Pat	Transgender, Genderqueer	Queer	30	White	Some College	20-39K	City
Travis	Transgender, Genderqueer	Queer	27	White	"Prof. Degree"	20-39K	City
Michael	Transgender, Genderqueer, Two-Spirit	Bisexual, Queer	36	White	Some College	20-39K	City
Irene	Genderqueer	Queer	30	Amer. Indian	Master's	60-79K	City
Kevin	Transgender	Queer, Bisexual	32	White	Associate's	20-39K	City
Arnie	Transgender	Bisexual, Queer	50	White	Master's	10-19K	City
Jeremy	Transgender	Gay, Queer, Homosexual	25	White	Bachelor's	20-19K	City
Anton	Transgender, Genderqueer,	Queer	25	White	Some College	<10K	City
Devin	Transgender	Bisexual	47	White	Some College	<10K	City
Melanie	Transgender, Genderqueer, "Tranny Girl"	Lesbian, Gay, Queer, Homosexual	25	White	Some College	10-19K	City
Amelia	"Omni-sexual"	(no response)	57	White	Some College	40-59K	City
Elena	Transgender	Lesbian	57	Amer. Indian	Bachelor's	10-19K	Rural

\*Reported household income.

\*\*City residence is Minneapolis or St. Paul, MN.

\*\*\*Quotation marks around an identity label indicate that it was written by the participant within the "other" category.

## Results

When asked about their transgender coming-out experiences, none of the participants focused on self-acceptance and the psychological processes involved with coming out. Although they may have been able to generate a story of internal psychological processes if directly asked, it is noteworthy that all 20 participants' coming-out narratives focused on social interactions and relationships with others. Participants told stories about either specific interactions or generalized relationships with family members, close friends, and co-workers. These stories revealed that the coming-out process is complex, interactional, and largely influenced by others. The data show that coming out as transgender is not merely an act of declaring one's gender identity to self and others. Rather, it is an ongoing and situational process of navigating the social implications of one's gender identity and gendered behavior.

With a focus on the socially dynamic nature of these transgender coming-out narratives, our analyses revealed three major themes. First, coming out as transgender involves *navigating others' gender expectations*. Many participants' stories included a discussion of others' gender expectations and how they altered their gender presentation in consideration of others' expectations and perceptions. Second, coming out as transgender involves *navigating others' reactions*. Participants' were greatly impacted by others' reactions to their gender identity. Participants' decisions to come out or not, and when, were based largely on how they predicted others would react. Third, coming out involves *navigating the threat of violence*. Personal safety concerns often determined how participants came out and to whom. Participants made coming-out decisions that would reduce the risk of violence.

### ***Navigating others' gender expectations***

In sharing their coming-out stories, nine participants shared extensively about the significance of others' gender expectations and perceptions. Some participants focused on specific others, such as parents or classmates, and some participants indicated that the general cultural expectations of gender influenced their coming out. Participants described coming out as a process of navigating gender expectations and altering their gendered behavior and presentation accordingly. Debra, a 52-year-old, White, transgender woman, who was living amicably with her ex-wife at the time of the interview, described her parents as loving and her childhood as happy. However, based on others' gender expectations of her, she suppressed her feminine interests as a child and went to great lengths to demonstrate masculinity as a young adult. Debra stated:

I was never interested in sports, and I had a whole wide range of interests, some of which were discouraged because I wanted to learn how to cook, I wanted to learn how to sew. Well, back then we didn't have home ec[onomics] for boys. We only had shop class ... But I also wanted to know this other stuff. Well, it wasn't encouraged. So, it was a little bit of a challenge growing up ... I tried to be this guy that people wanted me to be. I even joined the Marine Corps. I wasn't going to join the Army or the Air Force, because those ... weren't masculine enough. They weren't macho enough. I had to be a Marine.

Debra's words reflect early memories of how she took account of others' gender expectations and how this impacted major life decisions such as joining the military. Other participants had similar memories from their early years and similar behavioral responses. Elena, a 57-year-old, American Indian woman, grew up on a reservation with a strict father. She described becoming aware that she was not a "typical boy" by age 8. She did not tell her parents because she feared her father's response. Instead, Elena disguised her gender identity with hypermasculinity well into adulthood:

So, I mulled through it and somehow finished high school and decided, "OK I'm going to get off the reservation here so what should I do? Well, I'll join the Navy." So, I joined the Navy and I had a little more realization of what was going on then but at that time there wasn't a lot of resources out there. And then I was trying to hide the fact that this was possible within me so I did every conceivable, super macho thing I could think of, military being one of them. Drinking and drugging being the other two favorite things ... I mean I worked at a full-time job but I spent a lot of my time in the alcoholic drug world and I also was a dealer too. So, a bunch of us really liked Harley Davidsons so we started a bike group—really macho. Again, anything to hide ... I always thought "People can see right through me."

Elena's narrative parallels Debra's history of embracing hypermasculine pursuits to deflect suspicion about her ability to fulfill her assigned gender role. Yet these efforts were never enough to completely erase the fear of being perceived as failing in that role.

Melanie, age 25, grew up in upstate New York with her brother and parents. At the time of the interview she was a line cook at a popular downtown restaurant, having worked in restaurants since age 14. Melanie did not have many resources to help her understand her gender identity. She became aware that she was a girl prior to the start of high school, but Melanie's therapist told her she was just a confused boy. Melanie responded by trying "to be as macho and manly" as she could be for a few years before exploring her gender identity again. Similarly, Ryan, a 42-year-old transgender man, who was raised in a small town in South Dakota, described a specific memory of seeing a male wrestler on television and wanting to be just like him, but knowing he had to keep that desire to himself: "But I knew

that I couldn't tell my parents, because that was not okay. At least at that time it was definitely not okay. Not an okay thing to even think about."

