

Spring 6-19-2017

# "Neither of the Boxes": Accounting for Non-Binary Gender Identities

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## Recommended Citation

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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.5900>

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“Neither of the Boxes”: Accounting for Non-Binary Gender Identities

by

Erin Patricia Savoia

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Sociology

Thesis Committee:  
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Portland State University  
2017

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## Abstract

This research examines the ways in which individuals who identify with non-binary gender identities 1) understand and perform their gender identities and 2) navigate the workplace, intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ community. Prevailing understandings of gender rely on a gender binary; identification with a binary gender is compulsory. Individuals are assigned a gender at birth and are expected to identify fully with that gender for their entire lives. However, despite significant social pressures to identify as man or woman, there exist individuals whose identities bring into question the stability of the gender binary. Non-binary is sometimes used to describe individuals who do not identify solely or fully as man or woman. Fifteen interviews were conducted with individuals living in the Portland Metro Area who included non-binary as part or all of their gender identity. Questions included general descriptive information, questions about participants' conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and questions regarding their experiences as a non-binary person in the context of the workplace, intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus) community. It was found that non-binary individuals are largely held accountable to a normative performance of gender by friends, intimate partners, employers, and coworkers. While non-binary individuals are constrained by the gender structure at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels, they also appear to push back against these constraints in small but meaningful ways. Results from this study provide insight into a group of people which has been largely left out of the literature.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Kyla Tompkins, Phil Tostado, Alexis DeVigal, and Rina James

## Acknowledgements

I want to first acknowledge my participants, who shared their stories with me. Without their time and energy, this research would not be possible. In addition, I want to acknowledge my dedicated committee members: Dr. Maura Kelly, Dr. Emily Shafer, and Dr. Miriam Abelson. I am especially thankful for the guiding hand and encouraging words of my advisor, Dr. Maura Kelly. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge the role my friends and family have played in this process. In particular, I am endlessly grateful for the moral support of my dear cohort; thank you for everything.

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## 1. Introduction

Non-binary gender identities are important sites of sociological research, as trans and gender non-conforming individuals often experience a heightened awareness or consciousness of their gender identity development and presentation (West and Zimmerman 1987, Abelson 2014). That being said, non-binary identities are largely absent from sociological research. While gender inequality has been of interest to sociologists since at least the 1970s, the field has been slower to investigate non-normative gender identities. Where non-binary and genderqueer identities do exist in the literature, it is often in the context of a larger sample of trans individuals. While useful, these studies tend to blur differences between trans individuals who claim a binary gender and those who do not. The literature indicates that there is a great amount of variation among transgender identities; scholars and activists alike largely agree that a wide range of non-variant gender identities and expressions find shelter under the broader “trans” umbrella (Davidson 2007; Factor and Rothblum 2008; Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012; Downing 2013). Given the complexity, variety, and fairly recent introduction of the many terms used to describe gender-variant identities, it is necessary to operationalize the ones I will be using. I conceptualize the term transgender to describe all genders which do not fully align with the gender an individual is assigned at birth, or as Stryker defines it, “an umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (2008). More specifically, the term non-binary will be used to describe genders which do not match the gender an individual is assigned at birth, and which do

not align solely with a binary gender identity. See here that non-binary acts as a sub-umbrella, under which a long list of other identity terms can be found (ex. agender, genderfluid, two-spirit, etc.). It is important to note that although I am conceptually locating all non-binary identities under the trans umbrella, not all individuals who identify as non-binary will also identify as trans. This is mainly because of prevailing frameworks which pose transgender identities in opposition to cisgender identities<sup>1</sup> but still congruent with the gender binary. Popular discourse, even when acknowledging and affirming trans identities, often only allows for the possibility of transitioning to either a man or a woman. Non-binary individuals reject the assertion of this limited range of possibilities, and therefore may not identify with the term transgender. Although much of the literature uses the term genderqueer to describe what I am terming non-binary identities, there are two main reasons why I have chosen the language I have. First of all, in the state of Oregon, where my interviews were conducted, it has been possible since 2016 to legally change your gender to non-binary (genderqueer is not an option on the state form). This indicates fairly wide-spread recognition and usage of the term non-binary in the location where the study was conducted. Secondly, I am using non-binary to identify a slightly more specific set of identities than the term genderqueer often does in the literature. While genderqueer has sometimes been shown to indicate a very wide range of gender-variant identities, including butch, drag queen, and cross dresser (see Kuper et al.), non-binary here specifically implicates gender identities which do not primarily align themselves with either men or women. That being said, a number of my

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<sup>1</sup> Describes individuals who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth

participants identify as both non-binary and genderqueer, pointing to the somewhat synthetic and overlapping nature of these terms. It should be noted that I will be using the terms “transgender” and “non-binary” slightly differently when talking about past literature in comparison to when I am talking about my participants. In general, I will refer to my participants as non-binary rather than as transgender. This is partially to respect participant self-identification and partially because the experiences I’m talking about are unique to non-binary individuals and not necessarily generalizable to the larger trans population.

When empirical research includes non-binary identified participants, it is usually in the context of a larger sample of trans identities (Connell 2010; Schilt 2010) or LGBTQ+ identities (Kelly and Hauck 2015) more broadly. Although trans and non-binary identities may intersect for some individuals, regularly and uncritically subsuming non-binary identities under a trans umbrella, as the sociological research has often done, may not accurately reflect the distinct experiences of non-binary individuals (Dentice and Dietert 2015; Davidson 2007; Rothblum and Factor 2008). Studies that do include non-binary participants have pointed to still unanswered questions regarding the agency of non-binary individuals, their relationship to the gender binary, their performance of masculinity and femininity, their experience in the workplace, and their interactions with intimate partners, friends, and the LGBTQ+ community. In order to study and theorize gender in a way that discounts neither individual agency nor structural influences, sociologists should include (and, where appropriate, center) non-binary participants. Inquiring into non-binary gender identities raises the following question: how might we reconcile the existence of these non-normative gender identities in a society whose binary

understanding of gender does not seem to make room for their existence? While we cannot discount the salience of accountability and the staying power of the gender binary which promotes gender difference and inequality, we must also recognize that non-binary people exist and attempt to understand how these identities align with our current understanding of the sex/gender system.

While efforts have been made to explore diversity underneath the trans umbrella, non-binary identities remain understudied. Few studies have recruited a sample of exclusively genderqueer or non-binary participants, obscuring differences between binary and non-binary trans identities (but see Corwin 2009; Downing 2013). In order to better understand non-binary identities as separate from both cisgender and binary trans identities, I find it necessary to conduct qualitative research which draws data from a sample of only non-binary identified people. In this way, we can collect rich narrative-based information which will allow us to understand how non-binary individuals form and express their gender identities across a variety of contexts, all while operating within the context of a binary gender structure.

### *Research Questions*

Sociological research has not yet addressed the experiences of non-binary people across multiple social contexts, such as the workplace, intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ community. Previous research has procured important information regarding diversity under the trans umbrella, and has begun to explore the intricacies of non-binary and genderqueer identities. However, given the distinctiveness of non-binary gender identities in particular, further, qualitative research is called for. Informed by the gaps in the research, I have formed the following research questions:

- 1) How do non-binary individuals understand and perform their gender identities?
- 2) What are the experiences of non-binary individuals in the workplace, in intimate partner relationships, with friends and in the LGBTQ+ community?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### *Gender as a Social Stratification Structure*

My research is informed by the assertion that gender functions as a social stratification structure, defined by three distinct but interconnected levels: the individual, the interactional, and the structural (Risman 2004; Risman and Davis 2013). This tri-level conceptualization allows us to expound on the multiplicity of ways in which gender difference and inequality are propagated, and how these processes inform one another. Risman argues, “gender is deeply embedded as a basis for stratification not just in our personalities, our cultural rules, or institutions but in all these, and in complicated ways” (2009:433). This framework seems to be particularly relevant when examining non-binary gender identities, as it can hardly be claimed that non-normative gender identity is solely a product of structure (which would seem to only allow for two genders). On the other hand, it is similarly insufficient to study non-binary gender identities solely on an individual level, as it should be of interest to researchers to examine the ways in which these identities interface with gendered institutions, such as the workplace and the family.

We can also not ignore the role of interaction in the role of gender difference and inequality maintenance. Risman and Davis (2013) draw from West and Zimmerman’s seminal study in which the researchers introduced the concept of “doing gender” (1987). West and Zimmerman’s work has been foundational in informing gender scholarship. Importantly, West and Zimmerman differentiate between sex and sex category in their work, indicating that sex corresponds to the gender one is assigned at birth (usually based on genitals and chromosomes) and that sex category is the gender that one is perceived to be by others. Sex category is what informs social interactions. Furthermore, beyond

displays which allow others to place one into the sex category which they claim, the individual must also successfully accomplish gender. Accomplishing gender, or “doing gender,” is obligatory; West and Zimmerman tell us that every individual is held morally accountable to “do” their gender according to normative expectations. In this context, accountability is not only moral but reflexive. On one hand, accountability means that outside actors hold others accountable for failed performances of gender. On the other, individuals curate physical presentation and behavior based on the knowledge that others are going to be accounting for their gender. Hollander explains: It is important to distinguish between everyday understandings of accountability and West and Zimmerman’s understanding of accountability; rarely is this distinction made in much of the literature (Hollander 2013). For West and Zimmerman, accountability not only refers to actual instances of gender enforcement, but also serves as the motivation for doing gender. Every individual faces a risk of being evaluated; conscious and subconscious understanding of this risk compels individuals to “do gender” normatively (Hollander). Notably, West and Zimmerman do not allow for the possibility of threatening accountability; that is, they believe that everyone, including trans people, are obligated to conform to normative expectations for either men or women.

Risman’s conception of gender as a social structure is important here, as she tells us how “the taken-for-granted and often unacknowledged conditions of action do shape behavior, but do so as human beings reflexively monitor the intended and unintended consequences of their action, sometimes reifying the structure, and sometimes changing it” (Risman and Davis 2013:744). At the same time, Risman and Davis acknowledge that “action can turn against structure but can never escape it” (744). While human beings

have a certain amount of agency in how they chose to act, they are still constrained by the structures under which they operate. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the potentially transformative power of individual action. In considering the transformative power of individual action, we can again invoke West and Zimmerman's understanding of accountability. Hollander indicates that individuals who interrupt interactions by refusing to do gender normatively actually wield the power to affect outside actors and institutions. Although the effect likely will not be immediate, it may be the case that increased exposure to non-normative enactments of gender alters the way others assess gender, creating a ripple effect (Hollander 2013). If gender is done through interaction, it may also be redone through it.

#### *Masculinities and Femininities*

West and Zimmerman indicate that every individual is held accountable to a normative performance of gender. In her 2006 research, Kane provides us with a helpful framework from which to understand how accountability operates through interaction: she frames accountability as the motivation, social interaction as the means, and masculinity and femininity as the medium. This conceptualization aids us in thinking about how non-binary people may or may not enact masculine and feminine norms. In 1995, Connell introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, suggesting that a certain type of masculinity allows men privilege which allows them to exercise power over women and other men (see Connell 2005). What Connell points out is that certain ways of doing gender – certain masculinities and femininities – are seen as appropriate and acceptable because they support the domination of men over women. Schippers (2007) uses both the terms hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity to describe these



appropriate and acceptable ways to do gender. Schippers is unique in her introduction of the term hegemonic femininity, which suggests that there are also a set of gendered behaviors performed by women which perpetuate and legitimate the domination of men over women and benefit women who adhere to them (although the same rewards are not associated with hegemonic femininity as with hegemonic masculinity). Hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity serve to preserve the hegemonic gender order under which men have more power than women; “the significance of masculinity and femininity in gender hegemony is that they establish symbolic meanings for the relationship between women and men that provide the legitimating rationale for social relations ensuring the ascendancy and dominance of men” (Schippers 2007:91). Non-hegemonic sets of gendered behavior are sanctioned, thereby providing incentive for both men and women to adhere to hegemonic gender norms even though they serve to legitimate the subordination of women.

Notably, although the image of hegemonic masculinity can change across time and space, in the United States hegemonic masculinity is intimately tied to heterosexuality. That is, men who perform hegemonic masculinity must be heterosexual. In this way, masculinity is framed partially in terms of sexuality; a gender system which prioritizes masculinity also prioritizes heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Further, Butler tells us that heterosexuality is rendered incoherent when we fail to assume the existence of a gender binary – heterosexuality is reliant on the actuality of two opposite genders. At the same time, the gender binary is reinforced by cultural assumptions of heterosexuality; heterosexuality reinforces divisions, differences, and inequalities between men and women (Butler 1999). Homosexuality makes many of the

same assumptions as heterosexuality – namely, that there exist only two (easily identifiable and distinguishable) genders. Importantly, traditional understandings of heterosexuality and homosexuality require not just certain genders, but certain bodies (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Schilt and Westbrook analyzed data from two separate studies in order to examine the ways that non-trans people (“gender normals”) react to perceived mismatches between body and gender – potential threats to heterosexuality. The authors find that both men and women are invested in maintaining heterosexuality. For example, heterosexual women tend to be accepting of trans men’s masculine work behavior (i.e. asking them to lift heavy objects), but do not see them as viable sexual partners. Heterosexual men encourage trans men to engage in the objectification and sexualization of women. While some trans men resisted this, many chose to engage in such behavior as not to be ostracized by their cisgender male coworkers. Additionally, the authors found that trans women are murdered by straight cisgender men who come to realize that the woman they are sexually attracted to does not have the genitals typically associated with their gender. In these instances, “cisgender men stand to lose not just their sexual identity but also their standing as ‘real’ men” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009:460). This reflects a connection between heterosexuality and assertions of natural gender difference.

Masculinities and femininities research does not indicate that there is a “way out” of the obligation to accomplish gender normatively. While varying terms are used by different scholars, the literature continues to refer to non-normative or non-hegemonic gender performances as still “masculine” or “feminine” (see: pariah femininity, subjugated masculinity, etc.). However, these gendered terms are problematized when

attached to non-binary individuals. The existence of non-binary individuals seems to complicate the exclusivity of masculinity and femininity as performative categories. West and Zimmerman's original conception of "doing gender" has sparked a debate in the literature regarding the possibility of undoing gender; some scholars claim that gender can be undone while others claim that it can only be redone (Deutsch 2007, Connell 2010). My research builds on the work of scholars who explore the possibilities for redoing gender; given the current salience of the gender structure, possibilities for undoing gender appear to be less relevant. That said, there are ways in which individuals who transgress gender norms may create new gendered possibilities capable of redoing gender.

While it is true that those who fail to do gender properly are called to account for their gender failure, Risman does not believe that this is the end of the story (Risman 2009). Risman argues that, while humans surely have a very limited ability to act outside of gendered expectations, when people use their agency to do just that they are creating small but important ruptures in the system. Risman has confidence that acts of resistance against gender conformity should be taken seriously as threats to the gender order, imploring us to be critical of frameworks which simply label new behaviors as new femininities or masculinities rather than something else entirely. Non-binary individuals may be in a unique position which allows them to create these small but important ruptures.

### 3. Literature Review

#### *Diversity of Non-Normative Gender Identities*

There exist several quantitative studies which survey a wide range of trans people in order to better understand diversity of identities within the trans population (Factor and Rothblum 2008; Rankin and Beemyn 2011; Kuper et al. 2012). Factor and Rothblum, who conducted one such study, were interested in comparing three categories of trans identities: male to female (MTF), female to male (FTM), and genderqueer. The authors operationalized transgender as anyone who does not fully identify with the sex or gender assigned to them at birth. The authors were particularly interested in understanding differences and similarities within these three identities. Factor and Rothblum decided to use “genderqueer” to describe trans participants who did not identify as MTF or FTM because that was the language a majority of those participants (62.5 percent) used to self-identify. Their study surveyed 50 MTF, 52 FTM, and 64 genderqueer participants. Of genderqueer participants in Factor and Rothblum’s study, 28% preferred pronouns other than she/her or he/him, 40% had varying comfort levels with preferred pronouns based on context, 79% reported a fluid gender identity, 34% were taking hormones, and 82.8% went by a name other than the one assigned to them at birth. Kuper et al. conducted a similar study in 2012, although they did not divide their participants into the same clean categories. Instead, they broadly explored variation under the trans umbrella, reporting on the different identity terms used by participants and providing statistics on the group as a whole. The authors surveyed 292 trans adults, and found that participants used a very wide variety of terms to describe their gender identity. Participants were able to select more than one current gender identity, and 72.3% of participants did so. Terms

participants used to describe gender included genderqueer, transgender, cross dresser, two-spirit, bigender, intergender, drag king, androgynous, drag queen, agender, birl, boi, butch, dyke, confused, femme, genderfluid, gender-neutral, and queer. Overall, findings indicated that trans identities shift over time, and that identity terms are often used in combination with one another. Further, individuals who describe their gender identities in non-binary terms are also likely to identify their sexual orientations in non-binary ways (Factor and Rothblum 2008; Kuper et al. 2012). This is unsurprising, given that sexual orientations rooted in binary understandings of gender seem fundamentally at odds with genderqueer identities in particular. Although gender and sexuality are two distinct concepts, they should be understood as reflexive and interrelated (Connell 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Bishop 2012; Downing 2013; Callis 2014; Better and Simula 2015).

