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# Working Outside the Binary: Experiences of Nonbinary Employees in the Workforce

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Working Outside the Binary:  
Experiences of Nonbinary Employees in the Workforce

by  
Mordeky C. Dillum

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelors of Science  
in  
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and  
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## **Abstract**

Transgender issues in the workplace have only recently become a focus in research, and it is still new and understudied. Even less studied is the demographic of gender expansive individuals including nonbinary and gender non-conforming individuals. This qualitative study aims to explore and highlight workplace experiences for nonbinary people, with a particular focus on younger nonbinary people who experience less employment stability in more public facing jobs. Thirteen participants engaged in interviews where they were asked to describe their experiences dealing with discrimination, harassment and transphobia in the workplace, in addition to sharing their ideas for practical solutions or changes they would like to see implemented that they feel would better support them. They shared experiences of encountering microaggressions, having their identities delegitimize and misunderstood, and being forced to engage in distressing amounts of unpaid emotional labor to educate their peers. Additionally, topics of identity management and its place in modern workplace culture were brought into light and themes of performativity and conditional allyship arose. Various ideas for improvement are discussed, including structured advocacy, enacting accountability, and policies to outline the consequences of committing microaggressions.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to each participant, who gave their voices, their stories, and their wisdom to create this publication. Thank you for sharing.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Nicholas Smith, who exhibited unyielding faith in me and my abilities and provided wisdom, mentorship, guidance and an enormous amount of patience through the entire process. His friendship, support, and encouragement not only fueled this project, but the confidence he exhibited in me opened my eyes to what I am capable of.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The prejudice and discrimination faced by transgender people in the workplace has serious effects on physical and mental wellbeing and is correlated with negative mental health outcomes (Witte et al., 2020). Transgender people experience greater exposure to chronic life stressors specifically related to stigma and are at a higher risk for developing maladaptive coping skills and cognitive processes (Thoroughgood et al., 2017). Additionally, paranoid cognition has been found to bring about a relationship between employee's perceptions of discrimination and their emotional exhaustion, lack of job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Thoroughgood et al., 20117).

Current literature on the experiences of transgender people in the workplace often makes assumptions about gender and the trans experience and fails to account for differences across various ages and identities. While the work that has been done is important, it fails to holistically present experiences. Specifically, the majority of current literature clings to binary conceptions of gender, representing only binary transgender men and binary transgender women. This excludes any trans identities that exist outside of the gender binary, including nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, two-spirit, gendernonconforming and many other identities that experience transphobia. There is little current scholarship that highlights the experiences of nonbinary people, and that gap in knowledge is what this study aims to fill.

This study contributes the voices of nonbinary people to an understudied field. This is important because of the variation in experiences; the more voices there are, the more perspectives are brought, and the more holistic representation can actually be.

This work also contributes important perspectives about accountability from marginalized individuals, in particular Black and Indigenous perspectives, which are the most valuable voices in conversations about accountability and cultural humility.

Demographically, most current research in this field centers around participants who are older, white, and who experience more socio-economic stability. The pool of participants in this study includes a younger demographic than most current research, who are less established in careers and professional workplaces. This allows us to consider who our workforce is made up of, how people come into those positions, and offers us the opportunity to compare how workplace culture varies depending on the industry.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Nonbinary is a gender identity label used to encompass a wide range of experiences, often used as an umbrella term. There are many different ways that nonbinary people may identify, including agender, demigender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and genderfluid. Additionally, not all people who identify with those terms identify with the term nonbinary. Attempting to define and categorize all identities and experiences is both a fruitless and problematic task, as rigid categorical thinking does not acknowledge the fluidity and complexity of gender identity or expression (Dray et al., 2020). It is most commonly used by people whose gender identity does not align with the culturally dominant male/female binary. Transgender and nonbinary do not mean the same things, however some nonbinary people may identify as transgender, while others may not. Something that is common in both nonbinary and transgender experiences is experiencing a transition, mainly social and medical transitions. Medical transition and social transition are deeply personal processes that are not a determining factor in what someone's identity is, and neither is required for a person to identify a certain way. It is important to keep in mind that information about a person's transition is not necessary to being able to respect them and their identity. A social transition refers mainly to the way you present yourself to those around you, including coming out, sharing pronouns, changing one's name, and getting documents updated to reflect your gender identity. Medical transition refers to any medical gender affirming treatments that are undergone, such as hormone blockers, hormone replacement therapy, gender affirming surgery, laser hair removal, and other physical forms of transition that alter one's body. While it is not typically discussed as one, body modification such as piercings, tattoos and other

modifications are a form of transition, as they allow some transgender and nonbinary people to affirm their gender and feel more at home in their bodies.

Access to employment—and especially employer-provided health insurance—in many cases directly affects many transgender people’s ability to medically transition, due to extremely high costs of gender affirming medical treatments as well as the scarcity of institutionalized resources from state funding (Robinson et al., 2017). Scholars in this field of study call for improvements in workplace policies, culture, and management education to better working conditions for transgender employees that will inevitably benefit the entire workplace and business (Schilt & Connell, 2007; Robinson et al., 2017; Sawyer et al., 2017; Sawyer & Thoroughgood, 2017, Kleintop, 2019). There is a severe lack of organizational support for transgender employees which can be seen in the perpetuation of gendered work roles, and lack of non-gendered physical facilities (Kleintop, 2019).