Ryan went on to talk about how he knew it was "not okay" through his mother's attempts to feminize him. He said:

And my mother, damn, man, she did everything she could to make sure that I would be feminine. She was really workin' it hard, man. I mean every year we would fight during school shopping season. "You will wear the pink skirt, you will. The make-up, the eyeshadow, the hair. Don't you want to attract the boys?" "No! I don't. Don't you get it, Ma!?"

Ryan's narrative reveals both a sense that his gender identity must be concealed and a certain willingness to openly resist some of the gender expectations imposed on him in his youth. Like Ryan, Brianna, a 54-year-old, White, self-described "post-op transsexual," knew she needed to keep her gender identity to herself as a child. She was aware that she was a girl by age 5. Brianna started expressing her gender identity at age 11, but in an extremely limited way due to the gender expectations she felt from her community in a small northern Minnesota town. Brianna said: "You know, [I] start[ed] finding clothes and doing what [I could] with it, and deciding how much of it I could get away with on a social level, which, in the atmosphere I perceived in north Minnesota was none."

Deciding whether and how to adhere to specific and generalized others' gender expectations was a significant challenge that many participants encountered. Without the imposition of others' gender expectations, participants perhaps would have felt more comfortable expressing their gender identity at an earlier age. For example, Arnie, a 50-year-old transgender man, had parents who were both doctors. He believes that his masculine gender expression as a child was allowed by his mother due to his parents' lack of religiosity and the looser cultural gender boundaries for girls compared to boys. He noted:

But I identified on the male end of the spectrum when I was a little kid, and my mother was pretty laid back about it. I think it was a lot easier; it would have been harder if it had been my brother wanting to wear dresses than it was me wanting to wear jeans. I mean, that's just the reality of the way things work in this country, in our culture.

The greater restrictions on the gender of boys and men compared to girls and women is just one of the complexities of others' gender expectations that transgender people must navigate. Arnie's and other participants' experiences demonstrate that transgender people do not simply decide between a gender presentation based on assigned sex or one based on gender identity. Rather, gender presentation is often a socially negotiated interplay between the nuanced and variable expectations of others and one's gender identity. For example, Michael, a 36-year-old transgender

man, who came out as bisexual at age 19 and then as transgender in his early 30s, described how others' conflation of gender presentation and sexual orientation has affected responses to his coming out:

When I was living as female I was always read as lesbian because I looked somewhat like a guy. And so, I think if anything people would be surprised that I identified as bi rather than as a dyke. And actually, I'm having somewhat of a similar experience post transition now because people are surprised that I don't identify as gay. Like, I'm usually read as gay. I've got some experience with like every letter in the acronym!

Michael's experience highlights the complexity of negotiating gender expectations that are sometimes entwined with assumptions and expectations about sexual orientation. Irene, a 30-year-old transgender and genderqueer person, who grew up in rural North Dakota with four younger siblings, discussed the personal impact of others' gender perceptions, specifically the lack of sophisticated cultural understandings of gender and sexual orientation. Irene observed:

I think that with regard to my own gender identity and the way that I play that out in the world, I feel that my options are pretty limited. Like, I feel like the way I'm perceived is not that way that I necessarily feel, and the way that I act is sometimes not even the way that I feel, it's just what my options have been. So like, I feel like you can either be sort of butch or fem, and I don't really feel like either of those things. You can either be a lesbian or you can be ... like if you were born female, you can either be a lesbian or you can be trans and I don't really feel like either of those things. I think if you are a more male, masculine, female-born person, then you're sort of automatically assumed to be lesbian and I don't know that I even necessarily identify with that anymore. I think ... I think sometimes I identified as being a lesbian because I appear so, in some ways so masculine that I can't imagine ... my sexual orientation got defined by my gender presentation more than anything else. Because it's not so much about who I'm attracted to, but who might be attracted to me, and that feels sort of [like] ... evolving processes of identity. And maybe I'm asking a lot for it to be that wide open, but it would be nice if it was, you know.

Like Michael, Irene found that gender expression is often read as determinative of sexual orientation; Irene expressed frustration about the inability to escape gender expectations and assumptions about the meaning of gender presentation.

Robin, a 31-year-old transgender and genderqueer man, who lives with his partner in the city, expressed a great deal of concern over others' perceptions of his gender: "I feel uncomfortable in traditional women's clothes but I also respect other people's need for boxes to put people in, and so, I don't want to make other people uncomfortable by being overly mannish." He went on to say, "I'm not one of those people who needs to use gender neutral pronouns, I think it makes life difficult for people to do that, so you can call me

whatever you want. I don't really care." When Robin had to figure out what to wear to a company holiday party, he gave considerable thought to the comfort of his co-workers:

Situations where people tend to, you know, guys tend to wear suits and ties and women tend to wear formal dresses or what have you, I feel a little bit uncomfortable going into those situations, but I wouldn't say I avoid them. They don't come around all that often. My company's holiday party is a semi-formal affair ... but I managed to figure out something that was appropriate and didn't make other people uncomfortable. I just wore a tailored suit, but you know, all the other girls in the office were talking about what their dresses were like and I was like, you know, I'm not ... I'd rather talk to the guys, you know.

Participants' focus on the gender expectations of others reveals that coming out as transgender is not merely an act of no longer caring what others think. It is, instead, an ongoing and situational navigation of how to present one's gender considering others' binary gender perceptions and expectations. This socially dynamic, continual process is also present in participants' discussion of whether to come out and to whom.

### ***Navigating others' reactions***

Participants' coming-out narratives were heavily focused on how they expected their friends and family to respond to the news of their gender identity. Anticipated support or lack of support was an influential factor in participants' decision to come out or not and to whom. Expecting a negative reaction, some participants waited years to come out to certain people, whereas other participants reported a rather uneventful coming-out experience due to others' already having an assumed knowledge and acceptance of their gender identity. Coming out is a process of navigating both the anticipated and the actual reactions of others.