As indicated by Kuper et al., there are a plethora of identities to be found nested underneath the trans umbrella. Further research is needed in order to better understand the relationship of these identities to one another and to the gender binary. I would argue that qualitative research is best suited to accomplish this. A small number of qualitative researchers have already engaged in this task. Davidson conducted an ethnography which involved interviewing 101 trans activists (90 who identified as trans, 11 who identified as allies) in order to examine trends of inclusion and exclusion under the trans umbrella, and how these relationships affect trans activism (2007). Davidson found consensus amongst participants that “the term transgender has no singular, fixed meaning but is instead currently conceptualized by both scholars and activists as inclusive of the identities and experiences of some (or perhaps all) gender-variant, gender- or sex-changing, gender-

blending, and gender-bending people” (Davidson 2007:60). Davidson also found that trans participants were not strongly attached to the terms used to describe their gender identities, and that the terms used often depended on the context in which they were asked to identify their gender identity. Further, in about a quarter of Davidson’s interviews, participants noted a discrepancy between their public and private identities, indicating that the way they described their gender identity to others was not always synonymous with their own personal sense of identity. Similar trends were found in an interview study conducted by Downing, which involved 19 trans and gender-variant participants (2013). Like Davidson and Kuper et al., Downing found that participants used various and unfixed labels, suggesting fluidity of gender identity.

#### *Gender Identity Development*

So far, the qualitative studies mentioned have looked at genderqueer or non-binary participants alongside binary trans identities. However, there is some research conducted exclusively with genderqueer-identified or non-binary participants. For example, Corwin conducted an ethnography with 15 participants in Northern California that involved participant observation, open-ended interviews, and naturally-occurring dialogue (2009). Being a linguistic anthropologist, Corwin was primarily interested in understanding how participants constructed and performed their identities through language. Corwin found that participants were able to introduce culturally recognizable categories (such as man and woman, masculine and feminine) into their narratives, positioning these categories against their own gender identities: they “defy, distort, and distance” themselves from these normative conceptions in order to describe their own non-normative gender. Referring to a participant, Corwin indicates that “in this dialogic

interaction, Atlas was able to creatively negotiate their own gender identity. Through the manipulation of culturally recognizable categories and the management of voices in these narratives, Atlas was able to construct a non-binary gender” (Corwin 2009). By referring to culturally recognizable categories (in Atlas’ case, female and lesbian), Atlas provides the listener with a clear and accessible starting point from which to understand their gender. Corwin points to the ways in which genderqueer individuals interface with existing language which alone fail to fully describe their gender identities; this kind of language inadequacy is also reflected in studies which point to the variability and multiplicity of terms used to describe trans identities (Davidson 2007; Factor and Rothblum 2008; Kuper et al. 2012; Downing 2013). This nuanced understanding of the ways non-binary individuals construct and communicate their gender identity is accessible only through qualitative research, pointing to the ways in which interview-based research is uniquely suited to study this population.

#### *Intersection of Race and Gender*

In studies of non-binary and genderqueer individuals, participants are often overwhelmingly white. For example, in Factor and Rothblum’s survey (2008), 95.1% identified as white; among Kuper et al.’s (2012) participants, 86.6% were white. Although it is clear that their sample was very white overall, the particularly high rate of white genderqueer participants is consistent with claims by scholars and activists that a genderqueer identity may primarily be claimed by white, young, college-educated people (Davidson 2007; Beemyn 2015). However, it is likely overly simplistic to assume that the predominately white samples are a reflection of a lack of gender diversity among people of color. In actuality, across time and place, people of color and indigenous peoples have

long recognized and respected non-normative gender and sexual identities (Nanda 2000; Balestrery 2012).

An intersectional framework helps us to understand the complex relationship between race and gender, and allows us to critically analyze why study samples often include a limited number of genderqueer people of color. Intersectionality, as introduced to sociology by Black feminists, suggests that individuals who experience multiple sources of oppression exist at a unique social location (Crenshaw 1989). In the United States, “others” have been created out of both gender and racial minorities; for individuals who identify as both, this oppression is compounded (Balestrery 2012). Whiteness has been shown to function as a protective factor for some LGBTQ+ individuals, shielding them from discrimination they might otherwise face by allowing them to claim “sameness” with the dominant racial group (Ma’Ayan 2011; Abelson 2016). In addition, studies have shown that LGBTQ+ people of color (LGBT-POC) experience higher rates of discrimination than white LGBTQ+ people (Balsam et al. 2011; Whitfield et al. 2014). Balsam et al. explained this trend by pointing to the multiplicity of marginalization that LGBTQ-POC experience, derived from three interrelated factors: 1) racism in LGBTQ communities, 2) heterosexism in racial/ethnic minority communities, and 3) racism in close and dating relationships. Despite the fact that, historically, non-Western cultures have accepted and celebrated non-normative gender identities, there is a perception that communities of color and immigrant communities are less accepting of gender and sexual minorities than white communities. This apparent inconsistency is partially explained by the cultural genocide perpetrated by European settlers, which created a legacy of loss among indigenous communities,



including a loss of gender and sexual diversity and acceptance (Balestrery 2012). For example, prior to colonization, many Native American tribes revered non-normatively gendered individuals who were understood to occupy a third gender (Nanda 2000). However, post-colonization, as a result of both heterosexism in their racial/ethnic community and racism in the LGBTQ+ community, LGBTQ-POC may feel compelled to choose between their family and the queer community (de Vries 2012). If this is the case, it may be that people of color are not in close contact with communities who regularly use terms such as “genderqueer” and “non-binary.” It may also be that these terms simply do not carry as much significance for people of color; for instance, since 1990, the Native American community has expressed a preference for the term two-spirit to identify those who have both a masculine and a feminine spirit (Balestrery 2012). For some people of color, their gender identity is inextricably tied to their racial or ethnic identity. Because of this, it may be that racial or ethnic minorities do not identify with terms belonging to the dominant culture, and for that reason may not as frequently respond to calls for participants that use dominant culture language. Further research is needed to better explore these questions.

#### *Non-binary Identities in Institutions*

As Risman and Davis (2013) articulate, the gender structure is comprised of the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Non-binary individuals have been included in a limited number studies interrogating individual and identity development (see Corwin 2009, Downing 2013). There has been even less research on non-binary individuals in institutional contexts. That being said, there is some research on trans men in the workplace. Findings regarding trans men in the workplace likely describe at least

some aspects of non-binary experience in the workplace (although it does not provide a full picture of what it means to have a non-binary gender in the workplace). As an institution, work is an important site of study; feminist scholarship has indicated the special ways in which gender inequality and difference are maintained and recreated in the workplace (Acker 2006). Acker argues that workplace organizations are gendered, allowing them to reify inequalities between men and women. In order to preserve these inequalities, the workplace creates difference between men and women. Several studies have looked at the role of transgender identity in the workplace (Connell 2010; Schilt 2010; Schilt and Westbrook 2014). Connell argues that the workplace is currently a particularly salient location in which to study transgender identities because 1) it is a crucial site of the reproduction of gender inequality and 2) due to an increase in trans visibility and trans-friendly policy, rising numbers of trans men and women are out at work. Acker's analysis allows us to infer how trans and non-binary identities may create a threat to the gendered organization of the workplace. One way in which the workplace creates and maintains gender inequality is through its assumption of heterosexuality; the expectation of heterosexuality at work is one way in which the gender binary is reified. For example, women may be expected to be sexually attractive while performing their job, and male coworkers may engage in the sexual objectification of their female coworkers. As discussed earlier, heterosexuality requires not only certain genders, but certain bodies; Acker says that "body differences provide clues to the appropriate assumptions, followed by appropriate behaviors" (Acker 2006:451). This assertion presents important questions about the way in which bodies which do not conform to expected body differences are read (or rendered unintelligible) in the workplace. Another

important concept presented by Acker is that of vulnerability – Acker describes how a “fear of loss of livelihood controls those who might challenge inequality” (2006:459). Trans people may choose not to disclose their gender identities in the workplace because they fear job loss or tension in the workplace. Similarly, trans people who are out at work may manage their performance in order to conform to the gendered organization of the workplace out of the same fear of job loss or conflict.

In her ethnography, Schilt looks specifically at the experiences of trans men in the workplace (2010). Although Schilt’s study focuses exclusively on trans men, her findings can help inform our understanding of the treatment of non-binary people in the workplace. It is likely that non-binary identities provide a similar threat to the gender order as trans men do, and that employers and coworkers will engage in comparable attempts to manage this disruption. Schilt finds that “incorporating trans men as one of the guys at work simultaneously repairs any breach to natural differences schemas and maintains the belief that workplace gender hierarchies derive from nature, not culture” (Schilt 2010:9). Schilt’s finding aligns with Acker’s assertion that gender variance in the workplace is perceived as a threat; Schilt identifies ways in which this threat is managed by employers and coworkers. It is not only trans men who must do work to conform to the workplace – the people surrounding them in their job also do work in an attempt to maintain the stability and naturalness of the gender binary. For women, this might mean asking trans men to do masculine-typed tasks for them, for men, this might mean giving trans men more responsibility in the workplace than they had when they were perceived as women. On one hand, trans men experience positive feelings when their gender is recognized and validated in the workplace; trans men (particularly white trans men) may

also be able to benefit from patriarchal dividend, the rewards reaped by men through the subordination of women (Connell 2005). On the other hand, however, this process simultaneously serves to reify gender differences (which are key to maintaining gender inequality) in the workplace. Importantly, Schilt notes that “on a structural level, incorporating trans men as one of the guys does the same work as pushing them out of the workplace – maintaining the gender status quo” (Schilt 2010:17). What’s more, while in some respects being treated like a man in the workplace may be identity-affirming for trans men, in other ways it might be indicative of pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. Expecting trans men to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals may in fact stifle aspects of their personality that are still important to them but which do not conform to normative gender expectations. Says Schilt, “it is important to keep in mind that trans men can feel pressure to conform to normative behavioral and appearance standards for men in order to maintain employment – a long step away from freedom of gender expression” (Schilt 2010:168). That being said, Schilt calls for the elucidating of the workplace experiences of genderqueer people in future research.

### *Significance of Relationships*

Trans people experience their body as situated in relation to their environment; this can include parents, public discourse, and intimate partners (Downing 2013). Literature discussed above shows us that gender-variant individuals are indeed affected by their relationship to dominant discourse and the workplace; literature also demonstrates that gender-variant individuals are affected by the more intimate relationships in their lives. Non-binary individuals’ relationships with those important to them, particularly parents, intimate partners, and friends, affect their ability to develop

and express gender. In their qualitative research with gender-variant participants, Downing explores in detail the relational factors which impact gender identity development, investigating how these factors might limit or support this process. Downing emphasizes the importance of relationships to the identity development and mental well-being of gender-variant individuals, indicating that “experiencing one’s self as fundamentally not fitting within normative expectations of male and female categories could become all the more distressing and conflictual when such feelings were not given the relational space and support to interpersonally construct one’s self” (224). That is, relationships sometimes exacerbated the difficulties trans and gender-variant people already experience in attempting to reconcile their gender identities with normative expectations. Through speaking with older participants, Downing reports that, while avoiding disclosing gender identity to intimate partners may have temporary protective effects, it can be damaging over time to a person’s sense of self and mental well-being in the long run. Notably, in another study, it was found that gender-variant individuals were likely to first disclose their gender identity to an intimate sexual partner (Factor and Rothblum 2008). Like intimate partner relationships, families of origin were also found to have significant implications for gender identity development and growth. One area in which participants expressed the significant role of relationships in the development of their gender identity was physical gender presentation, such that “even imagining what it might mean to shift one’s gender presentation, through various modifications in the presentation of the body, often entailed ongoing considerations of how other people might respond to such gender non-conformity” (Downing 2013:222). Participants in

Downing's study were aware of the considerations of those close to them when curating their physical appearance, pointing to the reflexivity of gender accountability.

While efforts have been made to explore diversity underneath the trans umbrella, non-binary identities remain understudied. What we do know about non-binary identities indicates that there is a great amount of variation in terms used to describe gender, and that the limits of the English language may coerce individuals to employ binary gender terms in order to linguistically construct their non-binary genders. Additionally, we see that intimate partners, families of origin, and friends play a significant role in the gender identity development of non-binary individuals, reliant on the nature of their support or disapproval of the non-binary individual's identity. We also know that trans people face limitations in the workplace, as the disruptions they are perceived to create are regulated by coworkers and employers in an attempt to restore order to the workplace (a gendered institution). While there is no research currently looking specifically at non-binary individuals in the workplace, we can extend our knowledge of trans people in the workplace to understand non-binary experience. At the same time, further research is needed to study the distinct experiences of non-binary individuals in the workplace. There is no research exploring the experiences of non-binary individuals across a variety of contexts, including not only the workplace but also intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ community. In order to fill these gaps, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals who identify as non-binary. I find that non-binary people engage in a continuous negotiation as they attempt to embrace their non-binary gender in the context of relationships and institutions which actively work to maintain gender difference. That said, alongside these challenging negotiations exist

opportunities for non-binary people to act against structure, working to make room for themselves and others who wish to live life apart from the gender binary.

#### 4. Data and Method

In order to examine non-binary individuals' understanding and performance of their gender identities, and the ways in which these identities play out in the workplace, intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ community, I interviewed 15 non-binary individuals. Interviews allowed me to access the narratives of non-binary people in a way distinct from quantitative data. I was able to explore the complexities and nuances of my participants' identities, something which was of special importance to me considering the limited data we currently have on this population.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>
Adrian	Non-binary (NB), Genderfluid	She/her	Spanish/Latinx	30
Brett	NB, Genderqueer Trans Masculine	They/them (primary), he/him	White	25
Sam	NB, Gender Free	Ze/Zim (primary), he/him	White	41
Timothy	NB, Two-Spirit	He/him	Native American	36
Ray	NB, Trans, Genderqueer	They/them, she/her, he/him	White	34
Elizabeth	NB, Gender Non-Conforming, Fluid	She/her	White	20
Stevie	NB, Trans, Genderfluid, Genderqueer	They/them	White	20
Aspen	NB, Trans	They/them	White	21
Roan	NB, Genderqueer	They/them	White	38
Arthur	NB, Trans, Genderqueer, Gender Non-Conforming, Dancer	They/them	White	38
Theresa	NB, Trans, Non-Conforming, Genderqueer	They/them	White	38
Sara	NB, Demi-Femme	They/them, she/her	White	26
Dana	NB, Queer	They/them (primary), he/him	White	30
West	NB, Trans, Genderfluid	They/them (primary), she/her	White	18
Lisa	NB, Gender Non-Conforming, Genderqueer	He/him, she/her	White	48



### *Data Collection*

Participants in this study are individuals over the age of 18 living in the Portland metro area who self-identify non-binary as part or all of their gender identity. I recruited participants through both purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited largely through flyers, which were posted electronically and distributed through email (see Appendix B). The flyers were posted to three Facebook support groups for members of the Portland LGBTQ+ community. The flyers were also circulated to members of the email list serve of the Portland Q Center and the Portland State University Queer Resource Center. At the end of their interviews, several participants mentioned being a part of a community to whom they could circulate my flyer via email. Others mentioned friends who expressed interest in the study, and asked permission to give out my contact information to these friends. After the first round of recruitment, I gained an additional 5 participants through snowball sampling.

After a participant contacted me through the email address on the flyer, an initial survey was sent out, asking them to describe their gender and to provide their age, race and/or ethnicity, whether they lived in the Portland Metro Area, and whether or not they had children over the age of 18 (see Appendix A). This helped me to identify individuals who described their gender as other than fully man or fully woman and also allowed for an aim in diversity in race among participants. While 29 individuals responded to the survey, I only interviewed 16. Ten of the potential participants stopped responding to emails before we could schedule an interview, while the remaining three did not live in the Portland metro area. Unfortunately, due to a technical error, one of my interviews was

not fully recorded, and I was unable to use data from that participant. I analyzed data from the remaining 15 participants.

Sixteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted from the months of Aug-Nov of 2016. Interviews lasted from 30-87 minutes, with an average of 43 minutes. All interviews were conducted either in my office on the Portland State University campus or in a quiet cafe on the other side of the river which divides the city. I gave participants a choice between the two locations, in order to facilitate their ability to access the interview. All participants found one of the two locations to be convenient. Each interview was digitally recorded. Before recording began I summarized the consent form to participants, let them read it through on their own and sign it, and provided an opportunity for participants to ask any questions they may have had. I then asked permission to start the digital recorder and began the interview.