One of the first studies ever to examine the workplace prejudice faced by nonbinary employees, published in 2019, found that the trans identity that faced the most prejudice from their coworkers was nonbinary, and that specifically nonbinary people who were assigned male at birth, were rated the lowest (Dray et al., 2020). Nonbinary people face a unique form of transphobic discrimination as their identities are often delegitimized for not adhering to traditional binary gender standards in their expression or identities (Dray et al., 2020). Although authenticity in reference to gender transition and expression has been identified as important for transgender people in workplace contexts, these processes are both dynamic and social in nature (Hennekam & Ladge, 2022; Martinez et al., 2017). Binary standards of gender are frequently upheld and

enforced upon transgender employees by their coworkers in an attempt to assign that person to a particular role that increases their own sense of comfort (Schilt & Connell, 2007), thus transgender employees at times balance tempering gender expression with workplace gender norms and expectations (Hennekam & Ladge, 2022).

One common form of discrimination that is particularly relevant to the context of the workplace is what are referred to as microaggressions. These can be understood as interpersonal communications that contain messages of “othering” aimed towards marginalized groups or individuals (Nordmarken, 2014). As opposed to more overt discrimination, or a more “macro” form of aggression, microaggressions subtly undermine trans and gender non-conforming people’s safety and comfort, and put them under a level of scrutiny that is distressing. Microaggressions aimed towards trans and gender-nonconforming people typically promote and enforce conventional and exclusionary ways of thinking about gender, including harmful stereotypes about trans people, and enforcing binary gender roles and expectations (Sue, 2010). The term “micro” may cause others to downplay or underestimate the impact that this form of discrimination has.

Rather than using the term microaggressions, much of the workplace literature has examined interpersonal or subtle discrimination, which both encompass highly overlapping and related forms of discrimination (Jones et al., 2016). Interpersonal discrimination has been defined as often consisting of “nonverbal (e.g., avoiding eye-contact, grimacing), verbal (e.g., dismissive language), and paraverbal behaviors (e.g., tone of voice) that occur in face-to-face interactions” (Hebl et al., 2015 p. 388), and subtle discrimination has been defined as “negative or ambivalent demeanor and/or

treatment enacted toward social minorities on the basis of their minority status membership that are not necessarily conscious and likely convey ambiguous intent” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 1591). Importantly, meta-analytic findings have demonstrated that subtle, interpersonal discrimination has a similarly deleterious relation with psychological, physical, health, and work-related outcomes as compared to formal forms of discrimination (Jones et al., 2016).

Recent efforts by businesses to create more inclusive and diverse workplaces shows that there is an understanding that support is needed (Law et al., 2011; Martinez, Sawyer, et al., 2017; Ruggs et al., 2015), and that allyship is a goal for many people (Martinez, Hebl, et al., 2017; see Sabat et al., 2013; see Salter & Migliaccio, 2019). Many businesses and corporations make statements, particularly during June, LGBTQ Pride month, about their support for these communities and declare their allyship, and make efforts to reach out to assure trans and nonbinary people that the workplace is a place where they are wanted and will be respected. Importantly, allyship behaviors are nuanced and multifaceted (see Martinez & Smith, 2019). What has yet to be closely examined here are issues of performativity, and where current ideas of allyship falls short, including the idea of conditional allyship, or support that is contingent on behavior that is seen as acceptable by the person who assigned the label of ally to themselves. Examining allyship and clearly understanding what support is needed has not been a strong enough focus in this field of research, and as such, I propose the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How does the experience of non-binary individuals navigating the workplace challenge the way that acceptable workplace conduct, inclusivity, and allyship are understood?



**Research Question 2:** How can workplaces create environments that are tangibly supportive of the nonbinary community?

## **Chapter 3: Study Methods**

### **Sample**

Purposeful sampling approaches were used, including criterion and snowball sampling, such that participants were identified based on predetermined criteria and then identified through social media, personal networks, and referrals (Patton, 2015). The sample consisted of 13 participants with an average age 25 and an age range of 20–38. Every participant identified with the term nonbinary, other gender identities included transgender, agender, two-spirit, genderqueer, tumtum, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, trans woman, bigender, demiboy, and transmasculine. Of the 13 participants, 8 were currently employed and 5 were unemployed. The industries in which participants were currently or had most recently been employed included: retail, food service, direct caregiving, medicine, financial assistance, and housing. The two most common industries participants worked in were food service and retail. No participants identified as heterosexual, with the most common reported sexual orientation being queer. Participants were also asked if they would prefer to be referred to by a pseudonym or participant number and are identified as such throughout the manuscript. See Table 1 for socio demographic information.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data was collected in a qualitative fashion, through semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher, followed by analysis of the transcripts. Qualifying participants were required to have been employed or be currently employed, and to identify as something other than exclusively male or female. Participants were recruited primarily by snowball sampling, and many were referred by other participants

and contacted through Instagram. The researcher also posted an invitation to participate on Instagram and participants responded to the post asking to be scheduled for interviews. Some participants were contacts of the researcher that provided contact information for other participants.