Debra was afraid that her family would reject her, just as several other transgender people she knew had experienced after they came out to their families. She described her hesitation to come out:

We could talk for hours about the number of people that I know that have been thrown out of their families. They have been sued by in-laws, so that they never see their own children. I heard of one woman who is a cardiologist outside of Atlanta, and she came home one day and her then-wife had put all of her belongings in boxes and suitcases on the driveway with a note attached, "I've changed the locks. Get out of my life." And on and on and on about cases like that. So, I was very fearful about coming out, because I read more cases of non-support than I did of support. And so, I was very fearful about it. And it was not an unfounded fear, knowing the possibility of how people might react, not having much of an understanding about transgender identity.

Despite her fears, Debra made the decision to come out to her family and friends prior to her transition. Her decision was a strategic one. Debra thought others would react more negatively if she started her transition prior to coming out: “I wanted to tell everybody before I presented to them as Debra, and so, it added to the stress of transitioning at the time.” Even though it was challenging, Debra does not regret her decision. In fact, she was grateful for the surprising amount of support she received during her transition: “It gave me the support of friends and family and colleagues that I didn’t think I would have.” Debra also decided to come out to everyone she knew to avoid dealing with the reactions of people who might figure out that she was transgender: “One of the reasons that I wanted my transition to be complete, and not be living part time in two different worlds, is I didn’t want to have that fear. I didn’t want to be worried about, well, somebody might figure it out. Somebody might know who I am.”

Debra’s assessment of her coming-out process and transition was also based on the reactions of others. Because her friends, family, and co-workers responded positively to the news of her gender identity, Debra viewed her transition as uneventful: “And it turns out people were much better than I think either [my partner] or I thought would be, about my transition. And so, life continues on very much as it has . . . So, it’s been good for me. I’ve had a good transition.” Ryan also based his assessment of his coming-out process on others’ reactions. He shared the experience of his first time using the men’s room as an example of how positive his coming-out experience was:

I was just thinking about the initial anxiety of, like, because there aren’t really any unisex bathrooms really on campus. So, going to the men’s room for the first time in my workplace, I mean it’s like, some tall guy standing by the urinal, like “Hey! Welcome to the men’s room.” And I’m thinkin’, “I thought the etiquette was we don’t talk in here!?” But overall, I have to say, everybody’s gotten my name and pronoun right, and no problems there.

Ryan would rather have used a unisex bathroom because he anticipated a negative response from other men in the men’s bathroom. However, after receiving such a positive response in the bathroom and in other interactions, he assessed his coming-out experience as having “no problems.”

Steven, a 38-year-old transgender man, described his adoptive parents as being in denial since he came out to them. They were professors who became missionaries when Steven was in middle school. During Steven’s adulthood, his parents have continued to do mission work abroad, often in locations without Internet access. Steven decided to delay coming out to them and transitioning until his parents retired so that they would have access to online transgender-related resources. At the time of the interview it had been more than three years since Steven came out to them and began transitioning.

Steven said they still do not accept his identity. He expressed uncertainty about his parents' response to his next stages of transitioning:

So, I think it'll be very interesting once I'm really beyond the point of no return in terms of low voice and beard and all that kind of thing ... how they'll react to that, because then they really can't pretend anymore. We'll see. That's an unknown right now. But in the meantime, they still do stay in contact with me.

Even though he suspected that his parents would respond negatively to his permanent transition to manhood, Steven calculated that the geographical distance between them would act as a buffer. He explained:

And so, we're, we are in contact with each other every week or two, and just kind of update each other on the now, news and whatnot. But, so I think, this is going to be the next big test ... informing them that, okay, I'm going ahead with phases of the transition that are irreversible. It's not a matter of me growing my hair out or something, it's like, my voice is going to drop, and it's gonna stay there for the rest of my life ... So I think that's gonna push the issue for them again. It'll be a little less acute I think because they don't have to see me, and they live in Arkansas.

Likewise, Robin is fearful of further damaging his relationship with his parents. He described his parents as having a limited acceptance of gender identity and sexuality, still thinking of him as a woman. Robin said he is "guarded" about what he shares with his parents, referring to his new girlfriend as a roommate, for example. His parents' response to the end of his previous relationship affected Robin's current level of outness with them:

I'd like to be able to say you know, my girlfriend said such and such a thing instead of my roommate. And I think the time is coming when I'm going to have to do that. Because ... the time has gone by and they've gotten used to the idea a little bit. And I was with somebody for five years and they knew about her, and they were ultimately, relatively accepting of it, but once I was single it was like our relationship changed, and they were more present. They seemed to be more interested in what was going on, and they would be more supportive. And so I'm afraid of losing that sort of tenuous hold that I have on them by saying that I've got another girlfriend.

Robin's words capture the delicacy of the process of navigating coming out, and the ways gender identity and sexual orientation are sometimes intertwined in that process.

For Michael, his anxiety prior to coming out as bisexual stemmed from not knowing how his mother would react, even though he suspected she would be supportive:

But when I came out to my mom at like 19, I was totally nervous. Like, "Oh my god." I had no idea how ... I figured she would be cool but I didn't really know how she'd react. And so, I was really nervous. And I had this grand plan where I was going to take her to lunch one day and have this speech prepared and everything. And so I sit her down and I'm going through my speech and I'm

like, “Hey, I’m dating a girl.” And used the term bi and she’s like, “Well yeah, I know.” I’m like, “You know? How did you know and I didn’t know!?”

Due to his mom’s acceptance of his bisexual identity, when Michael came out again, this time as transgender, he did not hesitate to tell her:

And, actually, when I came out to her as trans it was pretty similar. Her response was, “Yeah, I was wondering when you were going to tell me that.” So yeah, there’s been a little bit of . . . like it’s been a bit of an adjustment on her part. She’s been supportive the whole time but there’s, even today, there’s the occasional pronoun slip. I think she’s had a little bit of a hard time with it, although she actively tries to be supportive.