Interviews were conducted according to an interview guide (see appendix); probes and clarifying questions were used when needed. Questions for my interview guide came from an understanding of issues facing non-binary and trans people garnered from the literature. Questions were aimed to gather data which would best be able to answer my research questions. A first iteration of my interview guide was used for participants 1 and 2; after these interviews I went back and revised my interview guide and used this revised version for all proceeding interviews.

In the interviews, participants were asked to describe their gender, recount significant moments or events in the development of their gender identity, and relay experiences related to their gender identity in the workplace, intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ community. I allowed the participant to

recount to me the parts of their narrative they felt to be most important, using probing questions to guide the interview according to how they answered questions. This reflexive style follows the feminist research tradition and gives partial agency back to the interviewee.

It is important to consider the role of the researcher when conducting qualitative work. I identify as queer, and although I did not explicitly disclose my gender or sexual identity to participants (as no participant asked me this question directly), participants' ability to deduce or assume my own identity may have had an effect on their level of comfort while talking about sensitive issues regarding their gender identity. Although no participant asked me directly about my gender identity, several participants did say things to indicate that they understood me to be a part of their community. Various participants used phrases such as "well, you understand," or "you know how it is," which imply assumptions of shared experience. Additionally, after posting my flyer to one Facebook group, a potential participant posted a series of questions inquiring into my identity, my research style, and what the interview data would be used for. I typed up answers to these questions in a Word Document, and from that point forward when posting the flyer to Facebook groups I would copy and paste the questions and answers in the comments section of the post (see Appendix C). Participants who read my answers to these questions prior to being interviewed would know of my queer identity. In some ways participants' knowledge of my identity may have been a positive effect, as they may have felt more readily able to share their story with me; that said, the perception that I am already familiar with their narrative may have led them to elaborate less or assume they did not need to provide me with certain information. In times where I felt like this might

be the case, I made an effort to ask probing questions as to make sure the participant was fully detailing their narrative.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed by the researcher. Digital recordings and transcripts were kept on a password-protected computer separate from any information which may have identified participants. Pseudonyms were used throughout the data analysis process to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts were read through several times, first in an attempt to identify preliminary themes. After the first read through, a list of codes was created. Data was analyzed using a qualitative coding software named Dedoose, a cloud-based online application. I used a general inductive approach to analyze data (Thomas 2006). While reviewing data and forming codes and themes, I kept in mind the theoretical traditions used to guide this study, particularly the interplay between the individual, interactional, and institutional levels which Risman and Davis (2013) include in their description of gender as a structure. That is, I looked at the data with a special interest in discovering 1) how non-binary individuals understand themselves, 2) how interaction influences the development and expression of non-binary gender identity, and 3) how institutional factors influence the development and expression of non-binary gender identity. I coded for issues related to identity development, which resulted in finding themes regarding identity and language, physical presentation, pronouns, sexuality, and development of identity over time. I also coded for issues specifically related to participants' experiences in the workplace, with intimate partners, with friends, and in the LGBTQ+ community.

### *Limitations*

This study is limited in that participation was completely voluntary, and I was not able to provide any incentives – for this reason, it was somewhat difficult to attract participants. Recruiting marginalized populations (such as gender minorities) is often difficult, as these people may distrust academia or be fearful of the possibility of disclosing their identity to a stranger. Despite assurances of anonymity, potential participants may also have feared that their privacy would be compromised. Many people who identify as gender variant have not disclosed their identity in contexts such as the workplace, and they may fear that to do so would jeopardize their job; they may not have been willing to take the risk of outing themselves by participating in a study such as this one.

This study is also limited in that participants were largely – 87% – white. Several factors may have contributed to this. Firstly, non-binary people of color exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. The trauma which has historically been inflicted on marginalized groups by researchers may make it more difficult to recruit individuals who face multiple axis of oppression. Secondly, recruitment took place in Portland, where the population is over 80% white. Lastly, it may be that the language used on the flyer was attenuated more to the experiences of white gender-variant people than to the experiences of gender-variant people of color. That is, the term “non-binary” might be closer to describing the lived experiences of a larger number of white people than people of color. For instance, while one of my participants identified as two-spirit, it may be that other Native Americans who identify with the term two-spirit either do not recognize or do not relate to the term “non-binary,” which was the word used on the

flyer. For people of color, their gender identities are often inextricably tied to their racial or ethnic identity and for that reason may not identify with the term non-binary.

Further, the results of this study may not be generalizable to non-binary people in other states or other countries, due to Portland's unique nature as a well-known queer-friendly city. Several participants reported moving to Portland because they believed they would be able to express their identity more freely and openly here compared to where they lived before. Because of this, it may be the case that my participants' experiences in the workplace, dating, and with friends are distinct from those of individuals in other locations. What's more, many participants reported that they were not familiar with the language that they currently use to identify their gender identity until they moved to the city of Portland – for that reason, individuals who share a similar sense of identity with my participants but who use different words may have their experiences overlooked if we were to overgeneralize the results of this study. However, considering the dearth of research on non-binary identities, a larger and more visible population from which to sample from may have better allowed me to give voice to non-binary people.

### *Significance*

This project is giving voice to non-binary individuals and advancing theory. The bulk of the sociological and psychological research done thus far on non-cisgender identities has been focused on white trans men and trans women. Further, research on non-binary identities has often been done as a part of a study sampling primarily binary trans individuals. There is not sufficient research done to explore the unique experiences of individuals who do not identify fully as man or woman. This research project attempts to fill this gap. This research is necessary because it can address important sociological

issues in special ways, such as the social construction of gender and the role of individual agency in identity formation. The data I collect through this study will serve as a useful contribution to the sociology of gender and sexuality as well as work and relationships, filling a gap that currently exists in these fields of research.

## 5. Non-Binary Identity Development and Expression

Non-binary individuals in my study develop and express their gender identities reflexively. This means that their gender development and expression are informed not only by the participants' internal sense of identity (the individual level of the gender structure), but also by their experiences with and the cultural expectations communicated by friends and intimate partners (the interactional level of the gender structure) and the organizations in which they operate (the institutional level of the gender structure). When developing and expressing their non-binary gender, participants are shaped not only by their own internal sense of identity, but also by interactional accountability and institutional constraints. Non-binary individuals consider a vast amount of information when considering how to proceed with the disclosure and expression of their gender identities. While, for many of my participants, their internal sense of self remains consistent and authentic over time, it is their ability to communicate and embody their gender identity that changes across time and space. This ability is affected by the institutional context in which they participate (the workplace, LGBTQ+ community, family) and the individuals with whom they engage in relationship (friends, intimate partners). Overall, non-binary individuals are held accountable to a normative performance of gender. This often restricts their ability to express their gender freely. Despite this, they find ways to assert and create their non-binary gender identities through use of identity terms, non-normative pronouns, physical presentation, and expressions of sexuality. These non-normative enactments of gender oftentimes mean that non-binary individuals face sanctions. At times, these sanctions are enough to coerce non-binary individuals into more binary expressions of their gender. At other times, however, their



ability to push back means that they retain the ability to construct an authentic, non-binary gender identity.

### *Gender Identity*

All participants self-identified as non-binary. The term non-binary encompassed a variety of complex gender identities for individuals. Additionally, while all participants embraced the term non-binary for its ability to communicate their gender, few participants were deeply invested in the term. Most often, non-binary served as a sort of proxy identity term for participants. Alone, the term did not fully describe participants' genders, nor did it mean the same thing to each participant. For example, when asked to describe their gender identity, West said:

Non-binary. Pretty simple, I used to go by genderqueer but I think non-binary is a little more formal sounding, or just sounds a little better to me, but maybe genderfluid too. Just not exclusively male or female

West expresses a lack of attachment to the term non-binary; they employ it, using it to describe their gender identity, but then follow by saying that the term genderfluid might work just as well. West, along with other participants, uses the term non-binary to indicate what their gender is *not* (solely male or solely female) moreso than what their gender *is*. That is, they use the concept of the gender binary to pose their own gender identities as outside of and separate from normative conceptions of gender. This tendency to “defy, distort, and distance” oneself from existing binary gender terms is reflected in Corwin’s research, where genderqueer participants were found to define their own identities by employing and distorting more traditionally gendered terms and concepts (2009). Like West, Aspen identified their gender identity by saying “Non-binary works, just neither of the boxes. Yeah, just outside of that.” Dana expressed a similar

relationship with identity labels when they explained why they prefer the term “queer” over “genderqueer”:

I guess that’s just how I would apply it to me in that I don’t feel like I have a super fixed gender identity, so that’s why queer feels good because that’s a big bowl that, I assume, it will always contain whatever I’m feeling about gender day-to-day

Dana describes a kind of gender fluidity that was found among many participants; again, their gender was not a stable and fixed category but rather something that had the potential to shift and grow and develop across time and space. For Dana, their gender does not exist as a specific fixed identity but rather a “big bowl” in which coexist many different experiences of gender. Based on my participants’ expressed lack of attachment to the term non-binary, we should understand non-binary to be not a fixed identity point along some kind of broader gender spectrum, but rather a term claimed by those whose gender identities do not map neatly onto any kind of binary or spectrum-based understanding of gender. Instead, it would seem that to identify as non-binary is more about a rejection of binary gender identities and the embrace of an alternative gender identity, rather than it is about claiming a specific alternative gender identity.

Importantly, this analysis should not be understood as a writing-off of the term “non-binary” as an incoherent or useless category – rather, the term’s dynamic and variable definition means that to identify as non-binary encompasses not one but many experiences. These varied experiences all share one thing in common that makes it analytically useful to group them together: a lack of identification as either fully male or fully female. Analytically, this allows us to study together a group of people who are, one

could say, living the unlivable: embodying the apparent impossibility of being neither man nor woman.

Given the numerous gender identities that the term non-binary encompasses, it is unsurprising that my participants reported a plethora of different terms when asked to describe their gender identity. All 15 participants identified with one or more terms in addition to non-binary (see Table 1). Non-binary gender, for my participants, was not an easily defined category but rather something more nebulous; it often took not only the use of multiple terms (i.e. Ray, who identifies as non-binary and transgender and genderqueer) but also full sentences in order for the participants to fully articulate their gender identities. For example, when asked to describe their gender identity, Brett said

I identify as a genderqueer trans masculine person. I think I lean towards masculine internally to a certain extent but it's like, I see gender more as a couple suggestions and guidelines to helping other people understand you as much as anything that is really concrete

The tendency for participants to produce such verbose responses when asked how they identify their gender may be partially explained by the difficulties presented by the English language in attempting to describe gender as anything outside of the traditionally inscribed gender binary. Many participants pointed to the challenges they have faced in understanding and communicating their identity due to constraints in language. When asked about whether or not he uses the words masculine and feminine to describe his gender, Lisa replied,

In traditional contexts, if I'm using them in traditional senses, yes. You know, in the sense that I'm trying to make a point and it's language, I don't have language to talk about a lot of this stuff. I don't know that it's actually there. So in the sense that people understand what I'm getting at when I use masculine and feminine, as opposed to, for example, some combination, it's a lot clearer to other people than it is necessarily to me to understand what I'm trying to say

Here, Lisa points to the ways in which the English language constrains his ability to communicate to others precisely how he understands his own gender. On one hand, because our language is not only gendered, but gendered in a way that assumes the existence and stability of a gender binary (she vs. he, feminine vs. masculine, etc.), non-binary identities are rendered not only communicatively unintelligible, but ideologically so as well. For instance, when Lisa uses the terms “masculine” and “feminine” to provide an approximation of his gender identity and expression in conversation with others, important meaning is obscured, not just to the other person but to Lisa himself. Although some of the content of Lisa’s identity is lost in translation, so to speak, the person Lisa is in conversation with feels comforted by the use of familiar terms: “masculine” and “feminine.” Here, Lisa is making what we might call a language concession. In order to make his identity legible to others, he distills it, which partially obscures its true content. However, at the same time, Lisa’s use of traditionally gendered terms, while certainly comprising a language concession, might also represent the use of distortion as creation. That is to say, like participants in Corwin’s study, formulating and describing non-binary gender identities not in alignment with, but in opposition to, traditionally gendered terms allows us to create and assign new (perhaps radical) meaning to bodies and identities (2009). The ability to take advantage of the gendered language that exists, manipulating or reconstructing it in an attempt to communicate non-binary gender identities, may be indicative of possibilities to alter the perceived permanence of gendered language.

In the sociological literature, non-binary identities have so far been located under the larger trans umbrella (see Factor and Rothblum 2008; Rankin and Beemyn 2011;

Kuper et al. 2012). This assumption is largely confirmed by my participants; however, only two participants actively volunteered “transgender” as a part of their gender identity, and a small number even rejected the term entirely. While this distinction did not come up in all of my original interviews, I sent a follow-up email to participants asking the following questions: “Do you identify with the term transgender? If not, do you identify with the term cisgender?”. All 12 respondents who had not already answered this question during the interview replied via email. Various participants demonstrated a lack of conviction in their replies, such as Sara, who said

I do not identify as cisgender. I am kinda on the fence with the term transgender but I think I fall within that category. If anyone asks me, I say I am non-binary. I don't use either cis or trans to describe myself. I see trans as being accurate, but do not think that the social meaning to cis people is what someone would understand

For non-binary people, normative understandings of the term transgender may discourage them from using the term; in popular discourse, it is understood the only way to be trans is to transition fully (at least socially, if not medically) from gender assigned at birth to the “opposite” gender. That is, transgender people, by and large, are still expected to “do” gender correctly, as West and Zimmerman describe. In this way, there is perhaps another binary created from what appear to be two polar “opposite” gender identities: cisgender and transgender. Within this framework, individuals who do not fully identify as either man or woman are once again rendered unintelligible. Further, it does not seem that cisgender is an accurate descriptor for my participants, because the gender identity of non-binary individuals does not align with the gender assigned to them at birth. Notably, only one of my participants (Timothy) identified as cisgender, and even then it was with little conviction. Timothy said:

I don't not identify with transgender. I do identify with cisgender only because people see me that way. I mostly identify as two-spirit, because it is the best word to describe who I am

Timothy's identification with the term cisgender seems to be more about acknowledging a sort of coerced categorization by others than a reflection of his internal sense of identity. Beyond Timothy, no other participant identified with the term cisgender. After receiving email replies to my question, I found that about half of my participants – seven – did identify with the term transgender. An additional two participants said that, while they would not volunteer the term transgender when asked about their gender identity, they would choose “transgender” over “cisgender” in a situation where they were asked to. Some of the seven participants who would volunteer transgender as part of their identity told me that, while they have been resistant to claiming the term transgender in the past, they now accept it as a term that is inclusive of non-binary gender identities. Claiming a trans identity makes sense for some of my participants. However, it is important to realize that some non-binary people choose to resist being labeled as transgender, likely because they feel it further erases their desire to exist outside of any kind of gendered binary.

Language does not exist to fully and effortlessly describe non-binary gender identities. When asked to describe their gender, non-binary individuals chose to employ various identity terms alongside full-sentence explanations in order to communicate their identity. These terms are all but meaningless outside of the context of gendered language; that is, in order to describe their non-binary gender identities participants often had to use gendered terms (such as masculine or feminine). In some ways, these discursive boundaries limit the extent to which participants are able to communicate their identities

effectively and accurately. As Risman and Davis indicate, the language which constructs ideological discourse is a tool through which the gender structure is maintained (2013). Then again, in non-binary participants' descriptions of their gender, we witness them pushing back against normative gendered language, posing their own identities outside of and in opposition to traditionally gendered terms. In this way, non-binary individuals find a way to re-define what it means to be gendered through their novel use of language.

### *Physical Gender Presentation*

Perceptions of gender identity are closely linked to how individuals choose to present themselves. Presentation varied among participants. Many participants described their presentation as being mostly masculine, mostly feminine, or a combination of the two. When pressed to define what the terms masculine and feminine meant to them, many participants wavered, and most indicated that they used the terms for lack of better ones. For example, Adrian says,

I mean I feel like I present myself as masculine, I wear men's clothing, I get my hair cut at a barber shop, my close friends and fiancé, they use like handsome [to compliment me], however, I feel like I have very feminine characteristics, mannerisms, which, I think people get confused where they see me dressed a certain way [since] I may, like I said, act more feminine, so people who are not familiar with the queer community don't understand the way I present and the way I act because they see butch, and they think that people who present like I do should be more masculine. And so I feel like it's confusing to others

Adrian is pointing to the dissonance she perceives between her gender identity and other's attempts to understand her identity using traditional binary conceptions of gender.