Participants were sent an email with a consent form to review, as well as a link to a zoom meeting for the date the interview would take place. At the time of the interview, the researcher asked participants if they understood the consent form and then obtained verbal consent. The researcher asked a series of short demographic questions, before beginning the interview protocol. Interviews ranged from approximately 45 minutes to nearly 2.5 hours, typically lasting for 1.5 hours. Participants were asked to describe various aspects of their experiences around gender and being in the workforce. Questions included asking participants to describe their gender identity, summarize their work history, describe challenges faced in the workplace, as well as the impacts of any intersecting identities they hold on their work experience. Opportunities were given for participants to share positive experiences they have had in the workplace as well.

### ***Coding***

Coding was conducted in line with best practices in grounded theory and the organizational sciences (Charmaz, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013; Kreiner, 2016). Further, an iterative and abductive approach was used, such that both the data and the literature were considered throughout the coding and theorizing process (Kreiner, 2016). Structure was developed with the emergent themes by drawing on Gioia and colleagues' (2013) technique, in which first order concepts were organized into themes, which were further organized into aggregate dimensions.

## **Trustworthiness**

To enhance trustworthiness of the findings, principles from Lincoln and Guba (1985) were drawn upon. In particular, credibility was enhanced through the practice of prolonged engagement. Specifically, the researcher drew upon lived experience, experiences with activism, work with and in the community, and familiarity with processes and healthcare. Further, the researcher conducted peer debriefs and member checking by speaking to close contacts and interviewees about emerging findings. Transferability was enhanced by using thick description in describing the findings. Dependability was enhanced through triangulating across multiple data sources. Finally, confirmability was enhanced by transparently describing the methodological process and by providing testimony in a replicable manner.

## Chapter 4: Findings

*“...the fall of Rome came, I, I can't say why, I'm not a historian, but a big part of it was their language wasn't one of art. It was an empirical language that was meant to describe law and the transfers of property. And like, like that, that's still what we, to this day, use their language for that in our law, because it's like math as a language. And there are just some fucking aspects of humanity that you can't explain with fucking math, with numbers, with binaries, it just doesn't fucking work. And then to suddenly turn that animosity and the discomfort in the system not working onto the people that don't fit into it instead of onto the system that doesn't work is just crazy.”*

*Participant 7 (they/them)*

The stories and experiences of participants of this study brought up many different ways to understand what things cause harm to nonbinary people in the workplace. These **challenges faced in the workplace** / ways of causing harm fell into three categories: **1) performativity and microaggressions, 2) demand of emotional labor and 3) identities being problematized** and seen as disruptive to workplace culture. Within these categories there are sub themes that are essential to understanding the key areas in which workplaces fail to protect gender expansive employees. There also emerged three major themes for **areas of improvement** / best practices or needed changes that participants suggested and these are categorized as: **1) structured advocacy, 2) concrete policies against microaggressions and 3) teaching cultural humility** (see Figure 1).

### **Challenges Faced in the Workplace**

#### ***Performativity and Microaggressions***

**Performativity.** A common experience of most participants was being in workplaces that were outwardly supportive, but then when that support was needed, failed to measure up to the values of inclusion that they claim. While many companies

claim that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are things that they value, many participants felt this often serves as a way to “virtue signal”, or a way to use diversity as a tool to appear supportive and escape criticism without having to actually enact change to their systems. Participants expressed that any action that is taken is usually the bare minimum and designed to ease the process for those leading DEI initiatives.

*“[Company] has a practice of hiring trans people and people of color to, um, kind of hide from their own, um, wrongdoings as employers” (“QA”, they/them).*

Moreover, when participants shouldered the burden of advocating for their identities to be respected, there were rarely situations where it was safe or helpful to do so. Across industries and work experience, from the service industry to professional fields, participants reported a lack of structural support or policy in place to address their concerns. When asked about current protections that were in place for workers and experiences with Human Resources departments, participants expressed they felt there was little companies offered in terms of support or accountability:

*“...it takes a lot of incidents for something to become a big enough problem for them to affect their bottom line, because to be honest, it'd be about affecting their bottom line and whether that happens to like reputation because of a negative interaction, or it happens because people stopped coming to the place because they don't feel safe and they lose money. That's what it takes” (Participant 13, they/she).*

**The Impact of Microaggressions.** An important aspect of why current policies are insufficient is because they are often created by people who may be unqualified to assess what causes harm to marginalized groups. Participants shared that there is a fundamental disconnect between the way that trans/nonbinary people experience transphobia and the way that cisgender people understand or identify it. A large factor in this disconnect comes from cis people underestimating the impact of microaggressions.

“Asbel” (he/him, ze/hir) gives the example of someone avoiding using pronouns that they are unsure of how to use grammatically:

*“...it's transphobia because they're choosing to prioritize their comfort and like not wanting to be embarrassed by using something the wrong way over actually referring to me the way that I have said that I want to be referred to as, so it's still transphobia, but it's this kind of convoluted, super removed transphobia of like, people are like, ‘Well, I'm not being shitty to you. Like I'm not being mean to you’.” (“Asbel”, he/him, ze/hir)*

“LS” (he/they) voiced that he is more deeply impacted by everyday microaggressions than by situational overt transphobia:

*“If they're saying things that are actually really hurtful and transphobic and like perpetuating violent transphobia, if they're sitting there and saying that to me, I'm way less upset than if someone is sitting there and they're like, ‘but, but, but, but pronouns, there's so hard I'm going to cry’...that's way more harmful. Having to console somebody who's upset about something that has nothing to do with them at all is way worse than like sitting there and being like, ‘wow, you're calling me slurs, cool’.” (“LS”, he/they)*

When it came to reporting microaggressions, most participants felt that it was not worth their time since it was unlikely anything productive would come of it, so they would rather stay silent. Unless it were something egregious or overt, it was unlikely that there would be any support for them or action taken. Reactions to this sort of mistreatment are highly criticized based on the way onlookers perceive the harm that is being done, which is often an inaccurate and minimizing perception.