Michael’s mother’s more hesitant acceptance of his transgender identity may not have been quite the reaction Michael expected, but he assessed her response as generally positive. Michael reported that due to how many people he has had to come out to and the number of times others’ reactions were different than what he anticipated, he has stopped trying to guess how people will respond:

Well, as trans, [coming out] is an ongoing thing for sure. Like every time I turn around there’s another person I need to come out to. It’s going on five years. It’s kind of funny, some that I expected would totally be supportive I just stopped hearing from them. And some that I expected it would be really open or there would be even open hostility, have been great. So, I’ve given up trying to predict!

Similar to Michael, Travis decided to disclose his gender identity to his family before telling anyone else. Travis, a 27-year-old who identifies as both transgender and genderqueer, grew up in the Dakotas with an older sister, mom, and dad. Travis initially came out to his parents as a lesbian. Their response was supportive, but they were hurt to know that Travis had not told them sooner or included them in the process of figuring out his identity. In response to his parents’ reaction, when Travis came out again, this time as transgender and genderqueer, he “really tried to include them,” asking for their support in “helping me figure out what was going on and what I wanted to do about it, and what the implications would be for those relationships.”

Like Travis, Irene made a strategic decision in the timing of coming out to mitigate potential negative reactions. Irene postponed coming out to family for years due to the anticipation of how they might respond. However, Irene was not primarily concerned with parental rejection: “I remember my thought process being that they could think whatever they wanted, they were adults and if they chose not to ever speak to me again, that would be fine.” Irene was, however, worried that their parents would restrict contact with younger siblings who still lived at home:

But the thing I sort of hesitated coming out to them about was that they had control over my siblings and I couldn’t imagine being taken away from them. So, I waited, because I really had to sort of test the waters to figure out whether or not it

was going to destroy my connection with them because I felt like if I lost connections with my brothers and sister, I thought I would die. Like, I couldn't imagine that.

Irene's example demonstrates how the limited ability to control the potential fallout from coming-out influences decisions about who to come out to and when. Even though Irene was prepared to accept possible rejection from their parents, Irene was fearful of the ripple effects of identity disclosure in terms of access to younger siblings, and that resulted in the postponement of coming out to their family.

Devin, a 47-year-old, White, transgender man, began transitioning at age 44. He grew up with two brothers and parents, whom he described as sexist and racist. At the time of the interview Devin's only income was from Social Security Disability, and he was a recovering alcoholic. Devin shared his fear of coming out within his recovery group and how he navigated the potential reactions of fellow members:

But the majority of people that are my friends and my network are in the recovery community, and that was really scary for me. And I was saying earlier before we began, I had a very female name, and I was like, "How am I gonna do this with the recovery program?" because you introduce yourself every single time, and I knew the transition would be slow. So about three years ago, I started with my home group, and said, you know, "I've made some decisions," and just told the group that I was gonna be transitioning and transgender. And what I started doing was introducing myself as, "My last name is Johnson and I'm an alcoholic." And you know, I did that at other meetings that I went to . . . That's a little out of the curve, so some people would ask, and if I didn't really know them or didn't want to share, I would say, you know, "I'm going through a name change," and other people I kind of let them in slowly.

Devin experienced a certain amount of apprehension about coming out as transgender to a social group of high importance to him—his recovery community—and found an innovative way to manage the possible confusion caused by his transition.

Anton, a White, transgender, and genderqueer student at a small, private liberal arts college, described his selectivity in disclosing his transgender identity based on the responses he received from his various social groups. Anton was raised in a church that consisted primarily of lesbian, gay, and bisexual members. Anton described his mother as bisexual and his father as effeminate. Thus it was no surprise to Anton that his parents responded positively when he came out as transgender. However, Anton still did not feel comfortable being completely out in all of his social circles due to negative reactions from others. He explained:

And, I don't know, I guess, I feel sometimes like the communities, I feel like I'm kind of always walking on fences, between different communities . . . I think the recovery community people are excited that other people are showing up and are

in recovery, but I haven't always had, like, strictly awesome reactions to trans stuff in the recovery community. So, I think I'm always on guard when it comes to that at meetings, just a little bit, and I feel like in the punk community I'm less on guard about being trans.

Like Devin, Anton expressed concerned about reactions within the recovery community, an important source of social support in his life. The past or anticipated negative reactions of others in the recovery community resulted in both participants deciding to be strategically less revealing of their gender identity.

Like our first finding regarding others' gender expectations, participants' concern over others' reactions to their gender identity indicates that coming out is a situational and complex social process. Transgender people must anticipate others' responses and plan whether to come out, when to come out, and how to come out in a manner that they hope will maximize the positive reaction from others and minimize negative responses. Beyond considering the level of acceptance others may have, transgender people must also consider the worst-case scenario, a reaction of violence.

### ***Navigating the threat of violence***

At the time of the interview, everyone in our study was out to at least a handful of significant people in their lives. Several participants reported being selective in whom they came out to. However, some participants, such as Pat, a 30-year-old transgender man who also identifies as genderqueer, were completely out, making sure that everyone they knew was aware of their gender identity. Prior to transitioning, as a young 20-something, Pat ended a marriage to a man and came out as bisexual. A few months later Pat came out as a "dyke," an identity that Pat said had more resonance than the lesbian identity. Then, a few years prior to the interview, Pat came out as transgender. When Pat told their parents, they did not respond well. Pat then decided to come out to extended family in a letter because not being out to them was posing increasing challenges. For example, at one family function, Pat's grandparents asked Pat to take a young cousin to the women's bathroom. However, the young girl told Pat, "You can't come in here; you're a boy." Pat now continues to come out to everyone. Pat explained that this was an intentional strategy to manage the threat of transphobic violence:

And I think partly for me, I think it's part of the way I negotiate my safety, because generally I've found that when people tend to freak out is when they feel like they're in a vulnerable situation and they get surprised by something. I mean the stories you hear about really horrific crimes against trans people are often when people are found out, and people feel threatened and whatever. And so ... I sometimes out myself before I might otherwise if I feel like I'll be safer that way by just letting people know ahead of time this is what you're dealing

with. I recently went to an event in Chicago with a bunch of people I didn't know, and we were going to be sharing hotel rooms with people we didn't know. So I talked to the organizers and I wrote an email to everybody being there. Because it was like, okay, would you rather, they just were going to put us in rooms with people of the same gender. I wasn't sure if there was anybody who had a similar gender identity to me, but I kind of doubted it. And I didn't want to just be thrown into a room with a stranger and then have them be, like, and then out myself as trans while we're doing our work and then have them be uncomfortable in a room.

Pat decided to disclose their gender identity to everyone to minimize potential violent reactions. Such safety concerns related to outness were common among participants. Some participants linked safety to their ability to "pass" as cisgender. Melanie talked about how transgender women are especially not safe in public due to an inability to pass. She described trans men's greater likelihood of passing as a privilege: "I think a lot of it is just simple privilege. Like I don't get to walk down the street and just be perceived as a woman. I don't get to do anything in public and not have my gender questioned. And in the past, that's put me in some situations."

However, Ryan did not see himself as having a greater ability to pass as a transgender man. Ryan said that he feels less fear in public now as a man than he did when he presented as a woman, but his fear of violence now stems from his lack of ability to always pass as a man due to his small stature. He stated:

It's a whole bag of fear really. You know, really it is . . . Because there's fear of, you know, I've always felt fear because I'm small. I think as a woman, and particularly a small woman, I felt a lot more in danger in certain situations. Like being downtown Minneapolis/St. Paul very late at night . . . in some kind of context where I would be a target for someone. And I feel less that way now, but still not completely safe, just because of my size. But the passing thing, unless you're a trans man that has a full beard and a genetic code that gives you a lot of body hair and a lot of facial hair, I think you're always gonna be . . . What is the term? Clocked. I've been clocked. I still kinda wonder sometimes, is that dude staring at me because he's clocked me? Or is he staring at me because, like, "man that dude is really small"? You know, and that could be it. It could very well be it, but I'm never gonna know, cause I'm not gonna ask him. I'm not gonna say, oh dude, why are you starin' at me?

Ryan's case illustrates the limits of some trans men's ability to feel safe from the threat of violence in certain situations. Even though he generally feels less fearful than he did as a woman, his size places limits on his ability to pass, which opens up the risk of being "clocked" and violently punished for his gender identity.

Even if a transgender person passes physically, they may not pass in other ways. Arnie, who participated in our focus group of trans men, explained how he navigated the potential risk of being outed to his boss

through his credit report. Arnie decided to out himself first to ensure his own safety:

And the ID thing is so problematic, because I've changed my birth certificate, my driver's license, my Social Security card, not the number. But I have two records for credit with each bureau, one under each name, and so, you know, God knows what the computers are bringing up, any time anybody [checks my credit] ... I just got a new job, and they said because I'm in a public space and dealing with children and vulnerable adults, they wanted to do a background check. And I said, you know, "that's fine, but you need to know I'm transgendered and here's my other name." You know, I mean, you have to do it, because otherwise you're gonna be looked at as fraudulent. You know ... that's my livelihood, that's my safety.

Arnie equates being perceived as fraudulent with a security risk, and, indeed, being viewed as fraudulent can jeopardize safety for transgender people. Jeremy, also in the focus group, explained how just by "virtue of being trans" he can be prosecuted for fraud due to having more than one name and gender in various legal documents. Jeremy, a 25-year-old transgender man, first came out to himself at age 8. He spent his teenage years associated with lesbian and gay student organizations that did not have any resources for transgender youth, so he continued to present himself as a girl and ended up marrying a man at age 17. After his divorce at age 20, he came out as a queer woman and then 6 months later as a transgender man. Jeremy described how the repercussions he faced after changing his legal name and the threat of violence in male prisons have kept him from changing his legal gender, too:

I went through hell with Social Security, and now, every time anyone runs an ID check, or if I'm trying to get student aid for law school or whatever else, I get flagged as two people under my Social Security number, because I legally changed my first name and not my last name. And I won't change, maybe in the future I will, but right now I don't want to change the legal marker, my sex marker, on my documentation, because God forbid, should anything happen, not that I would ever commit a crime, but should anything happen that I were to be implicated and receive jail time, I'm not going to a male prison because I won't come out of it alive. I mean, the prison system is horrifying, in the way that trans people are treated, and placed within the prison system, Oh God.

Other members of the focus group nodded or said "yeah" in agreement with Jeremy. Jeremy also shared how he and his transgender friends avoided interactions with law enforcement officials, even when they were innocent and needed help. With others continuing to nod, apparently to indicate similar experiences, Jeremy said:

Like, when we get in car accidents, so many of my friends do not call the police [even] if they are on the right side of a car accident, because they do not trust the cops to look at their ID and not create a shitstorm. And I wish I could [call the police], and often that's not what would happen, but that 20% of the time (and it's gotta be at least 20% of the time, 'cause Lord knows, I've been in it and I'm seeing

you guys nod), but yeah, like, that risk is too high. And people really, like, trans people are not getting their needs met. And they're refusing to try to get their needs met, because of fear of prejudice from systems of power.

Jeremy's observations poignantly reveal how transgender people must maintain a certain degree of suspicion toward the very people—law enforcement—who in theory should be protecting them from violence.