When asked to explain what she meant by feminine and masculine, Adrian said

I get told that, I don't know, this sounds really stereotypical, but people will say that I'm a gay man trapped in a lesbian's body, I'm very flamboyant, people think I talk with my hands a lot and [I'll have] limp wrists, and I know it sounds terrible to explain it to people like that, but sometimes I cross my legs like feminine,

which I think is funny because it's like, what's feminine about crossing your legs. I have a lot of female friends, [and] when people, like my best friend is more masculine presenting so she has a lot of male friends, and I think that people just see what they think, like on TV, and I don't fit in that box for a lot of people

Adrian expresses an acute awareness of the way other people perceive her gender presentation – as West and Zimmerman note, accountability is a reflexive process (1987).

The way other people perceive and comment on Adrian's gender presentation affects the way she understands and presents herself.

For non-binary individuals, social recognition is difficult to achieve – because of the pervasiveness of binary understandings of gender, they are almost invariably misrecognized as men or women by strangers they encounter. Although my participants rarely achieve complete social recognition, they can curate their gender presentation in a manner that facilitates social interaction. In doing so, they attempt to reconcile personal comfort with social expectations. Elizabeth, who used to identify as a trans man and who now identifies as non-binary and uses she/her pronouns, said

I'd say it's different when I go out and about than when I'm at home. Because when I'm at home I just wear boxers. I feel immensely comfortable in boxers. And you know, maybe a shirt or something, but. Mostly masculine clothing at home, and then when I go out I like wearing skirts, but that unto itself doesn't necessarily make my outfits feminine. Like it's a marker for it but you know I add other things and every once in a while I go out in pants. Not very often, but when I do I always feel especially masculine, more than otherwise. Or shorts, or you know, any kind of deal. I haven't gone out with unshaven legs in a long time. I think not on purpose since I stopped identifying as exclusively male

The way Elizabeth presents herself is dependent on whether or not she will be entering public space that day. This again illustrates how accountability is significant even before interactions occur – because Elizabeth can imagine how others will perceive her, the possibility of sanctions partially dictates the way she presents herself to the world. Her



public presentation varies from her private presentation, indicating a discrepancy between her individual sense of self versus her interactional presentation of self; this trend has been documented in past research (Davidson 2007). While the perceptions of others were a significant factor for many people when describing how they choose to present themselves, this meant different things for different participants. Dana identifies as non-binary and queer, but at one point in time considered themselves to be FTM (female to masculine transgender). Dana says:

When I first started transitioning, I put a lot of effort into being really masculine and it, I think it made me much more stiff and false, and so since then I feel like I've sort of just, the more comfortable I've been with myself the more at ease I behave, and I think I have a lot of feminine mannerisms and I don't care anymore that I have these mannerisms that are in the social construction of [the] female box. I guess as far as intentionality, I feel like I'm off in the bushes. Sometimes I feel like presenting gender is a lot of work and in a lot of ways [I] have a lack of intentionality, and I usually just I be who I am and just shrug if people read me incorrectly

Dana recognizes that “presenting gender is a lot of work.” West and Zimmerman indicate that everyone is held accountable to a normative performance of gender; for individuals whose gender expression may not align with the sex category into which others place them, the accomplishment of gender poses a special challenge. Dana resists pressure to conform to a normative masculine performance of gender, allowing themselves to display mannerisms perceived as feminine. In this way, Dana challenges what it means to be a trans person, allowing themselves a fluidity and flexibility of presentation that feels authentic to them. Theresa had settled into a similar intentional detachment regarding the message their physical presentation communicated to others regarding their gender, as illustrated through the following interaction

Q: How do you think others perceive your gender identity?

A: I wonder that regularly. I mean, I wear a lot of pretty feminine-ascribed clothing. I have long hair. I have a very feminine-enculturated voice so I have a lot of lilts, but at the same time my voice is very deep, I have facial hair. I think people often think that I was assigned male and that I am a trans woman. But I think there is a lot of confusion because I don't have a typical set of one or the other, I'm not like aiming for one or the other of masculine or feminine I'm just sitting where I'm comfortable.

Q: How does this make you feel?

A: It's awesome, I love being able to occupy my body the way I want to. And I work at a job that allows that. I feel lucky, I feel really lucky. I live in the Pacific Northwest and this is the haven for queer people who are genderqueer, and I mean people come here specifically because we have the culture that allows for more room for us

Like Dana and Adrian, Theresa acknowledges that their presentation may confuse others, or may lead others to categorize them into an identity group to which they do not actually belong. That said, Theresa has not chosen to curate their physical appearance according to others' ability to correctly categorize them; instead, they choose to occupy, modify, and clothe their physical bodies according to their own comfort and preferences. Further, Theresa finds joy in their ability to "occupy [their] body the way [they] want to." It would seem, then, that while non-binary individuals are expected to accomplish a normative gender presentation, just as we all are, there are ways in which non-binary individuals can push up against this interactional expectation. As Risman indicates, these small rebellions are not insignificant, but rather represent the potential for small undoings of gender (2009). Instead of adhering to a normative gender presentation, Adrian, Dana, Theresa, and other non-binary individuals choose to present themselves in a way that risks sanctioning. Their desire to live comfortably and authentically in their own bodies can sometimes supersede accountability as a motivator.

### *Pronoun Usage*

Pronouns were often an area of stress or discontent for participants, as the pronouns people use for each other represent how they are perceiving and respecting each other's gender identity. Most of my participants used gender neutral pronouns - either they/them or ze/zim – although some participants did use gendered pronouns (see Table 1). Pronouns, like identity terms, are limited at the institutional level; language dictates possibilities, and the majority of non-queer people only know and use gendered pronouns. Current dialogue among members of the queer community discourages use of the term “preferred pronouns” when referring to the pronouns that gender-variant individuals choose for themselves. A non-binary person's pronouns are not “preferred” – they are non-negotiable. The term preferred suggests flexibility and falsity, translating into a lack of gender identity affirmation. Participants in my study sometimes used different pronouns depending on context. That being said, most participants did cite one set of pronouns that, in an ideal world, they would like to have used for them across all contexts. Although these could reasonably be construed as participants' “preferred” pronouns, in order to align myself with current best practice, I avoid that term. Because I find a need to distinguish between pronouns participants use by choice versus coercion, I use the term “primary pronouns” to identify those they would use all of the time in an ideal world. Participants had different levels of comfort with the variability of pronouns people used for them – sometimes the participant preferred using different pronouns in different contexts, sometimes the participant simply never corrected people who used their non-primary pronoun because it did not bother them, and sometimes participants were troubled when referred to with a pronoun other than their primary but chose not to

amend the situation for a variety of reasons. For example, when asked what pronouns they used, Ray responded

Any and all but mostly they/them among my friends. I use she/her more at work because it's harder to get them to transition.

Later, describing a conversation with their mother, Ray says

I was like "Ok, you can use whatever pronouns you want for me, none of them are wrong for me, there are some days where it will seem a little weird if you use he/him if I'm dressed in a dress, or you know there are days where they don't necessarily match my presentation that day, but they're never inaccurate."

For Ray, different people using different pronouns for them on different days aren't mistakes that Ray decides to let slip, but rather accurate reflections of Ray's non-binary gender identity. Other participants, such as Arthur, expressed less comfort with being addressed by gendered pronouns. Reflecting on an instance when someone referred to them as a man, Arthur says

I was so angry, and at the end of that conversation I, I think more forcefully than I have with anyone before or since, just said "Never, ever address me or refer to me in any way that's gendered again. Like, stop. Don't do that, don't call me a man, don't call me dude, don't call me bro, none of that. Don't say he, these are some things you're not allowed to do with me."

Still other participants decided to use gendered pronouns in specific contexts (often the workplace) because it was too difficult to get the people around them to use gender neutral pronouns. Referring to correcting others on pronoun usage, Brett said

It's not something that I necessarily try to correct people on or really delve into outside of say queer spaces just because I, when I first moved here I was kind of trying to maintain a very genderqueer identity and I was correcting people when they would use he and I would encourage them to use they. And I found that I was just being treated like a girl and that made me really uncomfortable. And I had a very unsupportive workplace environment and I didn't know any, it took me a while to find queer friends, so instead I was just getting put back into this binary box that I really didn't like, and so I was kind of like well I will just, you know, encourage people to make the mistake the other way.

Brett, and several other participants who were assigned female at birth, expressed a preference for being read as a man rather than a woman. I see at least two possible explanations for this trend. First, it may be that non-binary individuals who were assigned female at birth, and have been perceived as women for most of their life, may see being read as men as the “lesser of two evils.” When asked if they could identify why they preferred to be referred to with he/him pronouns rather than she/her pronouns, Brett told me:

I have tried to kind of figure that out, and I mean the honest answer is that I don't totally know, I think it may be as simple as I spent 21 years getting misgendered in that direction and now I've only spent a couple of years getting misgendered in this direction and so maybe its just like the, like it hasn't worn me down as much. And so there's that; I also think that people like respect masculine people more. There's a certain level of the misogyny to it. And I think that when a lot of people, a lot of cis people, that don't have much experience with non-binary genders are gonna put you in one box or the other and, I don't know. I like being looked in the eye and I like being heard. So I think there's a selfish element to it as well, of being like you know I feel like this is more accurate and also I know if you see me as a girl you're gonna treat me like shit.

Although Brett's identity is not being seen clearly or wholly when they are referred to with he/him pronouns, they are still recognized as other-than-woman. This perhaps incites less gender dysphoria, partially because they have not had to endure being misgendered in “this direction” for as long. The second possible reason Brett prefers masculine pronouns may be due to what Connell calls “patriarchal dividends” (2005). That is, as Brett acknowledges when they say “I know if you see me as a girl you're gonna treat me like shit,” non-binary individuals may be able to access some (limited, contingent) degree of privilege when they are misrecognized as men. They may receive more respect, particularly in the workplace, if they conform to hegemonic masculine

expectations which match a masculine physical presentation (Schilt 2010). Unlike people who are read as female, masculine non-binary people may be rewarded when they behave according to normative masculine norms. However, as Schilt recognizes from her research on trans men in the workplace, pressure to conform is a long way from freedom of expression. This issue will be explored in further detail in my second findings chapter.

### *Sexuality*

Although gender identity and sexual orientation are two distinct concepts, the two interplay. Without the existence of the gender binary, terms such as straight, gay, and lesbian lose meaning. The majority of my participants identified their sexual orientation as queer, bisexual, or pansexual. Roan identifies their sexual orientation as queer, and had the following to say about it:

I feel like it's the best way of not putting me in a very specific box. It's more of an umbrella term. Lesbian has never worked for me because my understanding of the term is that you need to A) identify as a woman and exclusively be interested in women and I'm not. And, you know, bi indicates that there's two genders and that's it, so that one doesn't work for me either. Definitely not straight, I've never been with a cisgender man. Queer is like the best one, and I could be with whoever and nobody's gonna blink an eye. And it's just more comfortable if I'm going to have to label it. A lot of people have different definitions of what that means, so people can draw their own conclusions, and I'm not expected to be a certain way, whereas within certain identities you're kind of expected to behave in a certain way.

For Roan, “queer” best encapsulates their sexual identity. They do not identify with a binary gender, and so to say they are lesbian or straight does not make sense to them. For them, the term bisexual also does not make sense because it implies a gender binary.

However, other participants defined bisexuality differently, such as Brett, who said:

To me, it means that I'm attracted to people both of the same and similar gender identity to me and people with different gender identity than me. I know, like

other people may describe my sexuality as pansexual but for some reason I, I don't know, I like bisexual. I like the term.

Although Roan and Brett employ slightly different terminology, this is mainly a result of the limitations of language – essentially, they both define their sexuality in a non-binary way. Their sexual identity, like their gender identity, exists outside of normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. West identified their sexual orientation as queer, saying:

I use the word queer, but I used to identify as a lesbian because I like women, but queer's not, I don't know, some people say "oh no you can't identify as a lesbian because you're non-binary" so I just use queer. I mean there's also a tiny chance I could date a guy, but I'm definitely, yeah, I would be a lesbian if I wasn't non-binary, so just queer.

West, like Roan, does not feel comfortable using the term lesbian because they do not identify as a woman. However, despite also identifying as non-binary, Adrian said she identified as lesbian. As we can see, much like gender identity terms, sexual orientation terms meant various things to different participants - much like with gender identity, typical language and vocabulary proves insufficient when attempting to articulate the sexual orientations of individuals who identify as non-binary.

### *Gender Identity Development*

Many participants described persistently and reliably acknowledging gender difference within themselves throughout their lives, even before acquiring the language to describe their identities as they do now. Often, participants experienced their internal sense of gender as fairly consistent over time, sometimes referencing memories from early childhood. This aligns with literature on the gender identity development of trans people (see Lev 2004; Devor 2004). Ray, who was assigned female at birth, described a

time when their sister asked them if they wanted to be a boy. Ray was around six or eight years old at the time, and responded to their sister that no, they did not want to be a boy.

Ray reflects:

I think it was the first time I realized that I wasn't either box. And that there wasn't a box that I wanted to be a part of, because it wasn't, I mean at that point I didn't even have hips to consider, it was just, no I don't want a guy's body, I just want to have all the other things that they get to have, like I just want to climb the trees and get to do the fun things in gym instead of field hockey. And those kinds of things. And like I have friends who were queer who wanted to be the other, who very much were like girls who wanted to grow up to be boys and boys who wanted to grow up to be girls, and I was kind of like I just don't want any of this. So I think that was the first time I felt like I didn't have a category.

Ray remembers being a small child, knowing that they did not identify with the gender that was assigned to them at birth, but also knowing that they did not identify with the “opposite” binary gender. Although the term “non-binary” was not in Ray’s vocabulary at the time, they already recognized the presence of the identity they now describe as such. Several other participants reported acknowledging their gender variance during childhood. Consistently, those who shared in such experiences also highlighted the ways in which their parents allowed a certain amount of freedom of expression in regards to gender. West says,

I mean, when I was growing up I was fortunate in that my parents allowed me to have really short hair and play tackle football and play baseball and do all these masculine things. They let me use the men's restroom when I would go out and eat with them and it was really cool, I got to really play with gender and stuff

West was able to gender-explore as a child because their parents gave them space to do so. Participants whose parents allowed them to explore their gender presentation from a young age cited these experiences as foundational to the development of their gender



identity. Roan, whose parents never compelled them to adhere to normatively gendered behaviors, said

I think that, because of the way I was raised, gender was not emphasized. I was pretty non-traditional, I grew up on a hippie commune outside of [Oregon town] and my mom's a second-wave feminist bra-burner type who never wore makeup, didn't shave, didn't do any of those things, frequently talked to us about conforming and not needing to conform to gender expectations; whenever she talked to the group of us, me and my siblings, there was never any emphasis on gender or gender roles, and so growing up in a relatively gender neutral environment was really helpful for me. I feel like if I had been forced into more traditional gender roles my identity might be different than what it is today, I might have swung further to the masculine end of the spectrum if I had been forced to be über feminine, but because I was allowed to just be me I've just been middle of the road my whole entire life.

Roan attributes their current self-assuredness partially to the environment in which they grew up – an environment which allowed them to express their identity authentically and without pushback. Granted, children do not exist exclusively inside of their family unit – it is probable that children who were given freedom by their parents to present and behave in ways not traditionally associated with their assigned gender received censure from teachers, other children, extended family members, etc. However, my participants' narratives indicate that families who allow their gender-variant children to gender-explore freely are setting those children up for a healthier gender development trajectory as they grow older.

It is worthwhile to note that all four participants who explicitly stated their family's openness to their childhood gender variance were assigned female at birth. While I only interviewed two participants who were assigned male at birth, it is expected that, largely, children who are assigned female at birth are given more room to explore their gender identity than are those assigned male, as noted by Factor and Rothblum

(2008). The gender binary creates not only gender difference, but also gender inequality (Lorber 1994). For this reason, feminine presentation and behavior is considered not only qualitatively different from, but also decidedly inferior to masculine presentation and behavior. While individuals who are perceived as a woman but present as masculine are certainly not afforded the same rewards as men who exhibit the same behaviors, they are also not sanctioned in the same way as individuals who are perceived as men but present as feminine. Fittingly, the literature indicates that, while many parents experience neutral or positive feelings toward gender non-normativity in their children, fathers in particular are invested in preserving their sons' hegemonic masculinity (Kane 2006). For these reasons, it makes sense that non-binary individuals who were assigned female at birth report being allowed more freedom of expression as children. It may also help explain why the majority of participants in my study, and in other studies of genderqueer and non-binary individuals, were assigned female at birth – often, it is more fraught (dangerous, even) for individuals who were assigned male at birth to present femininely (see Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

While many participants described their sense of gender difference as unchanging over time, they found their understanding and self-description of their gender identity to be highly variable. That is to say, while participants felt that their non-binary gender was a deep-rooted and unchanging part of their identity, they were not always able to conceptualize or verbalize their identities the way they are able to now. Arthur explains, “I’ve got new words for myself, but my experience of myself is not dramatically different.” What’s more, a majority of participants highlighted discovery of vocabulary which aptly describe their gender identities as key moments in their gender identity

development. Acquiring language which gave name to their pre-existing sense of a gendered self was deeply significant for participants; language acquisition serves to legitimize identity and facilitate communication of identity to others. Theresa explains, “my gender identity has stayed the same, but my comprehension of it and my ability to express it have changed a great deal.” Sam said the following regarding the development of zees gender identity:

I actually pretty recently found the vocabulary to encapsulate this whole denial thing that I had been experiencing for a long time. Of just, I was assigned female at birth but I never identified that way... And then recently within the last couple of years I was exploring online and found some websites and got the vocabulary to identify non-binary as an option. That’s what I’ve been looking for.