### ***Demand of Emotional Labor***

A common microaggression that was the most highly reported is the demand of emotional labor from nonbinary people. This is such a pervasive phenomenon that it merited its own category, as there are several different factors to consider. These are namely, the emotional toll it takes to educate people, the impact of adverse reactions to advocacy, and the failure of cis people to recognize diversity of experiences.

**Emotional Toll of Education.** Nearly every participant expressed that one of the largest burdens is the amount of emotional labor that is demanded of them in the workplace. From being expected to educate people on how to respect their identities to having to shoulder the burden of advocating for a safe working environment, it has been described as one of the most taxing parts of being in the workforce:

*“...it's already hard just existing as like someone who has like multiple marginalized identities or someone who has like different access needs. It's very difficult...I'm already physically exhausted. So, my capacity to like emotionally educate people and like, not get like, not essentially have a meltdown when like I'm also experiencing like disrespect towards my gender and like having to put out more energy to like correct them.” (Participant 4, they/them)*

*“...so much of my life has been listening to cis people, largely straight people, wax poetic about the care that they think that my community should receive...you know, they're interested in it. But it's my identity. And so it's that much more triggering and exhausting to have to have these conversations...it's this constant violence. And it yes, it's totally exhausting.” (“Jordan”, they/them)*

Many participants expressed that they feel expected to educate others to explain their identities and how to respect them. The word “demand” is key here, as this is not something that is generally considered optional in the experience of participants.

*“...it's like everybody who's marginalized or underrepresented, like that's, it's our job to, to, to educate everybody else. And we got to do it on our own time” (“Jordan”, they/them)*

It was expressed that a common fear is that refusing to educate or showing negative emotions around being asked to do so will reflect negatively on their community as a whole. Many nonbinary people do not have the privilege of being seen as an individual, but rather knows that their actions will speak for their community because of the tendency for people to see the nonbinary/gnc community as a monolith. This leads into a discussion about recognizing diversity of experiences.



**Diversity of Experiences.** When cis people ask to be educated about gender, part of what needs to be understood is that you cannot get the answer you are looking for by asking one person because everyone has their own intersecting identities that inform the way they experience gender. Participants explained that they recognize their own experiences with gender to be unique to them and see an enormous amount of variation in experiences, each person different from the next. Primarily, many participants shared that they do not feel represented by the current culturally dominant perception of nonbinary identities described by one participant as:

*“like when you think of non-binary people like as shown as portrayed in like media, you think of like a white, thin able body person, um, with like a shaved head.” (“Clover”, they/them)*

“Clover” (they/them) shares that a factor contributing to the erasure of their nonbinary identity is not fitting this cultural script, and their race often plays a large role in them being misgendered. Another common difference of experience was between people who have taken steps towards medical transition and those who have not. While it is well understood within the trans and nonbinary communities that not all nonbinary people identify as transgender or with the trans community, this is often something that is not understood by people outside these communities and needs to be explained. Medical transition is not the determining factor of whether or not someone is trans, however participants reported that it does drastically change the privileges you have and the perspectives you can speak from.

Participant 10 (they/them) shares their discomfort when being asked questions about the trans community

*“...it's definitely difficult to also speak from a point where I don't fully like, experience what it's like to be a trans person, or I'm only have so much*

*experience from being non-binary that it's also hard for me to like, feel like I'm allowed to speak from that point of view.” (Participant 10, they/them)*

In contrast, one participant shared that their experience pursuing medical transition causing them to be assumed male rather than their authentic identity:

*“...it's weird to be misrepresented now that I've gone to the lengths that I've gone to, to be comfortable in myself. Um, and even other non-binary people in, uh, jobs that I've had...they just could not understand that I was not a binary man...they just couldn't understand it. Cause you know, you've had top surgery and you're on testosterone and you changed your name and stuff and I'm like, it doesn't all look the same.” (“LS”, he/they)*

One person can only share their experience and cannot speak for the entire community.

Basing one's learning on the experience of one person and neglecting to seek education from other available resources ignores this vast diversity of experiences and does very little to advance the educational process of deconstructing one's understanding of gender.

In this way, it often causes more harm to the community than good.