Coming out as transgender requires navigating the threat of violence. As Ryan pointed out, "passing" may act as a guard against some of the violence transgender people experience in public, but even transgender people who generally "pass" must still anticipate the potential safety implications of coming out or being outed in various situations. The level of caution transgender people are required to take in revealing their identity is considered alongside the need to enact a gendered performance that verifies their identity. Consistent with the previous two findings, having to navigate the threat of violence demonstrates that coming out as transgender is a dynamic social process that is ongoing and situational. The complex, social nature of the transgender coming-out process was summed up by one of our participants. Brianna, who was not completely satisfied with her deep voice and other masculine features of her body, still described her physical transition as easy compared to the social aspects of coming out. She said: "The physical was probably the easiest in a lot of ways. The social, I think, is where it was more of an adapting process."

## Discussion

Our study revealed three major findings. First, transgender individuals must navigate the gender role expectations of others, consciously deciding whether to adhere to them. This is an ongoing process that starts long before transitioning. Compared to cisgender people, transgender people may be much more keenly aware of the role expectations attached to their at-birth assigned gender because they have not internalized them. Prior to transitioning, rather than enacting gendered behavior based on an identity, the enactment of gender is an attempt to meet external role expectations. After transitioning, gendered behavior is an attempt to achieve identity verification, but positive reflected appraisals may be difficult to attain. Thus, as our participants indicated, enacting gender is often a conscious and concerted socially interactive effort both prior to and after transitioning.

Second, transgender individuals must navigate the anticipated and actual responses of others. The ongoing assessment of others' reactions starts long before revealing one's gender identity to another person. Reflected appraisals and anticipated reflected appraisals significantly affect decisions about who to come out to, when, and how. Transgender people use a high level of sophistication to manage their gendered behavior, enacted meanings, and gender

identity disclosures across social contexts containing mixed reflected appraisals. Even transgender people who are “completely out” continually anticipate and assess the reflected appraisals of others in new social situations and make strategic decisions about when and how to disclose their gender identity.

Third, transgender individuals must navigate the threat of violence. Transgender people must seriously consider personal safety risks when revealing their gender identity. Beyond receiving negative reflected appraisals, transgender individuals anticipate the real possibility that others’ negative appraisals will be demonstrated violently. In many cases, transgender people are forced to make a tradeoff between their level of outness and personal safety. They are faced with a unique situation where the pursuit of identity verification is weighed against the threat of violence. The level of caution transgender people have to take in revealing their identity might compromise their ability to attain identity verification across social contexts in the same way that most cisgender people are able to attain gender identity verification.

It is also noteworthy that not all transgender people strongly identify with the transgender identity or the male/female gender binary. Many transgender people, including several of our participants, identify as genderqueer in addition to the transgender identity. A genderqueer identity adds another level of complexity in seeking identity verification. Genderqueer participants often discussed the challenges of navigating social situations where the gender binary was particularly pervasive (such as formal-attire events). Their recognition of others’ discomfort and confusion surrounding their gender identity led many genderqueer participants to sometimes strategically adhere to expectations that did not match their gender identity. Although we cannot generalize based on the small number of people in our study who identify as genderqueer, we speculate that transgender individuals who also identify as genderqueer may be less likely to seek identity verification for their genderqueer identity across social groups and contexts because they know they are not likely to receive positive reflected appraisals.

Based on our findings, it appears that transgender individuals make intentional and strategic decisions about revealing their gender identity and enacting gendered behavior based on the specific reflected appraisals of others. Scholars should conceptualize transgender coming out as an ongoing social process, not only because transgender individuals must make decisions about identity disclosure every time they meet a new person, but also because coming out involves a constant navigation of the social implications of having a gender identity that is not well accepted. This involves continual assessments of specific social contexts even when people in other social contexts have long known about the transgender identity. Our results show that coming out as transgender is a socially situated, ongoing process of

navigating others' gender expectations, reflected appraisals, and potential acts of violence.

These findings are in line with the more recent LGB coming-out literature that recognizes coming out as a socially conditioned, lifelong process rather than a time-limited series of internal psychological stages. Our results indicate that transgender coming out should also be understood within the social context. Transgender people make socially situated decisions about gender enactment and identity disclosure. Our results are somewhat consistent with Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) findings that transgender identity development may be limited depending on the social context. However, rather than postulate coming out and the social context as fundamentally at odds, we argue that coming out is a social act, completely dependent on and embedded in the social context. In this sense, coming out may be limited or facilitated by external social factors, but, either way, coming out is always influenced by the social context.

Our findings deviate from the stage models of transgender identity development. Just as Cox and Gallois (1996) suggested for LGB identities, transgender identities are largely influenced by varying social conditions. The stage models for transgender identity development do not consider the social complexity of gender identity processes. To suggest that a transgender person is more psychologically healthy when they are out to everyone and heavily involved in their local transgender community compared to a transgender person who is out only to certain people and not involved in a transgender community ignores the varying levels of transgender identity acceptance across social groups, the safety risks involved in identity disclosure, and the identity management skills transgender people employ in attempting to achieve identity verification.

Our findings are also consistent with Orne's (2011) concept of "strategic outness." Our participants described coming out as strategically deciding to disclose their gender identity based on specific social contexts. The participants altered their gendered behavior and level of disclosure between different social groups and settings depending on their assessment of others' reflected appraisals. As Orne concluded about gay men, our study suggests that transgender people "are never fully 'out' or 'closeted'" (2011, p. 698).

Although our data do not speak to the accuracy of the closet metaphor in the past, we argue that it is not currently useful for understanding transgender identity disclosure. In contrast to other research suggesting that the closet metaphor is no longer useful due to an increase in the acceptance of sexual and gender-identity minorities (Savin-Williams, 2006; Seidman, 2002; Seidman et al., 1999), our study suggests that the lack of widespread acceptance makes coming out as transgender a complex, ongoing, situational process of identity management that renders the mutually exclusive categories of "in the closet" or "out of the closet" inapplicable. We also did not

find that coming out was an insignificant experience. To the contrary, our data show that coming out is an ever-present phenomenon for transgender people. The idea of coming out of the closet and staying out does not reflect the socially nuanced nature of identity disclosure. It would be absurd to characterize a transgender person as “out of the closet” in the morning, back “in the closet” during the afternoon, and partially “out of the closet” in the evening, depending on with whom they are interacting during any given day. The situational nature of gender identity disclosure is what makes the closet metaphor unsuitable.