Finding words that adequately described zees experience with gender was a significant moment for Sam. Additionally, like other participants, Sam reported first encountering the words they now use to describe their gender identity on the internet. The internet may represent a safe, anonymous space in which individuals can explore their gender.

Environment and community made a difference in peoples’ ability and freedom to explore and develop their gender identity. Many participants relayed the significance of engaging in community – this engagement heightened their awareness of new gender expressions, and gave them the courage and confidence to experiment. This trend is exemplified in the following interaction with West:

Q: Can you tell me about how and when you found the words [to describe your gender]?

A: Well, when I was 18 I moved out and I lived on my own for a while, and I started going to the local LGBT community center and people, we'd go around and say your name and pronouns, and then some people would say their gender identity too, and I was like "Really? what's that?". And then, I mean I wasn't rude or anything, but I was like, “What does that mean, I've never heard of that?”, and people were explaining to me that there's more than two genders, and then, you know, I just went on Google and YouTube and I found people around my age or

older that had these experiences like I did and then I was, it just made sense and I was like yeah, I totally identify as this too.

Like Sam, the internet played an important role in the development of West's gender identity – they used the internet as a safe, private means through which to learn about gender identity. Participation in a LGBT event was also important for West – it was through socialization with other gender-variant people, who self-identified using terms like non-binary, that West was first exposed to that language. As West put it, “when I learned those words everything clicked.” Like so many other participants, gaining the ability to put words to their gender identity stood out as an important part of gender identity development for West.

Geographical location also proved to have an effect on individuals' gender identity development – many participants said it was not until they moved to Portland that they acquired the language to describe their gender identity. Other participants expressed being able to express their gender more openly and freely in Portland compared to other locations. As Brett puts it,

In Portland I introduce myself as Brett, which was my chosen name, just to everybody. And yeah, I'm out at work, I think for like the first time ever lots of people don't even know my birth name which is like, I don't know, it's not something that I ever thought would - I didn't think I would ever feel comfortable living like that

For Brett, living in Portland represents a marked difference in the way they are able to express and explore their gender identity.

It should be noted that participants' understandings of gender difference, even when present at a young age, did not always translate into a seamless or linear gender identity development. Participants did not always have a solid or comfortable

understanding of their gender identity – while, for some, it was always plainly clear that they identified as neither a man nor a woman, for others, the particulars of their gender difference proved less accessible. As Brett expressed,

I think probably the thing that stands out to me is how murky the journey has been. I know a lot of people, not just with gender, but also with sexual identity, they'll be like "I knew from an early age that this is who I was," like "I feel it very strongly, you know, I was just getting messages from the outside world that that's not how you're supposed to be, but I knew it." And I had no idea, and I still feel like I kind of have no idea. I feel like the way that I have been able to figure things out is through my reaction to other people's reaction to me. And that's not something that I really - that's not a story that you usually hear I feel like, as being like "I was just confused as hell, I just knew that this was hurting me." It's kind of weird, it's like figuring out your boundaries and figuring out who you are based on the damage you're receiving from other people

For Brett, the development of their gender identity was not as simple as identifying it internally, finding the appropriate language, and then communicating it externally. This is important to note, because while some participants reported consistent confidence in their gender identity throughout their lifetime, not all shared in that experience. In fact, perhaps because society does not provide a model for acceptable gender expression outside of the gender binary, and because the English language does not supply the linguistic tools needed to articulate such an identity, the identity development process was often turbulent for participants. Elizabeth also experienced her gender development as non-linear, and at times distressing. While she now identifies as gender non-conforming or fluid and uses she/her pronouns, there was a point when Elizabeth identified as a trans man and used he/him pronouns. She says:

In high school I fell in love with my best friend and it was this whole horrible thing, and I remember her saying like I could never be in love with you because you're not a guy. And I was like, oh fuck that shit, I'll become a guy. And that was the first time I ever dabbled in masculine presentation ever... But it taught me more about myself, that I was more masculine than I was ever taught I was

allowed to be... But, and I gave up on it after it was clear that it didn't do anything and that it also made you know my life harder at school at the same time... But yeah, no, it evolved like that and then I sort of, for lack of better word, I lost my mind at the end of my first year of college because I had also been assaulted earlier in the year and I went through all this gender confusion and I had done so poorly in my grades, and I felt disgraced and everything so when I went home I just said I give up, I'll be a girl I guess. And after I spent some time with my now fiancé when we first started dating and was like oh, this is safe. I can just be however I want to be and I was very open about that with [my fiancé] and he was like "Yeah, I'm also, you know, I'm not gender conforming in presentation and stuff," so we we're both on the same page at least there. And then I was just comfortable identifying as whatever

Elizabeth did not set out on her exploration of gender with the same self-conception that she has now. Although fraught with mental health issues, the sometimes painful journey that Elizabeth took is what led her to her current sense of gender identity, one which feels authentic to her. Fluctuation between gender presentation and identity terms should be taken not as an indication of a lack of commitment or legitimacy among trans and non-binary people, but rather as a reflection of the sometimes poorly marked and under-traveled path that they must go down in order to understand their own gender. There is no map for gender identity development, particularly not for those whose gender identities develop non-normatively. It is unsurprising that some of my participants explored multiple gender presentations and trialed a variety of different identity terms before landing on ones that felt the most authentic.

Non-binary individuals pose themselves as different to and outside of the gender binary through their verbal and physical articulations of self. The gender structure limits the ways in which non-binary individuals are able to explore and develop their gender identities. At the individual level, non-binary individuals work to reconcile their internal sense of self with the binary gendered society into which they are immersed; at the

interactional level, non-binary individuals are held accountable to a normative doing of gender; at the institutional level non-binary individuals are limited in their ability to understand and describe their own gender due to language constraints. Despite these limits, non-binary individuals often retain a fairly consistent sense of self throughout their lifetime. That being said, this understanding of self may not be totally stable across time or place. Oftentimes, because of the restrictions set in place by the gender structure, non-binary people experience the development of their gender identity as a tumultuous process. Nevertheless, non-binary individuals continue to struggle in an effort to embody a gender which feels comfortable and authentic. Through non-normative physical presentations, pronouns, identity terms, and other embodiments of gender, non-binary individuals create for themselves the opportunity to carve out a living space which, while perhaps not existing outside of, exists in opposition to the binary. We have begun to see the ways in which interfacing with society shapes gendered possibilities for non-binary individuals – in the next chapter, we will examine further the ways in which non-binary individuals attempt to negotiate their identities in the context of the workplace, intimate partner relationships, friendships, and the LGBTQ+ community.

## 6. Non-Binary Identities Across Contexts

Non-binary individuals face challenges in the expression of their gender identity across contexts. I specifically investigate their experiences in the workplace, with intimate partners, with friends, and with the LGBTQ+ community. Non-binary individuals represent a threat to the validity and stability of the gender binary. Employers, coworkers, intimate partners, and friends often do work in an attempt to maintain gender difference. Gender difference is one way which institutions such as the workplace and the family maintain order; when normative conceptions of gender difference are disrupted by the existence of a non-binary person, other people do work in order to manage this disruption. While the motives behind this attempt to manage disruption vary, they have the same consequence: they limit the ability of the non-binary person to live out their gender fully, authentically, and without fear of repercussion. Across contexts, non-binary individuals are held accountable to a normative “doing” of gender. That being said, these same contexts can sometimes provide unique opportunities for non-binary individuals to experience moments of joy, recognition, and affirmation regarding their gender. In these ways, non-binary individual’s experiences in these different contexts have a significant effect on the development and expression of their gender.

### *Work*

By and large, participants described the workplaces as a site of conflict regarding their gender identity. Out of my participants, 13 had experienced or were experiencing challenges related to their gender identity in their current place of work. Of the two participants who did not report experiencing challenges in their current place of work, one worked in a workplace specifically crafted to welcome and work with trans people,



and one was unemployed. Challenges faced by participants included, but were not limited to, participants' perceived and real inability to be out in the workplace, participants' need to compromise on pronoun use, harassment from coworkers, and issues accessing safe and comfortable bathrooms. The frequency, degree, and consequence of workplace challenges varied, but the sheer amount of participants who reported experiencing some kind of workplace challenge is notable nonetheless. Feminist scholars such as Acker (2006) have identified the workplace as an important site for the creation and maintenance of gender inequality. Creating gender inequality requires establishing clear gender difference; to establish gender difference it is necessary to affirm the naturalness of the gender binary. Research on trans men, such as Schilt's (2010), indicates that trans men are interpreted as a potential threat to the gendered organization of the workplace; because of this, employers and coworkers do work in order to manage this perceived disruption. It is unsurprising, then, that my non-binary participants were not able to fully express their gender in the workplace. That being said, for participants who were able to express their non-binary gender in the workplace, this ability often provided moments of joy and affirmation they otherwise would not have experienced.

Often, participants had to compromise their expression of gender in order to accommodate their work. This manifested in different ways, but it often involved suppressing part of participants' identities so that they might be able to participate more easily in their workplace. For example, in Brett's first job in Portland, their gender identity was not taken seriously – they were continuously referred to by she/her pronouns by their supervisor. In their current job, disillusioned from past experience, Brett has not attempted to fully articulate the complexities of their gender identity. Instead, Brett has

taken comfort in their employers' acknowledgement of their trans masculine identity; still, their employer does not fully understand the nuances of Brett's identity. Brett says,

But since being genderqueer was so erased in that other space, coming into this job I was like "Ok, well I guess I'm going to kind of try and, I can't be closeted and read as a girl, that's going to bother me. So I am going to try going the other way with it." And see if like, see if they can at least respect that. And at least respect placing me on the other side of the boundary because, I don't know, for some reason I feel much more comfortable being read as like a trans man than as a cis woman...I was kind of like, I'm just going to take whatever compromise I can for now. And if I stay there then I can see it becoming more of a conversation with my employers but as of right now I'm kind of just trying to let it be a good thing that they are supportive and listen to my feedback.

Brett has had to make concessions to their gender identity in order to feel comfortable in the workplace. By invoking the word compromise, Brett points to a central issue for many participants regarding the workplace. Generally speaking, participants reported experiencing a conflict between 1) feeling comfortable in their expression of gender and 2) feeling comfortable as an employee. It is not a given that their gender will be accepted in the workplace – in fact, many participants do not attempt to articulate their non-binary identities in the context of the workplace. Some, like Brett, strategically disclose what may be a slightly more accepted identity – trans man – in order to gain partial recognition. Sam reports a similar experience to Brett's:

And now they know that I'm not female, so there's that, but they're also making some other assumptions that I wish they weren't and maybe I will be more clear in time...they're assuming that I'm a trans dude. It has its pluses and minuses. Because, on the one hand, they're actively supporting my identity instead of just living with assumptions. On the other hand, the nearest neutral bathroom is the port-a-potty in the park next door. So you do the best you can with what you have.

Both Brett and Sam describe a sense of appreciation for the recognition they do receive from their workplace, although it is an incomplete recognition – Sam's coworkers use he/him pronouns, and although they are not Sam's primary pronouns, they represent at

least a limited recognition and respect of Sam's identity. Again, non-binary individuals are often forced to make concessions in the workplace in order to attempt to feel comfortable not only as an employee but as a non-binary person. We can also look to understandings of the workplace as a gendered organization in order to explain why Sam and Brett are treated like men in the workplace. Acker shows how the workplace functions as a means of upholding gender difference and the naturalness of heterosexuality. As Schilt describes, coworkers may manage disruptions to the naturalness of the gender binary by superimposing traditional ideas about gender onto those who seem to be subverting gender norms. When Sam's employers instruct him to use the men's bathroom, they are attempting to prevent a rupture in the gender system. For Sam to claim a non-binary gender identity in the workplace (say, by presenting as masculine but using the women's bathroom, or requesting his workplace to install a gender-neutral bathroom), would be to deny the naturalness of the gender binary. Instead, Sam's employers prefer to understand Sam as a man.

West has also had to make concessions regarding pronoun usage in the workplace. However, unlike Brett and Sam, West's employer does not display any recognition for or understanding of their gender difference. For West, the waves it might cause to insist on being referred to by gender neutral pronouns are not worth the risk at this stage in their employment, as illustrated by the following exchange:

A: And this job I currently have, I did say that I use they/them pronouns, and I guess I didn't explicitly say I was non-binary, but, and we wear our uniform and there's no men's or women's uniform, but it hasn't really come up actually.

Q: Yeah, so gender isn't something you typically talk about at work?

A: No

Q: Mhm. So do the people at your work right now use they/them pronouns for you?

A: No, I mean I'm a [medical professional], so maybe they don't, maybe they might think it's weird if they refer to me as they or something in front of the clients, or maybe they just kind of, they didn't think that was super important, and it flew by, you know. I mean it doesn't bother me too much, but it also does at the same time.

Q: Do you ever think about having the conversation with them again, or not?

A: Possibly. I've only been working there for two months, so I wanna wait until I'm extra good at my job and then I'll revisit.

Acker tells us that the workplace is often a site of vulnerability – marginalized workers may find themselves unable to self-advocate for fear of negative repercussions. To that point, the workplace seems to be a unique site for many participants, as it might not allow them to exercise the same kind of assertiveness or risk-taking when it comes to insisting on pronoun usage that is appropriate in other parts of life (i.e. with roommates, friends, or family). Participants have a vested interest in not only remaining employed, but maintaining a comfortable working relationship with employers and co-workers. In fact, when asked which pronouns she used, Adrian immediately referenced her workplace in framing her reasoning for using she/her pronouns:

I use female pronouns. I think in the job that I'm at, I'm a [medical professional], and so it's easier for people, they see me, like even though I dress masculine my face is very feminine, people see me as a female, so it's just easier for me and not so confusing to my patients and other coworkers to go by female pronouns.

Adrian chooses to use feminine pronouns because she is invested in maintaining a certain level of order and comfort in her work environment. For Adrian, unlike Brett, Sam, and West, the concessions she makes on pronoun usage in the workplace carry over into other parts of her life; Adrian reported using exclusively she/her pronouns across all contexts. Sam and Brett made concessions regarding pronoun usage in the workplace but did report talking about gender in the workplace. On the other hand, West and Adrian did not report discussing gender in the workplace at all – their concessions took a different form. While

Sam and Brett were able to partially disclose their non-normative gender identities, West and Adrian's concessions were mainly a result of attempting to keep separate work and gender identity. What is significant is that, in both situations, two important consequences result simultaneously: 1) the non-binary person is not able to fully express their gender identity in the workplace, and 2) gender difference is maintained.

While some participants felt unable to fully engage their workplace with the nuances of their gender identity, other participants discussed their gender more openly at their jobs. However, despite this freedom, disclosure of non-binary identities in the workplace almost always created conflict. Dana is open about their gender identity at their job, and was able to advocate for themselves because of it:

So anyway, just because the bathrooms are always a quandary for me, I asked if [my employer] would back me up if I did what I do everywhere else and use whatever bathroom is available to me, or functioning, and they made a big deal out of it. And now at this point, they had the wrong answer, and they were like "no, you can't use [either bathroom]," and I was like "actually what you just did was tell a trans person which bathrooms they could or could not use," so then they were like "oh you could probably sue us on that," so then they're just like super careful about how they talk to me and how they manage the situation now, and it's just blown up to this super fraught thing that it's like I hate even going, approaching it anymore. I hate the issues.

Dana has chosen to be open about their gender identity at work. Beyond that, they have chosen to take an active role in interrogating policies and infrastructure at their workplace that make it harder for them to exist as a non-binary person. Dana was actually able to affect structural change, as their place of work was in the process of constructing a gender neutral bathroom during the time of our interview. While disclosing their non-binary identity at work allowed Dana to advocate for themselves, being out with their gender identity is also a source of distress for Dana. Dana's relationship to their employer

and coworkers has been complicated because of Dana's willingness to discuss their gender identity in the workplace. This represents yet another type of concession – in order for Dana to express and embody their gender identity to the fullest extent in the workplace, Dana sacrifices some of the comfort in their working relationships. In fact, advocating for the right to use a bathroom in which they feel comfortable has “just blown up into this super fraught thing.” To exist comfortably as a non-binary person in the workplace is to exist less comfortably as an employee. Ray reports a similar experience - like Dana, Ray is open about their gender at work. While nearly all of their coworkers respect Ray's gender, and use their chosen name<sup>2</sup>, one coworker in particular does not:

One of the women I work with is a Baptist and that factors into a lot of aspects of working with her; to start, that she does not like me because I'm queer. And that's always been an extremely tense relationship with her. She doesn't like anybody in the office who's queer. And so, it's kind of like the more I present in any sort of non-binary or masculine way, the more she uses like, she'll stop saying “Ray” and go all the way to “Rachel Maryanne” and I'm like why? Why would you even do that? Like, what just went through your head that made you go all the way over here, you know?