**Impact of Consoling Cisgender Coworkers.** A large part of the barrier to effective communication and learning was attributed to the way people assume that when being given feedback, it is an attack on their character or that moral value is being assigned to them. Participants explained that this detracts from their ability to have their experiences heard, because people stop listening when they feel they are being attacked, and their first response is to defend themselves or offer an explanation to justify or excuse their behavior. A participant named “Asbel” (he/him, ze/hir) shared his thoughts on what ze is thinking when going to offer corrections or feedback:

*“I'm literally just trying to have a conversation with you...Like, this is me showing that I actually respect you and think pretty highly of you...if I thought that you were a terrible person, I wouldn't say anything probably...but like this clearly shows that I do think that like, you are like a good person or whatever, and like wants to do better and care about other people.” (“Asbel”, he/him, ze/hir)*

“Clover” (they/them) discussed the issue of responding to misgendering in the workplace, explaining that while their coworkers typically did their best to respect their pronouns, their reactions when corrected created more of a problem than the misgendering had on its own. While it is okay to make a mistake, more often than not people who have made one will respond by overreacting and putting on a display of profuse apologies and show that they are distressed by their own actions.

*“...that makes it feel like I can't ask for my pronouns to be respected because it's distressing to you.” (“Clover”, they/them)*

This is harmful and uncomfortable as it draws attention to the person who was misgendered or misrecognized, and then puts them in a position where they are forced to console the person and reassure them that they are not a bad person and that nobody is mad at them.

### ***Identities are Problematized***

The specific aspects of workplace culture that participants took issue with was that disruptions to productivity tend to lower your value as an employee, and unfortunately, defending your identity is seen as disruptive. Participants feared that in the eyes of employers they are seen as having a net negative impact on the workplace. Veil describes their experiences with most workplaces having a falsely inviting and welcoming environment which melts away as soon as you bring issues to their attention:

*“...Like it's like, you're part of this conveyor belt. Like, and if you do anything that disrupts that, um, I guess the flow of that, like then automatically they have a problem with you...if you're disrupting the efficiency of the company by speaking out, um, then you lose your value.” (“Veil”, they/she)*

Multiple participants who were employed by small businesses noted that the company culture in those places tends to involve the narrative of “we are a family here” and if you

cause disruption or there is conflict you are opposing the values of that workplace because “families don’t fight”.

When other factors besides gender are considered, it is clear that when you have to advocate for multiple marginalized identities, the amount of disruption you cause compounds, and your value is lowered that much more:

*“So it's kind of like, okay, how many identities can I pile on top of this? And every single one of them means that I'm slightly more disliked than the last...being in an environment where everyone knows that I'm trans and I'm queer and I'm non binary and I am intersex and I'm Jewish and I am disabled and I have cognitive illness and like all of this stuff like that, just, it sucks.” (“LS”, he/they)*

It was explained that part of what is seen as disruptive is negative reactions of cis coworkers to advocacy. If conflict or tension is created because a cis coworker is offended or feels they are being attacked, the blame is placed on the individual advocating for themselves, rather than on the person escalating the situation with their negative reaction.

**Delegitimization of Identities.** For many participants, having their identity respected or disrespected came down to a matter of other people deciding whether or not their identity was not legitimate. It was brought up on several occasions that there is a sort of attitude that “because this does not affect me, it is not real to me, therefore I do not need to adjust my thinking to accommodate or respect it”. Defending your identity is seen as your responsibility and the burden of emotional labor of education falls on you, because ultimately your identity is considered a matter of opinion:

*“It seems weird calling your recognition of yourself, a feeling like, like there are people who very much feel that like, like self-expression is somehow like an opinion thing. They gave an example of how the language of ‘preferred names’ and ‘preferred pronouns’ plays into this idea, and how this is frustrating saying ‘It's not what I'd prefer. It's, it's who I am’.” (“RL”, they/them)*

Participants attributed a lot of this sort of thinking to the “newness” of nonbinary identities in western society and comparing this “new” idea to expectations that many people have for binary trans people. Multiple participants shared experiences where a coworker or supervisor discounted their identity because they viewed that person’s identity as impermanent or incomplete. It was not uncommon for someone to be asked when they would “fully” transition or be told their pronouns would not be respected because their identity was not real or developed enough. Identities are constantly growing and changing, making the idea of a final state of transition an impractical one, however by people who accept and utilize that way of thinking, the idea of “finality” in one’s transition or identity is attainable only by eventually definitively aligning yourself with a binary gender.

## **Needed Changes**

### ***Structured Advocacy and Accountability***

**Structured Advocacy.** In order to diffuse the burden of advocacy and reduce additional unpaid labor that nonbinary employees are tasked with, participants suggested creating a minority advocate position and then hiring qualified individuals to fill it.

Most people identified that people in the workplace who played the largest part in failing to protect minorities were direct supervisors and management. Because of this, an important stipulation of this position was that the advocate needs to be intentionally placed in a position of power in order to hold other powerful positions accountable, rather than simply producing reports. For this minority advocate position, qualifying individuals would be BIPOC non-binary or trans individuals who consent to doing advocacy work.

As mentioned by nearly every participant, the work of advocacy is draining and often frustrating. One participant noted that for this work to be sustainable, this position would need to be a department filled by multiple people to trade off and share the burden of this kind of work. In addition to this, it was voiced that anyone doing designated advocacy or minority education needs to be paid well for their labor and expertise.

### ***Concrete Policies Against Microaggressions***

When asked what would be helpful in helping microaggressions, participants suggested that microaggressions needed to be weighted just as seriously as other forms of harassment in the workplace. Not only that, they also need to be reframed and seen for what they are, which is acts of violence, not differences of opinion.