Our data also do not support Zimman’s (2009) definition of transgender coming out as only a pre-transition declaration. Our broad interview question about coming out elicited narratives from both pre-transition and post-transition stages of the life course. The transgender participants in this study did not describe their coming out as a discrete, pre-transition event. Rather, they talked about it as a lifelong process that extends far past the transition period. Also in contrast to Zimman’s analysis, some of our participants expressed a moral imperative to be out, and some did not. These findings are in line with Guittar and Rayburn’s (2016) conceptualization of LGBQ coming out as “a career.” Our study indicates that transgender coming out is an ongoing “career” for transgender individuals as well.

Even though our results indicate that coming out as transgender should be conceptualized within the same socially dynamic, continual-processes frame that scholars have more recently applied to LGB coming out, we agree with Zimman (2009) that transgender identities should be studied and understood as distinct from LGB identities. We find it problematic to assume that findings from studies of LGB people apply to transgender people. Thus it is noteworthy that in addition to our key findings that indicate certain similarities between transgender and LGB coming out, our data also reveal several points of departure from LGB coming out. For example, many of our participants discussed coming out multiple times, often as lesbian, gay, or bisexual prior to or after coming out as transgender. The intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity presents transgender people with an added layer of complexity in making identity disclosure decisions. Our data are consistent with Bockting et al.’s (2009) study in that some participants chose to disclose either their gender identity or sexual orientation, but not always both.

Our findings also demonstrate that many transgender people must deal with the imperative to come out due to the difference between their gender presentation pre-transition and post-transition. Transgender people do not have the option of maintaining their pre-transition social ties without coming out. Gender-conforming LGB people do not have such an external imperative to come out. Furthermore, while not all transgender people desire to

“pass” as male or female, those who do may not always be able to pass due to physical characteristics. Thus many transgender people must navigate how to handle an unwanted or forced level of outness among social groups they were part of pre-transition and sometimes among new social groups and settings for the rest of their lives. The threat of violence further complicates the imperative to come out and any attempt to pass. These dimensions of coming out are unique to transgender and genderqueer people.

In summary, our findings confirm the value of an approach to transgender coming out that emphasizes the social nature of this process and sees it not only as discrete identity development events, but as an ongoing identity-management process. Even the coming-out narratives that seem most internal, such as an early memory of trying to act masculine or feminine, contain specific or generalized others whose expectations and anticipated reactions shape individuals’ gendered behavior and outness. Their stories of coming out illustrate transgender people’s heightened sensitivity and skill in responding to variable social contexts that offer a range of responses from acceptance and affirmation to rejection, or even physical danger.

Our data provide valuable insight into transgender coming-out experiences, but the study has some limitations. Our sample of transgender participants is small and nonrandom, limiting the generalizability of our results. The small sample size also makes it difficult to make meaningful comparisons within the transgender subsample. (For example, it appears that participants under 40 are more likely to identify as genderqueer than participants over 40, but we decline to explore such differences based on only 20 individual cases.) Although the larger study went to considerable lengths to recruit a sample with diversity along several key dimensions, the transgender subsample is somewhat socially homogeneous, with most of the transgender participants being White, well-educated, urban, non-elderly, and queer-identified in terms of sexual orientation. As previously noted, this sample includes only people currently identifying as transgender or genderqueer, so it does not include the perspectives of people who have completed a gender transition and no longer identify as transgender. The relative lack of diversity of the subsample further limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the data were collected prior to recent social and political developments in transgender rights (such as, for example, highly publicized battles over laws curtailing transgender individuals’ access to public restrooms). Despite these limitations, the narratives of our participants provide a valuable window into the distinctive features of transgender coming-out experiences and the skills employed to navigate the social complexities of transgender coming out. We look forward to future research with larger and more diverse samples that might confirm or extend this study’s findings.

## Note

1. See Valentine (2007) for a thoughtful ethnographic inquiry into the emergence of the category of *transgender*.

## Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the late Timothy Ortyl, co-principal investigator on the project.

## Funding

This article is based on research supported by the the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law and the following University of Minnesota funding sources: College of Liberal Arts; Life Course Center; Office of the Dean of the Graduate School; and Office for Multicultural and Academic Affairs.

## References

- Armstrong, E. A. (2002). *Forging gay identities: Organizing sexuality in San Francisco, 1950–1994*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bockting, W., Benner, A., & Coleman, E. (2009). Gay and bisexual identity development among female-to-male transsexuals in North America: Emergence of a transgender sexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 38*(5), 688–701. doi:10.1007/s10508-009-9489-3
- Bockting, W., & Coleman, E. (2016). Developmental stages of the transgender coming-out process: Toward an integrated identity. In R. Ettner, S. Monstrey, & E. Coleman (Eds.), *Principles of transgender medicine and surgery* (2nd ed., pp. 137–158). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Brown-Saracino, J. (2015). How places shape identity: The origins of distinctive LBQ identities in four small U.S. Cities. *American Journal of Sociology, 121*(1), 1–63. doi:10.1086/682066
- Burke, P. J., & Cast, A. D. (1997). Stability and change in the gender identities of newly married couples. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 60*(4), 277–290. doi:10.2307/2787090
- Burke, P. J., & Reitzes, D. C. (1981). The link between identity and role performance. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 44*(2), 83–92. doi:10.2307/3033704
- Burke, P. J., Stets, J. E., & Pirog-Good, M. A. (1988). Gender identity, self-esteem, and physical and sexual abuse in dating relationships. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 51*(3), 272–285. doi:10.2307/2786925
- Carrion, V. G., & Lock, J. (1997). The coming out process: Developmental stages for sexual minority youth. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2*(3), 369–377. doi:10.1177/1359104597023005
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexuality identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*(3), 219–235. doi:10.1300/J082v04n03\_01
- Coleman, E. (1982). Developmental stages of the coming out process. *Journal of Homosexuality, 7*(2–3), 31–43. doi:10.1300/J082v07n02\_06
- Coleman-Fountain, E. (2014). *Understanding narrative identity through lesbian and gay youth*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cox, S., & Gallois, C. (1996). Gay and lesbian identity development: A social identity perspective. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30(4), 1–30. doi:10.1300/J082v30n04\_01
- Devor, A. H. (2004). Witnessing and mirroring: A fourteen stage model of transsexual identity formation. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 8(1–2), 41–67.
- Eliason, M. J., & Schope, R. (2007). Shifting sands or solid foundation? Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity formation. In H. M. Ilan & M. E. Northridge (Eds.), *The health of sexual minorities: Public health perspectives on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations* (pp. 3–26). New York, NY: Springer.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Processing fieldnotes: Coding and memoing. Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed., pp. 142–168). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Flores, A. R., Herman, J. L., Gates, G. J., & Brown, T. N. T. (2016). *How many adults identify as transgender in the United States?* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.
- Gagne, P., Tewksbury, R., & McGaughey, D. (1997). Coming out and crossing over: Identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community. *Gender and Society*, 11(4), 478–508. doi:10.1177/089124397011004006
- Galupo, M. P., Krum, T. E., Hagen, D. B., Gonzalez, K. A., & Bauerband, L. A. (2014). Disclosure of transgender identity and status in the context of friendship. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 8(1), 25–42. doi:10.1080/15538605.2014.853638
- Garvey, J. C., & Rankin, S. R. (2015). The influence of campus experiences on the level of outness among trans-spectrum and queer-spectrum students. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62(3), 374–393. doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.977113
- Guittar, N. A. (2013). The meaning of coming out: From self-affirmation to full disclosure. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 9(3), 168–187.
- Guittar, N. A., & Rayburn, R. L. (2016). Coming out: The career management of one's sexuality. *Sexuality & Culture*, 20(2), 336–357. doi:10.1007/s12119-015-9325-y
- Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58(4), 255–269. doi:10.2307/2787127
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. transgender survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.
- Klein, K., Holtby, A., Cook, K., & Travers, R. (2015). Complicating the coming out narrative: Becoming oneself in a heterosexist and cissexist world. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62(3), 297–326. doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.970829
- Lev, A. I. (2004). *Transgender emergence: Therapeutic guidelines for working with gender-variant people and their families*. New York, NY: The Haworth Clinical Practice Press.
- Levitt, H. M., & Ippolito, M. R. (2014). Being transgender: The experience of transgender identity development. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(12), 1727–1758. doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.951262
- Lewins, F. W. (1995). *Transsexualism in society: A sociology of male-to-female transsexuals*. South Melbourne, Australia: Macmillan Education Australia.
- Liang, A. C. (1997). The creation of coherence in coming-out stories. In A. Livia & K. Hall (Eds.), *Queerly phrased: Language, gender, and sexuality* (pp. 287–309). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Luker, K. (2008). *Salsa dancing into the social sciences: Research in an age of info-glut*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nuttbrock, L., Rosenblum, A., & Blumenstein, R. (2002). Transgender identity affirmation and mental health. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 6(4), 1–11.

- Orne, J. (2011). You will always have to 'out' yourself: Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness. *Sexualities*, 14(6), 681–703. doi:[10.1177/1363460711420462](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711420462)
- Powers, W. T. (1973). *Behavior: The control of perception*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Reed, I. A. (2011). *Meaning. Interpretation and social knowledge: On the use of theory in the human sciences*. (pp. 89–122). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2006). Who's gay? Does it matter? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15(1), 40–44. doi:[10.1111/j.0963-7214.2006.00403.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2006.00403.x)
- Schilt, K. (2010). *Just one of the guys? Transgender men and the persistence of gender inequality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Seidman, S. (2002). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Seidman, S., Meeks, C., & Traschen, F. (1999). Beyond the closet? The changing social meaning of homosexuality in the United States. *Sexualities*, 2(1), 9–34. doi:[10.1177/136346099002001002](https://doi.org/10.1177/136346099002001002)
- Serpe, R. T. (1987). Stability and change in self: A structural symbolic interactionist explanation. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 50(1), 44–55. doi:[10.2307/2786889](https://doi.org/10.2307/2786889)
- Serpe, R. T., & Stryker, S. (1987). The construction of self and reconstruction of social relationships. In S. R. Thye & E. Lawler (Ed.s), *Advances in group processes* (Vol. 4, pp. 41–66). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (1996). Gender, control, and interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 59(3), 193–220. doi:[10.2307/2787019](https://doi.org/10.2307/2787019)
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237. doi:[10.2307/2695870](https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870)
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Caldwell, NJ: Blackburn Press.
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284–297. doi:[10.2307/2695840](https://doi.org/10.2307/2695840)
- Thoits, P. A. (1992). Identity structures and psychological well-being: Gender and marital status comparisons. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 55(3), 236–256. doi:[10.2307/2786794](https://doi.org/10.2307/2786794)
- Troiden, R. R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17(1–2), 43–74. doi:[10.1300/J082v17n01\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v17n01_02)
- Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Zimman, L. (2009). 'The other kind of coming out': Transgender people and the coming out narrative genre. *Gender and Language*, 3(1), 53–80. doi:[10.1558/genl.v3i1.53](https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v3i1.53)