Again, while Ray enjoys being able to be out with their gender identity at work, it has also caused conflict between them and at least one coworker. Notably, Ray tells us that the more Ray presents their gender in a way that does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth, the more animosity they receive from their religious coworker. Again, it would seem that to be non-binary in the workplace presents a conflict between two competing forces – non-binary individuals' desire to fully express their gender identity, and non-binary individuals' desire to maintain comfortable and gainful employment. When non-binary individuals face this kind of conflict, they are forced to engage in

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<sup>2</sup> Chosen name refers to the name a trans or non-binary person may choose for themselves as a part of transitioning socially.

identity labor and emotional/educational labor on top of the paid labor they are in the workplace to do.

Although many participants reported gender-related conflict in the workplace, the workplace was also a source of joy and victory for some participants. Being open in the workplace allowed some participants to experience moments of recognition, validation, and community that they otherwise would not have. Theresa, who works as a medical professional with trans patients, really enjoyed and benefitted from their work, and their relationship to their patients in particular. When asked if they had any especially positive experiences at work, Theresa answered simply, saying just, “I am accepted for who I am every single day, and welcomed, and people appreciate my expression because it makes them feel more comfortable with their expression. So yeah.” Theresa’s ability to be out at work enriches their experience – their unique working environment allows Theresa to be open about their gender identity, and provides Theresa with positive moments and relationships. In Theresa’s unique situation, there is no conflict between their gender identity and the structure of their workplace – quite the opposite, in fact. Additionally, although Dana has experienced conflict with their employers (regarding the bathroom issue), they are still able to reference positive moments they have experienced while at work. They highlight one in particular:

I, so we have a uniform, and I wear the nametag and whatever else, and I had a button next to my nametag with my pronouns, with a they/them/theirs pronoun button, and a lot of people don't understand it and they'll ask me about it, and it gives me an opportunity to talk about gender-neutral pronouns. And then maybe the other thing, for instance one time my coworker who, ironically enough, had asked me if I could get for them a they/them/theirs button to wear next to their name tag ... this coworker called the next customer, like it was a customer service, and was like "Miss, I'll help you over here" and then I ended up later helping the same customer, and I was like "so", like I just had this vibe so I was

like "so, when my my coworker called you over by saying hey miss, were you comfortable with that?" I mean it was weird for me to like, I mean I just had a vibe that maybe this person might not be comfortable with it, and they're like "that's funny you asked, because I actually really hated it and I just let it go" and they were appreciative that I noticed and was attentive to it

While being out about gender identity in the workplace was sometimes a great source of stress, it also was able to provide some participants with enjoyable experiences. Often, such as in the case of Dana, negative and positive experiences related to gender coexisted simultaneously in the workplace. This is true for Aspen, who explains

I've also had experiences, it's funny that this has happened twice to me, but one of my coworkers also called me a man-lady at the workplace. And I did basically the same thing that I did on the date [where the same thing had happened]. "Don't say that again, transphobic, bye." But in contrast to that, one of my coworkers overheard that conversation and immediately reported her to HR which made me feel really safe. I didn't do it because I didn't feel comfortable but the fact that she took that step was really nice. So yeah, very, opposite ends of the spectrum.

While Aspen endured harassment in the form of name-calling due to their gender identity – an unpleasant experience – this negativity was offset by a coworker who showed her support for Aspen by standing up and reporting the incident to Human Resources. This is another example of the positive relationships participants who were out at work were able to form even in the face of conflict and discrimination. This also points to a special need for advocacy from coworkers in the context of the workplace – because of the increased vulnerability non-binary individuals face as gender minorities in the workplace, coworkers who step up to report incidents such as Aspen's can make a real difference in non-binary people's ability to function in the workplace.

Overall, the gendered structure of the workplace placed limitations on possibilities of non-normative gender expression for participants. For almost all participants, the workplace presented a conflict wherein the non-binary individual was



forced to compromise either the expression of their gender or their comfort as an employee. We can understand this conflict when we realize that to interrupt gender difference is to threaten what Acker (2006) refers to as the inequality regime of the workplace – in order to manage this perceived threat, coworkers and employers will tend to treat non-binary individuals in a way that allows them to maintain normative understandings of gender difference. Like the trans men in Schilt's (2010) study, non-binary individuals provide a potential threat to the gendered order of the workplace. In order to maintain a gendered status quo, non-binary individuals are treated instead as if they have a binary gender identity. Non-binary individuals who push back against this, advocating for their ability to express and embody their gender in a way that feels comfortable to them, are required to employ great amounts of emotional labor, and sacrifice the comfort of a conflict-free work environment. Nonetheless, alongside these challenges, they are able to experience moments of recognition and sometimes even change the structure of their workplace.

### *Intimate Partner Relationships*

The literature has indicated that intimate partner relationships can have a significant effect on identity development for gender-variant individuals (see Downing 2013). Because the construction of the self is a reflexive process, non-binary individuals' ability to grow in understanding and expression of their gender is partially dependent on the quality of their relationships. As West and Zimmerman indicate, the accomplishment of gender is interactional; interactions are the means through which individuals enact and evaluate normative (binary) conceptions of gender (1987). Accountability motivates us to perform gender normatively – a non-normative gender presentation can garner negative

reactions from partners invested in maintaining masculine and feminine norms. On the other hand, when partners are disinvested from maintaining these norms, they can provide safety and support for non-binary individuals to experience and express their non-normative gender identities freely and joyfully. For participants whose partners also identified with a non-normative gender, their relationship provided them with a safe space to explore their own gender identity. Ray, whose partner identifies as non-binary trans, says

The person I'm dating now is freaking awesome. And like I said, I think every week we have some sort of gender feels discussion. And he's changing a lot right now and going through a lot of things, so it's really easy to have discussions like that together because it's, I mean he's on T [testosterone], everything about his body is changing, and he wants to talk about all of it. And I'm just kind of like "This is awesome! Let's talk about the thing! Like, is this changing? What's that doing?" Like, "we need to measure your feet again." And so that's been really cool, because it provides an opportunity to kind of be like "Oh, that would be cool if that thing changed on me but I don't want any of that that's going on over there, like, hmm." And so it's kind of like I can acknowledge each different part of like no, I like this thing, but I don't want that thing, and you have a beard and that's weird, I don't want any of that, also shave. So that's been kind of cool to go through together.

Ray's partner provides them with a comfortable space to discuss gender identity.

Although Ray's partner also identifies as non-binary, he has chosen to receive gender-affirming medical interventions, while Ray has not. In some ways, Ray sees a reflection of themselves in their partner; this allows Ray to feel confident in freely expressing their own thoughts and feelings related to their gender identity. At the same time, the differences Ray sees between themselves and their partner provide for Ray a fuller understanding of their own gender identity. Through this dynamic, Ray not only affirms their non-binary identity through conversations with their partner, but also feels more secure in their decision not to receive gender-affirming medical interventions. Also

noteworthy is the playfulness that comes across in Ray's description of the conversations that they have with their partner – in this relationship, talking about gender identity does not seem to be taxing or stressful. Instead, expressions and fluctuations of gender identity are centered and celebrated joyfully. Partners who allow for freedom in and fluidity of gender expression serve non-binary individuals well reducing the stress associated with the development of their gender identity.

Even for participants whose partners did not share a non-normative gender identity, many still experienced their relationships as positive and affirming. Lisa said of his husband:

He's very supportive, in a variety of ways. Any clothes that don't fit him, or he doesn't like, he gives them to me and asks me to try them on [and] he's like, "Oh it looks good," "Not so much," you know, helps me figure out how to buy the best binder, then says "Gosh, you look so much more comfortable now that you're dressing that way as opposed to how you looked before." Stuff like that

Lisa's husband affirms his non-binary gender identity by not only allowing but facilitating his change in wardrobe. When Lisa's husband hands him down his clothing, helps him to choose a binder, and verbally affirms his new-found comfort, he is recognizing and appreciating Lisa's non-binary gender identity. Here, again, we see changes in gender expression to be celebrated joyfully and collaboratively. Instead of questioning Lisa's choices, or encouraging him to maintain a gender expression which aligns with the gender he was assigned at birth, Lisa's husband chooses to aid Lisa to live in his body comfortably. As reflected in the literature, and as discussed in my first findings chapter, physical presentation has played an important role in the gender identity development of participants (Downing 2013). For non-binary individuals, physical presentation can often be a site of conflict as they contend with the desire to live

comfortably in their own bodies along with the desire to be recognized appropriately by others. Thus, to receive affirmation from an intimate partner regarding bodily presentation represents an important moment for Lisa. Similarly, Aspen describes a significant positive experience with a past partner:

I was with a long-term partner when I first discovered my whole transition, or, started going through my transition socially and physically, and he was very encouraging about the whole thing, and I think a really big turning point for me was he helped me find my name. We were watching a show together and [there was a character named] Aspen and he was like “That’s you!” and I was like “Yeah!”. So from that point on he called me Aspen, like without any pause. And that was so invigorating

For Aspen, one of the most significant moments in the development of their gender identity – choosing their name – occurred at the encouragement of their then-partner.

Like Lisa, the support of their partner during a pivotal moment in the development of their gender identity helped Aspen to move forward comfortably and confidently in their identity.

Partners who do not themselves identify as non-binary can also provide support by demonstrating an engaged and respectful desire to learn about their non-binary partner’s identity. For Timothy, who identifies as two-spirit, the support of his white, cis, male partner is important to him. Because Timothy’s gender identity is inextricable from his Native American identity, his partner’s respect of his gender identity is necessarily concurrent with his partner’s respect of his Native American identity. To be two-spirit is to be non-binary, but it is also to be indigenous. Timothy explains:

But [my partner] also sees me taking it as seriously as I do, and respecting that in a way where it’s not, he’s not trying to culturally appropriate it as a gender thing, as a racial thing, or as any other thing, but just as a means of really getting to know me, to a point where it’s almost adding to the relationship and intimacy, because they’re wanting to understand and know and yet have good boundaries on

what that means. So respect and dignity with it and as such it opens me up to the idea of sharing more about it. So he's met my two-spirit family [...] and that kind of thing. And really wanting to understand me as a native person and understanding that this gender identity comes as part of that package. And really understanding the layers of it as we kind of move forward

Timothy's partner works to learn about Timothy's gender identity and Native American identity without objectifying Timothy or treating his identity as a prop (something which Timothy has experienced in past relationships). What's more, because Timothy feels like his partner is earnestly respectful and interested in the different facets of his identity, the intimacy within their relationship has increased. That is, for non-binary individuals, feeling that their gender identity is supported by their partner is an important facet of developing a healthy relationship. Here, too, Timothy points to the importance of considering gender from an intersectional lens. Because Timothy is Native American, and he identifies as two-spirit, he experiences a multiplicity of marginalization – his unique social location creates a greater vulnerability to oppression than what my white participants experience. Additionally, as indicated in the literature, queer people of color risk compounded alienation, with the possibility of experiencing heterosexism from their racial or cultural community alongside the possibility of experiencing racism from the LGBTQ+ community and intimate partners (Balsam et al. 2011). We can sense from Timothy that he is aware of this possibility – he appreciates his white partner's respect for his native identity because it is a respect that has been lacking in relationships past. For Timothy, the support of his partner facilitates the development of his racialized gender identity.

Supportive partners were significant in facilitating the development of participants' identities. However, unsupportive partners often significantly stunted the

growth of participants. Participants sometimes felt limited in the extent to which they were able to present themselves authentically because of their partner's attitudes and behaviors. When asked about their experience dating as a non-binary person, Brett replied:

Very stressful. When I first started to think of myself as non-binary and realized that's what was going on I had just gotten out of a relationship with someone whose ex was a trans guy, like immediate ex, and I was kind of the rebound, and she was very aggressive towards trans masculine people, so coming out of that was kind of really, it was really weird, and I had been very overly feminine with her and very focused on that aspect of my personality. So coming out of that was kind of odd.

Brett's ex-partner's attitude towards trans masculine people did not allow Brett to embrace their non-binary gender identity. In fact, it was not until Brett got out of that relationship that they even began to think of themselves as non-binary. Instead, Brett performed a level of femininity that they describe as inauthentic, because they wanted to please their partner. The behavior of Brett's partner made Brett feel unsafe in expressing their authentic self. Whether or not it was intentional, Brett's partner was holding Brett accountable to a normatively feminine gender expression – Brett felt pressured to accomplish femininity in the context of this relationship. Ray reported a strikingly similar experience to Brett's, saying

The last person I dated, I knew I was non-binary, but I wasn't like verbalizing it as much as I potentially could have because I knew I was gonna get pushback. She had dated somebody previously who was trans and trans masculine, and very much wanted to be read as a cis man. And he gave her some sort of speech about "you need to tone down the queer look because you're outing me" and so she had a lot of feelings about that. And when she was talking to me about it she didn't realize, like, this conversation is having a bigger impact on me, otherwise, I think – to be honest I should have been more open to talking to her about it, but at the time I was just figuring myself out and kind of like yeah, no, scary ... Once we broke up I realized yeah, [my gender identity] is a bigger part of me than I'm ok not acknowledging anymore.

In this relationship, Ray still was not totally confident or comfortable in their gender identity. If Ray had been in a relationship with someone who was better able to see and appreciate their non-binary identity, perhaps they would have grown in confidence and comfort, as they have expressed being able to do in their current relationship. Instead, they were stuck in a negative cycle – their partner was unsupportive partly because she did not recognize the complexities of Ray’s identity, and Ray was not able to successfully communicate the complexities of their identity partly because their partner was unsupportive. While in this relationship, Ray suppressed part of their gender identity; it was not until after they exited the relationship that they recognized how uncomfortable this suppression was. In Downing’s 2013 study, they found that, while avoiding gender identity disclosure in intimate partner relationships sometimes acted as a protective factor for gender-variant individuals (preventing harassment from their partner), in the long run it seemed to negatively affect mental health. Brett and Ray’s experiences illustrate the ways in which unsupportive partners may compromise the development of participants’ gender identities. At the same time, experiences such as these were able to illuminate for Brett and Ray the importance of performing gender authentically in conjunction with an affirming partner. Speaking on a separate relationship, Brett continued:

My one long-term relationship before the one that I’m in now, she told me “I love you and I want to be with you and I accept your gender identity but if you ever want to, you know if you ever want to go on hormones or have any surgery or anything like that then that’s not something that will work for me.” And it’s kind of funny how possessive people get ... and you know, like perfectly rational, oftentimes queer people or lesbians suddenly think that it’s acceptable to tell you how to behave because they think it’s more flexible, I guess, than a cis identity. And it’s like, I don’t know, shit that they wouldn’t say to a like normal partner suddenly becomes okay.

Here, Brett describes a past partner who actively attempted to police Brett's expression of their identity. This partner felt comfortable drawing a line for Brett between 1) what was acceptable (Brett's gender identity) and 2) what was unacceptable – medical interventions which might affirm this identity. In this way, Brett's partner managed the perceived threat to gender normality that Brett's trans identity provided by drawing the line at medical transition. Their partner's attempt to control their gender presentation indicates an investment in maintaining the naturalness of gender and its relationship to sexed bodies; part of maintaining gender distinction is emphasizing bodily differences between men and women. Brett's partner may be attempting to regulate her own sexual identity by policing Brett's body. What's more, for Brett's ex-partner, gender identity is perhaps not realized fully before medical transition; this reflects dominant discourse which assigns legitimacy to only certain trans bodies. Brett also indicates that their partner may have believed that Brett's identity was more flexible than that of a cis person, indicating a lack of belief in the truth or authenticity of Brett's gender. Here, again, their partner shows a commitment to a belief in the gender binary – by doubting the truthfulness and permanence of Brett's gender, their partner is able to confirm their understanding of man and woman as the only two “real” genders. Theresa cites a similar instance of attempted gender policing, saying

I had a partner at one point who really wanted me to be something different, and part of that was gender-wise. Would ask me to shave, would ask me to remove this, would ask me to dress a certain way, act a certain way, be more demure, that relationship was a couple years long, and it was subtle, but toward the end it wasn't subtle. It kind of knocked on my confidence and my comfort for a while, but then we broke up and I went to Burning Man, and everything was fine.