*“I think that being constantly mis-gendered at work should be grounds for grievance, that you can file a grievance to this and be like, this is fucked up. And I think it should be taken seriously because that's super distressing... I think that invasive questions about someone's transition should be considered sexual harassment. And I know that they're not currently and that's a really hard subject to broach with your manager...your coworker is like, 'so tell me about your genitals. How do you have sex? What what's going on? What are you going to do with that?' Like that needs to be more clearly defined as sexual harassment in the workplace.” (“LS”, he/they)*

Again, this issue of advocacy comes into play, as microaggressions are uncomfortable to advocate against due to the sensitive nature of topics such as gender identity and sexual harassment, as well as the way that the impact of this sort of violence is minimized or misunderstood. Having these kinds of offenses clearly defined and recognized would help to support people when they are saying that those behaviors are unacceptable.

Additionally, having consequences in place to deter people from committing them and having education surrounding why there are harmful could greatly reduce the amount

of stress placed on the individuals who are being targeted by these microaggressions to handle everything themselves.

*“This needs to be something that in my opinion, like, I guess on a similar level to like how people create metrics with like tardiness and such, like, like, why like, keep people accountable be like, hey, like, in our metrics for inclusion and diversity, like this is how many times someone has reported you for misgendering.” (Participant 12, they/them)*

### ***Cultural Humility and Accountability***

Setting workplaces up to be places where accountability can be enacted starts with education, specifically about what accountability looks like, and the role that cultural humility plays in being able to be accountable. Participants described accountability as an ongoing process that requires being able to decenter yourself from the feedback you are receiving.

*“...even teaching people processes for being accountable to their mistakes, because I don't think people actually know what accountability is...take sorry, out of accountability, because I don't even think it's a part of it. Sorry. I mean, sorry's are important, but it's more the sentiment of the sorry, than it is the word...show me with your actions, not your mouth.” (Participant 13, they/she)*

To address the overall lack of accountability, the general answer was to implement changes in the system. Sensitivity trainings as they exist have been expressed to be severely inadequate in the types of education they provide, and participants expressed that those trainings need to be improved and expanded upon to include specific examples of what types of behaviors are harmful, as well as cultural humility training and accountability work. A one-time seminar or training was not deemed to be sufficient, but rather there was a desire for more ongoing and established support in place.

*“I think it would be best if it were written by people who are people of color, who are trans people, who are non-binary people, because I often feel like there are certain trainings in certain jobs that are like that, but are written by white people.*

*So, it's like, how much can you really speak upon like racism in the workplace, if you don't experience it.” (Participant 10, they/them)*



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The findings describe three major categories of harm causing behaviors. The first is performativity and microaggressions, where businesses use diversity as a tactic to signal virtue, and fail to support employees that advocate for themselves when they experience microaggressions that stem from the conditional allyship of their coworkers and supervisors. Next, employees are forced to engage in unpaid emotional labor in the form of educating others on how to respect their identities, being asked to educate outside their own experiences, and then consoling people who express guilt or discomfort when they are corrected or educated. Lastly, harm is caused by workplaces blaming marginalized individuals for disrupting the environment of the workplace and creating tension when they advocate for themselves, thus problematizing their identities, rather than holding individuals who are creating a need for that advocacy accountable for their actions. To counter these harmful behaviors, participants identified a need for the creation of a minority advocate department to create structured advocacy and decrease the burden of emotional labor on nonbinary employees, as well as implementing concrete policies against microaggressions with a metric system that can track employee transgressions and that clearly defines harassment of gender minorities as having the same weight as other serious fire-able offenses. Lastly, providing employees with comprehensive cultural humility training should include teaching about what accountability means, how it is practiced, and why it is important to professional conduct.

### **Implications**

Responsibility of identity management and advocacy falls to the entire workforce. Findings imply that as it stands, advocating for things such as correct pronoun usage,

calling out microaggressions, and enforcing boundaries is seen as the responsibility of the person who holds the identity they are advocating for. This designation of responsibility is influenced by the harmful and incorrect notion that gender identity is a personal choice that should be defended only by that person. On the contrary, advocating for the respectful treatment of workers is the responsibility of everyone in the workplace. It is important to understand that issues of gender identity are not a personal choice, and deserve respect and discretion. This has important implications for improving upon current standards of professionalism and helps to create a workplace where advocacy is appreciated and taken seriously rather than ignored or discouraged.

Combatting performativity of organizations requires implementing concrete policies against microaggressions. The findings of this study imply that many companies claim to value diversity and hire minoritized individuals as a way of virtue signaling, and then fall short in creating a safe and equitable workplace for those employees. Current understandings on what constitutes harassment are not sufficient to protect gender minorities. The data in this study shows that asking employees and coworkers invasive questions about their experiences, identities, and bodies contribute to feelings of discomfort, distress, and isolation. Findings suggest that definitions of sexual harassment should be expanded to include asking a coworker questions about their bodies, sexuality, and transition goals or journeys as these questions inevitably impose on people's privacy and demand that they discuss intimate personal details. Additionally, repeated misgendering and other microaggressions being weighted as seriously as other harassment offenses would not only better support and protect gender expansive employees, but also substantiate claims of support and inclusion made by companies.

The data presented in this study may inform organizations on how to implement policies and structure that protect and support gender minorities in the workforce. Participants expressed distress at having to manage negative reactions to their self-advocacy, as well as having to expend emotional labor to educate their coworkers, frequently upon demand. The data showed that racism was commonly experienced alongside transphobia, and that there is a lack of cultural humility as well as accountability. This suggests companies would do well to create a department of qualified individuals to provide education on gender identity and expression for staff in addition to comprehensive cultural humility training. These trainings should be targeted across all levels of the organization, including leadership, supervisors, and coworkers. Indeed, prior research on supporting employee mental health has demonstrated that both supervisors and coworkers can be trained in mental health awareness (Dimoff et al., 2016; Oakie et al., 2016). Similarly, training across organizational levels would comprehensively provide employees with the opportunity to learn about allyship, accountability, and how to be open to as well as implement critical feedback, in a context that does not demand unpaid emotional labor from their coworkers. Qualified individuals would need to be culturally competent in the areas they are educating in. The only way to be culturally competent is to be a part of that culture, therefore qualified individuals would be Black, Indigenous and other POC individuals who are queer and trans/nonbinary.

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations of this study include geographical reach. The sample was largely composed of participants who reside in the Pacific Northwest, therefore some of

the experiences and data may be regionally specific. Additionally, the interviews were done one time for a short period of time rather than following participants over time. This allows us only a snapshot into their past and present experiences, and may exclude developments they may have or experiences that may change moving forward. The size of the sample in this study is also a limiting factor. Experiences vary greatly between individuals in this demographic, and there is great value in adding as many voices to the data as possible. Thus, a larger pool of participants would greatly enhance the amount of representation and help diversify the sample.

### **Future Directions**

To further expand upon this study, researchers might consider opting for a more longitudinal study and follow participants over a longer period of time in order to capture developments or changes in experiences that might add complexity and nuance to the way these issues can be addressed. Another direction could be to study workplaces that model the kinds of policies suggested by participants and assess the efficacy of those strategies in alleviating the distress experienced by nonbinary employees. Further, as stereotypes held about certain types of jobs can impact treatment of employees with minoritized identities who hold those jobs (see Reeves et al., 2021 for work on agism across job-types), future researchers might consider examining potential difference across job-types. Lastly, future researchers are encouraged to obtain a more regionally diverse sample to explore any differences in workplace culture in other areas of the nation and world, and to examine how the experiences of nonbinary people in those workplaces may compare.

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## Tables

Table 1.

## Sociodemographics

Interview Number	Pseudonym	Industry	Hours Worked On Average	Gender	Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Age	Race/Ethnicity
1	QA	Adult novelty	Between 35 and 40	Two-spirit	They/Them	Straight	24	Indigenous/white
2	Asbel	Housing	40	Trans / Nonbinary Agender, Uses the word trans man, Exists to confuse cis people NOT male	He/Him Ze/Hir It/Its	Questioning/Don't care	21	white/white Jewish
3	LS	Specialty retail	30	Publicly: Identify as male for safety also in workplace sometimes socially identify as agender or nonbinary, personally identify as tumtum but most people don't respect that / culturally specific	he/him and they/them	Queer	22	white/Ethnically Jewish
4	-	Food service	10-20	Nonbinary	They/Them/Theirs	Pan/Bi	20	white
5	Clover	Coffee / Barista / Food service	20	Nonbinary / Agender	They/Them/Theirs	Pan/Bi	20	Japanese/white
6	Sea	Financial assistance / Food service	15	Genderqueer / Nonbinary	They/Them/Theirs	Queer	22	white/Latinx