Here, again, is an example of a partner who is actively attempting to censor a participant's physical presentation. Theresa's unsupportive partner took a toll on their mental health. Further, Stevie says:

I came out to one of my exes who goes to school with me, and one thing he had to say was, I was telling him about how, you know I'm going to go and get top surgery and possibly start T, and he was like, well your breasts are my favorite part, or why would you get rid of that, it looks so good, or why would you want to do that, why would you, almost like a selfish questioning, like how dare you want to change yourself because I like that thing you don't like ... It triggered a lot of self-deprecation.

Stevie's ex, in expressing disapproval for Stevie's desire to go on hormone replacement therapy and undergo top surgery, implies ownership over Stevie's body. He denies Stevie's bodily autonomy and agency, instead indicating that Stevie's body was there for the enjoyment and consumption of others. We can contrast these damaging interactions to relationships which create a safe space for non-binary individuals; the relationship between Lisa and her husband, for instance. Lisa's husband respects, even celebrates, Lisa's decisions to alter the appearance of his physical body. This celebration is not derived from a sense of ownership that Lisa's husband holds over his body, but rather from a recognition of the positivity these changes have brought into Lisa's life.

Sometimes, it appears that a partner's policing of participants' presentations is used as a tool to protect the partner's sense of their own sexual orientation and, relatedly, their own appropriate performance of gender. This issue seems to be particularly salient in situations where the partner is a cisgender, heterosexual man, dating a non-binary individual who was assigned female at birth. It may be that straight men have a vested interest in maintaining their male, heterosexual status, given the centrality of heterosexuality in hegemonic masculinity. We see that men who date non-binary

individuals who were assigned female at birth police their partners' gender expression in order to preserve their own heterosexual identity which, in turn, allows them to invest in masculine capital. To be a heterosexual man is a position of privilege; it is not surprising, then, that it is a position which individuals actively strive to maintain. Sara tell us,

I broke up with an ex who had initially claimed he was an open relationship supporter, like non-monogamous, and also didn't care about gender, even though he strictly said he wasn't attracted to men, but then he got really weird whenever I tried to present more masculine, and I was presenting pretty damn feminine at that point, so it was kind of like not really that much of a difference.

While Sara's ex claimed that gender did not matter to him, he also indicated that he was not attracted to men – so, when Sara began presenting in a more masculine way, this may have threatened her partner's sense of his own masculinity, given that heterosexuality relies on a binary understanding of gender in which one partner is feminine and the other partner is masculine. Dana recounts a similar experience, saying:

When I was in New Mexico I was with a guy for like two minutes and he, I tried to sort of get him to understand, and also at the time I felt I was more in the FTM binary world, but he was just like "I'm straight and you're a girl, because I'm straight and I'm not attracted to anyone but women, I'm pretty sure you're a woman."

The man who Dana was dating explicitly communicated the motivations behind attempting to negate Dana's gender identity – he was a straight man, and he was attracted to Dana. This assertion did not leave room for Dana to identify as anything other than a cisgender woman.

There may, at times, be nothing malignant about altering one's appearance, or shifting one's conception of self depending on who one is dating. In fact, sometimes intimate relationships provide the foreground for an individual's exploration of new ways to present themselves. When this is the case, a partner's willingness to allow their non-

binary partner to freely and fluidly explore their physical presentation provides a safe space within which the non-binary person can further develop their gender identity. However, a problem arises when an individual feels compelled to present in inauthentic ways out of fear of displeasing their partner, or when a partner explicitly demands or forbids a certain kind of presentation. In these cases, when non-binary individuals feel compelled to perform gender according to their partner's preferences or demands, identity development is stunted. Similar to in the workplace, outside actors do work in order to maintain order – like the workplace, intimate partner relationships may be construed as a sort of gendered institution. Similar to the workplace, dating operates under the assumption of a gender binary, and functions to promote gender difference and inequality. Because of this, non-binary individuals present an inherent threat to the order of both the workplace and intimate partner relationships. Intimate partners, like coworkers and employers, sometimes do work to manage this disruption and restore gendered order. However, at other times, intimate partners are able to foster and support non-binary gender development in a more significant way than the workplace.

### *Friendships*

Like intimate partner relationships, friendships were important to the development of participants' non-binary gender identities. While participants experienced both positive and negative interactions with friends regarding their gender identity, overall, friends did not seem to have the same ability to limit gender identity development as intimate partner relationships. Instead, participants who had negative experiences with friends almost uniformly reported having immediately ended those friendships. When participants reported difficult or uncomfortable experiences with past friends, they also described

positive feelings associated with having moved on from those friends. In other words, although participants sometimes experienced loss of friendship due to their gender identity, this loss was always framed as a net positive gain. When asked about her experiences with friends as a non-binary person, Elizabeth said, “I’ve lost friends. And I’ve gained friends. Both, both so...and I say the friends I’ve gained are worth all the friends I’ve lost in the end.” Elizabeth indicates that although she has lost friends as a consequence of being open about her gender identity, in the end the affirming friends she has gained hold more value to her than those who she lost. Elizabeth provided a specific example of a friend who she lost but was better off without, saying

I was treated badly in college too, by my friend group, when I was gender exploring. My one friend was committed to showing me what it was like to be a man. Like, a man's man. Like, “if you're gonna be a man you gotta be this type of man.” And it was miserable. I'm like uh, I'm bi. That doesn't change about me, I'm probably gonna be feminine if I'm a guy, like, and he was having none of that and at one point hit me. And I went into like cold rage and just left because I knew that there was nothing better for me to do. And it was like I wasn't gonna talk to my friends after that, they weren't my friends anymore.

During this point in the development of Elizabeth’s gender identity, Elizabeth identified as a trans man. Her friend, in an attempt to preserve hegemonic masculinity, attempts to violently coerce Elizabeth into what he deemed is an appropriate performance of masculinity – heterosexual and physically aggressive. By holding Elizabeth accountable to a normative display of masculinity, her friend attempted to preserve his understanding of gender. Like the coworkers of trans men in Schilt’s study (2010), Elizabeth’s friend was doing work in order to manage a potential threat to the gender order – a feminine man. At the same time, we see Elizabeth exercising agency after refusing to engage with her friend’s attempt to coerce her into a display of aggression. After this negative

experience, Elizabeth immediately decided to cut ties with this friend and the friend group associated with him, indicating that she prioritized the ability to express her gender freely over her relationship with this friend. Dana also reports exercising discretion when it comes to maintaining friendships:

Hmm. I mean pretty close to the same thing with lovers, I guess, or partners, most people that I am close to, I don't continue to get close to somebody if they seriously don't, can't get me, I guess.

Dana does not take the time or energy to form friendships with people who are not able to respect their gender identity. Similarly, Theresa says

Some folks have struggled, which has been interesting. I don't spend as much time with them anymore. I have one who can't get the pronoun thing down, and is just always exclaiming how hard it is [...] So my relationship with her has definitely become more distanced. But for the most part, my friends have been awesome and very welcoming and very accepting and very, you know, they go to bat for me.

Theresa has chosen to distance themselves from a friend who does not seem to fully understand or respect their gender identity – illustrated by their inability (or unwillingness) to learn Theresa's pronouns. Theresa puts their experience with this friend in contrast to experiences with other friends who “go to bat” for Theresa. The friend who does not use Theresa's correct pronouns demands emotional labor from Theresa. When Theresa's friend exclaims how hard it is to use gender neutral pronouns, she is placing a burden on Theresa. Theresa can either choose to undergo the distress associated with being misgendered, take the time and energy to continuously correct their friend, or choose to stop spending time around her. As we can see, maintaining relationships with individuals who do not fully respect or understand gender-variant identities requires non-binary individuals to do work – they must engage in emotional labor to manage negative

emotions associated with being misgendered and disrespected as well as educational labor to explain themselves to others. Ray tells us:

And so, yeah, I think the only bad part for me is the amount of education required for me to talk to people that are outside of the community, for them to really understand the words coming out of my mouth.

It takes time and effort to continuously have to explain identity terms in the context of a conversation, particularly if in that conversation the non-binary person is seeking validation and support from a friend. What's more, alongside the labor of educating others, non-binary individuals must regulate their own emotions during these times when their identity is misunderstood or disrespected.

In general, positive experiences with friends seemed to be a product of participants successfully choosing to engage in friendship with only those who are accepting and validating of their gender identity. Oftentimes, this meant that their friend group was comprised mostly or entirely of other queer people. Much like with intimate partners, participants greatly benefited from friendships which acted as safe spaces within which to talk about their gender identity. Dana tells us,

I have universally always felt misread, unless I'm in really specific, in close, like hanging out with people who I'm in closer relationships with who are also queer, I feel like they get me because we have like, we talk about those things so then it becomes more clear, on a consistent basis with people I'm close with.

Healthy friendships are generally understood to be an indicator of better mental health for all individuals (Pearlin 1989). However, my research indicates that positive and affirming relationships may provide extra protective benefits to people with non-binary genders.

Like Dana, for some participants, being in relationship with other queer people may be the only context in which they feel truly seen and understood. The experiences and

knowledge shared by fellow queer people provide a unique context in which individuals find that they do not need to constantly explain and defend their gender identity. They are relieved of the emotional and educational labor they are otherwise required to perform.

Despite the unique benefits stemming from friendship with other queer and non-binary identified individuals, relationships with non-queer people were not always experienced as negative by participants. In fact, for some participants, these relationships provided reward in the form of the distinctive opportunity to educate and challenge another person in their gendered assumptions. Non-binary people are able to bring something unique to the table in the context of friendship, as they have first-hand experience with an identity and a community that many people are unfamiliar with but willing to learn about. While sometimes this unfamiliarity acted as a stressor on friendships, at other times it was perceived as positive. For example, Brett says

I feel like the sort of queer or more radical people see me and I feel much more comfortable with them and I'm able to have much more authentic conversations and show up in kind of a more authentic way with them and then cis people it like takes me longer to open up to them and I see when I break out of the sort of masculine protective layer that I keep, that it surprises them but it kind of pleasantly surprises them, or at least it pleasantly surprises a lot of the girls. The guys are sometimes I think a little weirded out by it, but not all of them, some of them think it's great. And I think it kind of encourages a little bit of queerness with them. And like I'm able to kind of make them, like they kind of challenge what their perception of me was. And with some of them it's an opportunity to challenge what they have thought of themselves or what they've been comfortable with themselves.

Brett does express here that they are able to “show up in a kind of more authentic way” with fellow queer people. However, at the same time, Brett indicates some of the unique benefits they gain from friendship with straight cis people. Brett primarily presents as masculine, but enjoys expressing their feminine side when allowed the opportunity. Brett

indicates that, while it may be easier to demonstrate the complexity of their gender identity in the context of queer friendship, they have found that it is also possible to do this with their straight, cis friends. Notably, Brett tells us that they receive more positive reactions from their friends who are women than their friends who are men when they choose to express their femininity. This may be because Brett's expression of femininity interrupts their friends' understandings of acceptable masculinity. Brett's femininity may be perceived as a threat to the gender binary. As we have learned from research on trans men, outside actors often encourage gender-variant individuals to behave in a way that affirms gender difference (Schilt 2010). It may be easier for Brett's friends to understand their identity if it looks like how they expect a masculine identity to look, according to hegemonic masculine ideals. An interruption of this expectation seems to be especially problematic for Brett's friends who are men – this is perhaps because men have more of a vested interest in preserving hegemonic masculinity. Brett's friends who are women may be more welcoming of Brett's femininity because they are not as threatened by the potential disruption of “acceptable” masculinity.

The novelty of Brett's gender expression challenges some of their friends, encouraging them to grow in their understanding of Brett specifically and perhaps even of gender more broadly. What's more, Brett's fluid, non-normative gender expression seems to incite some of their friends to discover facets of their own identity they may not have previously explored. In this way, Brett brings something productive and dynamic into the relationships they form. Aspen reports something similar:

Sure, when I posted, I posted like a little blurb on Facebook just saying that I had just left the courthouse after declaring my name and gender change and I was just talking about how happy I was about it, and I got so many like paragraphs of



comments of how much people were proud of me and supported me and how it, like my talking openly about my gender identity, my gender and sexuality, has made them notice things about themselves and think introspectively about that and that was just so amazing, like I wanted to print it out and put it on my wall, it was great.

Like Brett, Aspen's gender identity allows them to have unique interactions with their friends that they otherwise would not have. As we can see, the friendship experiences of non-binary individuals are unique not only because of what they receive from others, but what they bring to others.

Friends can be a great source of support for non-binary individuals. In open and affirming friendships, non-binary individuals find themselves able to express and develop their gender in a way which feels comfortable and authentic. On the other hand, friends sometimes attempted to hold non-binary individuals accountable to a normative (binary) "doing" of gender. However, unlike in intimate partner relationships, non-binary individuals more often parted from these unsupportive friends very promptly. This willingness to dismiss gender-policing friends limits the extent to which they are able to limit the gender development and expression of non-binary individuals. Because of this, by and large, friendship served as a positive resource for non-binary participants.

### *LGBTQ+ Community*

It is not simply individual supportive friendships which provide sources of support for non-binary individuals – many of my participants reported positive gains from being part of a community of other queer and non-binary individuals. For instance, Roan says:

Most of my friends get it. Most of my friends are also trans or non-binary. That's part of the reason the idea of moving back to [an Oregon town] is shitty because I would be losing that sense of community and that feeling of acceptance without

having to explain it. I feel like if I go back I'm going to have to come out everyday. I don't have to do that here [in Portland].

As indicated above, having a group of friends who share similar experiences and challenges makes it easier for non-binary individuals to live their lives comfortably. They are not faced with the stress of continuously having to come out to the people closest to them – without the support of queer and non-binary friends, an individual will be faced not only with the burden of initially informing a new person about their gender identity, but also with the continuous burden of re-explaining, re-defining, and defending their gender identity. For Roan, like other participants, this burden is lifted in the context of their current friend group.

Notably, community was an especially important resource for Timothy, my two-spirit participant. For Timothy, existing at the intersection of a marginalized gender identity and a marginalized racial and cultural identity magnifies the existing need for community that was identified by many white participants. When asked about what stands out about the development of his gender identity, Timothy responded

My connection with my community. And really beginning to understand that, the complexity within it despite the fact that it is so special and unique with Native people being such a small portion of individuals and then understanding the complexity and layers of even within that a much smaller community. And being able to be around my two-spirit family is very, we call it good medicine. We always have a good time. And one of the things is like, the best is when we get together we don't have to do two-spirit 101. With other natives, with other gender and sexual minorities who are not native, and then just the general people in mass community and wherever we go, we get to just be and we have jokes and tease each other and do that in a space that is, and like we call it good medicine, its just us being together and resonating.

Timothy reports experiences which seem to reflect what is referred to in the literature as multiple marginalization (Balsam et al. 2011). Dominant society has created an “other” of

not only Timothy's gender identity, but also of the Native community to which he belongs. What's more, the non-Native queer community does not share in his same experiences, nor does the non-two-spirit Native community. This means that Timothy often must perform educational and emotional labor in order to explain, defend, and simply exist with his cultural and gender identities. For Timothy, his gender identity and Native identity are deeply intertwined; it is only other two-spirit people who can appreciate and support his identity expression and growth to the fullest extent. Timothy engages in a reflexive relationship with his community, receiving what he calls "good medicine" and giving back in return:

There's an individual in town who is going through surgery, specifically top surgery and just needed assistance in terms of things like post-surgery food and prep and just you know really wanted to be able to take care of themselves physically and spiritually and emotionally and they just needed assistance and so some of us just got together and said this is the journey this person's going through who's a part of our two-spirit community, we need to rally and get help. And so I helped lead with a couple of other people that effort. And it went well. He's doing great.

As Timothy reports, this kind of support and sense of community is central to the experience of non-binary individuals in general, and two-spirit individuals in particular.

For the majority of my participants, the sense of community they reported came not from direct involvement in the organized LGBTQ+ community<sup>3</sup>, but instead from a group of friends drawn together due to similarities in identity. In fact, participants reported an ambivalent at best, and distressing at worst, relationship with the more formal Portland LGBTQ+ community. Sometimes, participants reported instances of exclusion

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<sup>3</sup> Groups, events, parties, volunteer organizations, etc. specifically geared and advertised towards the LGBTQ+ community; this is as opposed to a privately-formed group of friends

from the LGBTQ+ community which discouraged them from further participation. For instance, Ray says:

One of my friends ran a group that, when it was created, was called Fantasy Softball League, which was supposed to be a bunch of people, a bunch of queers hanging out and drinking and taking over a bar for a night. And they changed who the leader was to one of my other friends, to be honest, and she changed the name to be Gal Pals and I was like oh my God, like I don't, it just left a bad taste in my mouth, and I'm like I know you don't mean it, but a few of us contacted her and were like um, this sounds really not inclusive anymore and she was just kind of like, "it's just a joke, it's not a big deal," and I'm kind of like, "ok well we told you it was a big deal and you did it anyway" and then she was like "why didn't you guys come and support "  
{]=}" So, that was really, and now that whole thing's disbanded because so many people weren't coming who didn't identify as gals, so they were like "yeah, no."

Non-binary individuals are rendered invisible and unimportant when queer spaces are gendered in a binary way. Their existence is denied by a refusal to use gender neutral language, and the validity of their identity is put into question in situations like this where their concerns are determined to be invalid. Here, the truthfulness and legitimacy of non-binary gender identities are once again put into question; when non-binary individuals feel disrespected and unseen their reactions are sometimes framed as overreactions. Sam reports a different barrier to interacting with the trans community, saying

I wouldn't say it's classism, but it's kind of classism. Because it feels like the overwhelming majority of trans folk in Portland are also experiencing financial difficulty. And it's not that it's any kind of reflection on character or morality, but it just makes it harder to have in common with somebody. Because when one person is trying to figure out where they can come up with a couple of dollars for sharps so they can take their testosterone, it's a different category of need from I need to decide whether I'm buying a new car or whether I'm doing landscaping. I mean it just, the conversations are not as easy because I mean I've been there so it's not like I don't know how it was but it makes me uncomfortable because I have and I don't have enough to just make everybody have.

Sam, who is 48 and holds a stable job, may experience life with a non-normative gender identity very differently than a trans person who is struggling to make it day-to-day.

Much like we need to consider the intersection of racial and gender identities, it is worth nothing that class also affects the kinds of challenges people face regarding their gender identity.

While many participants were not directly involved with LGBTQ+ community, others, like Stevie, are. Says Stevie about getting involved with their local community:

It was important because I didn't have a community. And I was really depressed at that time because there was no one else in the world that I thought was like me. And I didn't know other queer people, other queer kids. And especially being from [a rural area] there's so much isolation, especially where I come from, which is like the back woods. So getting involved, and meeting new people, and you know getting in touch with other trans people and listening to their stories and identifying with what they had to say was really huge.

For some participants, like Stevie, more formal LGBTQ+ spaces were experienced as positive. Additionally, sometimes more official LGBTQ+ served as the site of language acquisition for participants.

Non-binary individuals contend with challenges associated with expressing their non-normative gender across a variety of contexts. In the workplace, in intimate partner relationships, with friends, and in the LGBTQ+ community, non-binary individuals find themselves at odds with the interactional and institutional constraints which form the gendered social stratification structure. Institutions and individuals who have a stake in maintaining the gender order hold non-binary individuals accountable to a normative performance of gender. Through verbal sanctions, demands for emotional labor, workplace policies, and other interactional or institutional consequences, non-binary individuals are consistently made aware of their gender failure. Despite this, non-binary individuals find ways to express their gender identities in a way that pushes back against the dominant gender structure. Through perseverance, the exercise of emotional labor,

and ability to push back against constraints, non-binary individuals are able to act against structure. In this way, they create new possibilities for themselves and the relationships and institutions in which they participate.

## 7. Discussion

Ultimately, this study finds that non-binary individuals perform a great amount of identity labor throughout their lives. Informed by West and Zimmerman's doing gender perspective (1987), this study understands participants to be faced with the constant task of managing their non-normative gender identities with the normative gender expectations of others. Non-binary individuals find it difficult to achieve social recognition for their identities; because of this they are constantly managing compromises between personal comfort and public perception. Due to the role of accountability in our daily lives, it is not a simple task for non-binary individuals to identify and express their gender in a way that feels true, comfortable, and authentic to them. Rather, they must negotiate an authentic performance of self alongside the specter accountability which motivates them to adhere to hegemonic masculinity and/or femininity, depending on the sex category into which they believe others place them.

Failures and successes in language turned out to be an incredibly prominent theme across participant narratives. As Risman and Davis indicate, the institutional component of the gender structure includes ideological discourse (2013). Dominant cultural understandings of gender dictate the language and vocabulary we have available to us; language, in turn, limits the discursive possibility of a non-binary gender identity. When the only words available to describe gender adhere to binary understandings, it is incredibly challenging to verbalize identities which exist completely outside of these binary conceptions. However, these identities do exist and are therefore not impossible, but merely difficult, to articulate. My participants employed a myriad of linguistic strategies in order to circumvent the limited possibilities provided by gendered terms to

fully encapsulate their genders. Most commonly these strategies involved, as Corwin (2009) articulates it, defying, distorting, and distancing themselves from normative conceptions of gender in order to pose their own identity as separate from the “normal.” This helps us understand why non-binary participants so often employed the terms “masculine” and “feminine” when asked to describe their gender presentation. The terms masculine and feminine are commonly used to describe mannerisms, haircuts, articles of clothing, and other factors which comprise physical appearance. Participants have little choice but to use these words when trying to communicate how they present physically. Using terms like “masculine” and “feminine” allow non-binary people to indicate to others not only the way they dress, but also the way they feel. Granted, because they are compelled to use gendered terms that don’t necessarily map neatly on to their non-binary identities, in some ways non-binary people can only ever approximate descriptions of themselves to others. That being said, as we learn from Corwin (2009), this distortion of preexisting terms may actually serve as an act of creation, allowing non-binary individuals to carve out new gendered discursive possibilities for themselves; they may in fact be redoing gender.

Language was also important to participants when it came to pronoun usage. Like physical presentation, pronouns act as an integral part of the interactional component of the gender structure. This is because pronouns often serve as the primary indicator of how someone else is perceiving our gender. For non-binary participants, they often craft their gender presentation in such a way so as to avoid being referred to by pronouns which make them uncomfortable or dysphoric. While many participants want to be referred to with gender neutral pronouns, because of a lack of education about these



pronouns, most strangers on the street will not use them. That is, it is often only after forming a relationship with someone and educating them about gender neutral pronouns, that a non-binary person will have their desired pronouns respected. Due in part to this issue, some participants choose to use different pronouns across different contexts. This compromise seemed to be especially relevant for participants who were assigned female at birth; they preferred to be perceived as masculine and referred to with he/him pronouns than to be perceived as feminine and referred to with she/her pronouns. As discussed, this may be as simple as appreciating the novelty behind being misgendered in the opposite direction as they had been the rest of their lives. However, delving deeper, we can theorize that the (however small) amount of masculine capital that these individuals may gain from performing hegemonic masculinity may act as another motive.

In general, it was found that non-binary individuals are held accountable to normative performances of gender, as illustrated through their experiences in interaction with other people. This accountability showed through primarily through interactions with employers, coworkers, intimate partners, and friends. Although non-binary individuals consider their gender identities to exist outside of the gender binary, that does not mean that they are not motivated to do gender normatively. Because non-binary individuals risk gender evaluation and enforcement from others, they are sometimes compelled to adhere to a normatively masculine or feminine “doing” of gender. As West and Zimmerman describe, gender is accomplished through interaction. While non-binary individuals are neither man nor woman, they cannot escape sex categorization by others. My participants reported a keen awareness of this coerced categorization, and detailed to me the labor that is involved in managing their presentation so as to avoid conflict and

ease social interaction. This is an ongoing negotiation for non-binary individuals. At the same time, the concept of accountability may provide opportunities for non-binary individuals to create small ruptures in the gender structure. We know that a non-binary individual is motivated to do gender normatively due to accountability, and that when a non-binary individual chooses a non-normative gender performance they risk sanctioning. At times, this risk of sanctions, alongside the actual gender enforcement non-binary individuals sometimes face, is enough to push them toward a more binary doing of gender. However, at other times, non-binary individuals are successful in their ability to express their non-binary genders in a way that feels comfortable and authentic to them. Hollander's (2013) research would indicate that in these instances, where non-binary individuals are doing gender non-normatively, the gendered expectations of those they interact with are interrupted; Hollander calls these moments interactional transformations. Further, non-binary individuals are not only assessed by others, but assess others – they occupy both roles involved in the accountability process. It is important to understand not only the way non-binary individuals assess their own gender performance, but also that of others. Hollander's research would also indicate that, by creating new gendered possibilities for themselves, non-binary individuals may also be creating new gendered possibilities for others.

This research illuminates the potential for a redoing of gender. My participants re-imagine what it means to be masculine and feminine, divorcing these concepts not only from the physical body but from gender identity itself. Non-binary individuals in my study point to the possibility of redoing gender radically, in a way that does more than simply redefine what it means to be masculine or feminine. Rather, it may be that non-

binary individuals are able to redo gender in a much more fundamental way, carving out space for the existence of more than two genders and challenging the violent patriarchal gender order which is predicated on the gender binary. When non-binary individuals claim or perform masculinity and femininity, while occupying a body they refuse to gender, they are interrupting the foundation of the gender binary. The instability they are able to create, through their use of non-normative pronouns, their linguistic ingenuity, their physical presentation, and their challenges to institutions, give promise to the possibility for redoing gender. Through their interactions and their existence in institutions, the disruptions non-binary individuals present may move us towards a gender order which is not based on oppositional difference and inequality, but one that allows for varied, un-hierarchical expressions of gender. That said, it is not the sole responsibility of non-binary individuals to dismantle the gender structure, nor do they alone hold the power to do so (binary individuals are likely also able to contribute to this redoing). However, non-binary individuals do occupy a unique position which increases their drive and capacity to act against structure. Ultimately, as reflected by my participants' highly gendered narratives, non-binary individuals may not be able to undo gender; at the same time, my data does present possibilities for a redoing of gender.

In interactions, it was found that, often, when other people attempted to regulate the gender of participants, it was just as much in order to preserve the outsider's sense of their own masculinity or femininity as it was to regulate the gender accomplishment of non-binary people. This means that when someone tries to correct or guide a non-binary person toward a normative performance of gender, they are not solely motivated by a grand desire to uphold the gender binary integral to our dominant gender structure. This

research would indicate that the motivation is much more personal. For example, among friends and intimate partners, it was found that male friends and partners were more likely to react unpleasantly to non-binary individuals' non-normative displays of gender. Take, for example, the friend who attempted to incite violence in a participant who identified as trans masculine, or a boyfriend who told another participant that they had to be a woman because he identified as a straight man. This is congruent with other research which shows that men have a greater stake in maintaining gender difference, due to the privilege gained by embodying hegemonic masculinity (Kane 2006).

In addition to the interactional accountability reported at the workplace, the gendered organizational structure of most workplaces which Acker describes illustrated the institutional limits non-binary individuals have on their gender expression. For example, most workplaces do not have gender neutral bathrooms. This means that individuals either have to choose a gendered bathroom to enter, or they have to advocate for themselves in an attempt to have their workplace install a gender-neutral bathroom. Several participants decided to make their gender a non-issue in the workplace, likely because of the vulnerability they face as an employee. Those who were open about their gender identity almost uniformly experience challenges related to it in the workplace. In general, it was found that a non-binary identity is often as least partially incongruent with safety and lack of conflict in the workplace, much like it is incongruent with the institution of dating and some aspects of family life.

My research on non-binary individuals in the workplace suggests several things about the need for policy protecting gender minorities. Firstly, there is a need for gender neutral bathrooms. This kind of inclusive infrastructure makes it more possible for non-

binary individuals to do paid labor in the workplace without the additional stress of feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in the bathroom. Additionally, policy which places obligations on employers to respect chosen names and desired pronouns are called for. In this way, non-binary individuals will be freed of the burden of having to perform emotional and educational labor at their place of work. It is important that we legislate this type of policy given the vulnerability of marginalized workers and the ways in which this vulnerability and fear of job loss might prevent them from advocating for themselves. Overall, non-binary individuals face a great amount of structural constraints in their attempt to express their non-binary gender identity. Another way forward is through the normalization and legalization of non-binary as an identity term. Certainly, there are important criticisms from within the queer community regarding the implications of legalizing non-binary as an identity term. Critics point out the potential dangers of including one, but not other non-variant gender identities as possibilities; this may give legitimacy to certain expressions of gender but not others. Other critics point to the possibility that allowing individuals to change their gender to non-binary will create a category of what was initially introduced in queer circles as a sort of anti-category. As my participants' narratives reflected, non-binary gender identity is more about a rejection of the binary than it is about an assertion of membership to a particular gender category. However, criticisms aside, allowing individuals to change their gender to non-binary legally likely has positive implications that can not only improve the lives of non-binary people on an individual scale, but also begin to change the way gender difference and inequality operate at the structural level. A legal gender change may allow non-binary individuals to operate more freely in the workplace, and may normalize non-binary

gendered language, such as gender neutral pronouns and non-normative identity terms. Since these are issues that non-binary individuals face on a day-to-day basis, a structural change which increases the ability of other people to recognize and affirm non-binary gender identities is a positive one. The fact that non-binary is now a viable option for legal gender change in the state of Oregon is one testament to the ways in which non-binary individuals are able to take action against the gender structure. The gender structure remains largely intact, surely, as reflected by the accountability non-binary individuals face in their daily lives. That said, by living out the unlivable, non-binary individuals appear to create small ruptures in the system which, over time, may in fact alter the way society understands and enforces gender. However, most often, and just as significantly, non-binary individuals' lived experiences illustrate the ways in which they are able to carve out space for themselves in a gendered environment, allowing them to experience moments of joy, comfort, and affirmation.

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Appendix A: Screening survey

Please describe your gender:

Race/ethnicity

Age

Do you live in the Portland Metro Area?

Do you have children? If yes, what are their ages?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

- 1) How long have you been living in Portland?
- 2) Has your gender identity changed since you've moved to Portland?
- 3) How do you currently identify your gender identity?
  - a. What pronouns do you use?
  - b. With whom are you open about your gender identity?
  - c. How would you describe your gender presentation?
  - d. Are the words masculine and feminine useful to you in describing your gender?
  - e. Aside from your gender presentation are the words masculinity and femininity useful to you?
  - f. What do masculinity and femininity mean to you?
- 4) How do you currently identify your sexual identity?
  - a. What does that mean to you?
  - b. With whom are you open about your sexual identity?
- 5) How do you think others perceive your gender identity?
  - a. [Specify for] People you encounter in everyday life?
  - b. How does this make you feel?
- 6) What stands out for you when thinking about the development of your gender identity?
- 7) Can you tell me about an important moment or event in the development of your gender identity?
  - a. When and where did this moment or event occur?
  - b. What did this moment or event mean to you?
- 8) Have you ever been treated differently due to your gender identity?
  - a. When and where did this happen?
- 9) What has been your experience as a non-binary person in the workplace?
- 10) What has been your experience dating as a non-binary person?
- 11) What has been your experience parenting as a non-binary person?<sup>4</sup>
- 12) What has been your experience with friends as a non-binary person?
  - a. Do you talk about your gender identity in this context?
  - b. Have you had any especially positive experiences related to your gender identity in this context?
  - c. Have you had any especially negative experiences related to your gender identity in this context?
  - d. How do you think your experience in this context compares to your colleagues etc.?
  - e. Can you tell about me a moment or event that would help me to understand your experience in this context?
- 13) Are you involved in the Portland LGBTQ community?
  - a. If yes, what does that look like?
  - b. If no, why not?

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<sup>4</sup> Ask only if participant currently parents a child under 18

## Appendix C: Facebook Frequently Asked Questions

Q: I'd like to participate, but I have a few questions.  
What is the purpose/goal of this study?

A: The goal of this study is to gain understanding of the ways in which individuals with a non-binary gender identity navigate everyday life, including work, family, dating, and friendships

Q: How much experience does the interviewer have relating to non-binary people?

A: The interviewer (me, Erin Savoia) identifies as queer and uses they/them pronouns. I engage in feminist research methodology, and will make every effort to reduce the hierarchy between researcher and participant. Interviewees will be given every opportunity to ask questions and should also feel free not to answer any question they may not feel comfortable with.

Q: Who will the results of the study be released to?

A: The study is towards the completion of my Masters Thesis in Sociology at Portland State University. Results will be released to current and future faculty and students of the university. It is possible that the results will be published in a Sociological academic journal.

Q: Will names be attached to the results?

A: No, the interview is confidential. No names or identifying information will be included in the results and no one but the interviewer will know that you participated in the study. I will keep confidential any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to participants.

Q: What is the focus/"theme" of the study? Will there be questions about body parts, surgery, trauma, relationships with family members, or other things that could be triggering? If so, do you have someone available to speak to right away who can help the non-binary person recover?

A: The study is broadly themed. You will be asked about your experiences in the workplace and the family, and some descriptive information about yourself. We are interested in how people who identify as non-binary navigate both public space and interpersonal relationships. Although questions do not specifically ask about body parts, surgery, or trauma, these topics and other negative experiences may still come up during the interview. Should the participant experience any stress or anxiety during the interview, they can choose to step away and stop the interview at any time. Although there will not be someone available to speak to right away, a list of appropriate resources can be provided.