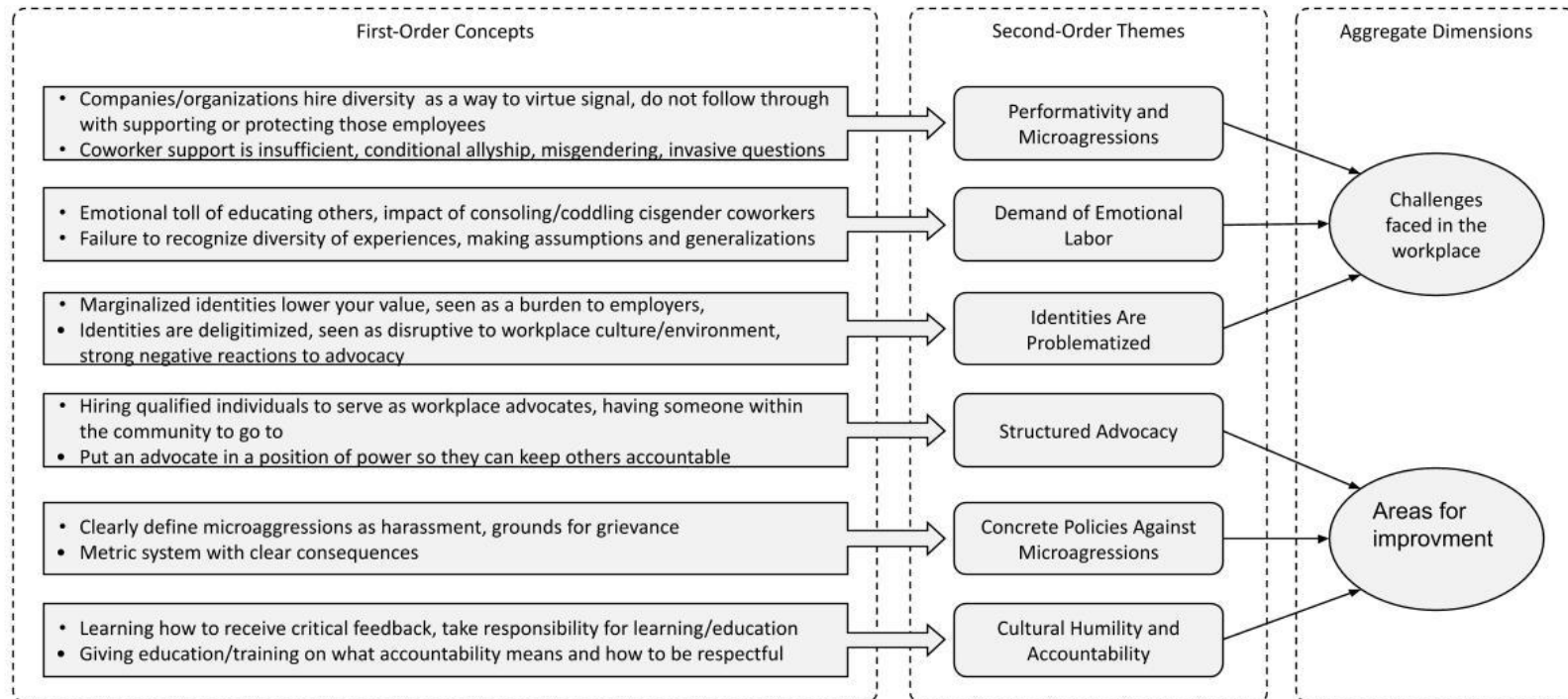
7	-	Food service	32	Nonbinary	They/Them/ Theirs	Pansexual	22	Mixed/African American Multi racial,
8	-	Technology / Retail	Part time, 32	Nonbinary, Bigender	They/Them	Bisexual	24	African American, Latino
9	Veil	Direct support professional for people with disabilities	25-30	Nonbinary, Transwoman, Gender non conforming trans woman	They/She	Queer	22	Latinx
10	-	Retail	26	Nonbinary, Trans, Demiboy, Agender	He/They	Queer	32	Hispanic/Latino
11	-	Caregiving	~26	Nonbinary	They/Them	Gay/Lesbian	21	Mixed race, Indigenous, Black, Mexican, Italian
12	Jordan	Medicine	40	Nonbinary / Genderqueer / Transmasculine	They/Them	Queer	38	white
13	-	Medicine	24	Nonbinary, gender nonconforming	They/Them but with cis people she/her	Queer	37	Black

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## Figures

Figure 1.

## Gioia Coding Model



## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol Questions**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your job/work experience?
2. Tell me how you conceptualize your gender identity and how that has impacted the types of jobs or professional opportunities you have pursued, if at all.
3. What is the disclosure process for you and how does it play out when it happens?
  - a. In the past or currently, how have employers/managers treated you if/when you disclose your identity/pronouns?
  - b. With regards to your gender, what parts of your job frustrates you the most?
  - c. Since disclosing your gender, do you find it easy to build a relaxed atmosphere in your work environment?
4. To what extent do you think your experiences in the workplace impacted the way you have navigated your gender / gender identity?
  - a. The role of dysphoria
  - b. The legitimacy of your identity
  - c. Decisions you make regarding your transition
  - d. The way you present yourself
  - e. When and to whom you disclose your identity
5. What are your relationships with your coworkers and managers like?
  - a. Do you feel as though your identity is respected?
  - b. Have you ever felt misunderstood or unappreciated by a manager or coworker because of your gender identity?
  - c. Do you feel any sort of divide between yourself and your cisgender coworkers?
  - d. Between yourself and your binary-trans coworkers?
  - e. How do you handle problems with coworkers and managers if they arise?
6. Have you faced barriers or advantages in employment because of your gnc identity/presentation?
  - a. If so, can you describe any such barriers?
7. One of the things we are interested in learning more about is how people's experiences with their gender identities at work might contribute to burnout. This could include feeling a) emotionally exhausted, physically tired; b) cynical about one's job, stressed out, c) detached or withdrawn, and/or feeling like they couldn't do a good job. Can you speak to that experience at all?
  - a. Can you describe a time your gender identity played a role in feeling emotionally exhausted/physically tired?



- b. Can you describe a time your identity played a role in feeling cynical about your job?
  - c. Can you provide an example of a time your gender identity played a role in feeling like you couldn't do your job effectively?
- 8. Are there any other intersecting identities that you feel play a significant role in how you are treated as a nonbinary person?
- 9. Are there changes you would like to see in your workplace - positive or negative?
  - a. And what sorts of best practices / policies do you think are important to share?
  - a. If so, can you describe any you think would be particularly important?
- 10. The general narrative around experiences of nonbinary folks in the workforce is often negative, focusing on issues such as discrimination, harassment, and misrecognition. Can you tell us any particularly positive experiences that you have had or any important perspectives that you have that might counter that narrative?
- 11. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience?