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Christine E. Strayer
Western Michigan University

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**Gender
Nonconformity: The
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Gender Transgression**

Christine E. Strayer

More than any other underlying social framework in Western culture, the concept of gender has effectively served to demarcate deeply guarded boundaries of social power and privilege. So culturally ingrained is this particularly divisive construct, that any actions taken to challenge the binary of woman and man has historically been met with a range of negative and often violent responses with the intent of neutralizing the gender nonconformity. In fact, the assumptions regarding the ‘natural’ occurrence of feminine or masculine genders being mapped onto the presumed “opposite” sexes of female and male, respectively, was not problematized until the middle of the twentieth century, by postmodernist and feminist theorists, and later queer theorists (Beauvoir, 2009; Bourdieu, 2001; Butler, 1990; Connell, 1987; Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1978; Wittig, 1992).

Instead of a natural enactment of biological sex, gender began to be interrogated as a social construction. This significant shift in theoretical perspective laid the groundwork for exposing the underlying power structures, embedded in reified social norms and public policy, which have aggressively preserved the gender binary. Given the patriarchal legacy in Western society, it is not surprising that these social mechanisms have constructed ‘traditional’ masculinity as the referent gender category, thereby placing all others in a derivative gender category of non-male or non-masculine (Connell, 1987; Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1998; Wilchins, 2014). Any actions taken in perceived defiance of the boundaries of ‘traditional’ masculinity have been met with derision and stigmatization. Both public policies and sanctioned rhetoric in Western society, in essence our language and discourses, cast gender nonconformity as one of the worst social transgressions or acts of moral deviance an individual can commit.

There are individuals in our society who do not and cannot adhere to the constraints of the socially mandated gender binary, and the stigmatization of gender

nonconformity seems to be a distinct reaction to questioning the power structures which defend and protect the ‘natural’ enfranchisement of the traditional masculine gender. Given these circumstances, a critical examination of the construction of manipulating gender, particularly masculinity, as a form of social transgression or moral deviance seems warranted. Using the theoretical lens of postmodernist and queer theoretical perspectives of gender, this paper explores social mechanisms which serve to construct and reify the social stigma associated with gender nonconformity in Western society. The primary research question proposed for analysis in this paper is: *How are acts of gender nonconformity, particularly the manipulation of masculinity, socially constructed as acts of transgression or deviance by language and discourse?* Emphasis is placed upon the sociological purposes of a socially-constructed gender binary as well as the complex conceptual framework of traditional masculinity as the referent gender category. The concept of manipulated masculinities is also briefly explored as an affirmation of the problematic nature of the gender binary. Finally, the concepts of language and discourse are utilized to consider how acts of gender nonconformity are socially constructed as forms of gender transgression.

Postmodernist, Feminist, and Queer Theoretical Lens on Gender

As previously indicated, postmodernist, feminist, queer theorists are recognized as the first to problematize the concept of gender as a manifestation inherent to one’s assigned sex at birth. These theorists began to challenge the notions that the male and female sex were in some way “oppositional” biological ‘truths,’ as well as the notion that gender is a natural set of behaviors that are inherent to their prescribed sex identity, males are masculine and females are feminine (Beauvoir, 2009; Connell, 1987, Butler, 1990; Wittig, 1992). Instead, postmodernist, feminist, and queer theorists argued that gender is purely a social construction that has been created and curated

to maintain a social power dynamic which sanctions domination and denial of social power and prestige based upon one's ability to dominate others.

Theorists such as Wittig (1992), Connell (1987), and Reynaud (2004) argue that regardless of what sex category one is assigned at birth, based upon one's genital physicality, gender is a social creation, which has constructed a system of unequal, shifting, and contested power relations between women and men. Although Simone de Beauvoir's (2009) work focused on the social construction of 'woman,' her assertion that any human who is born with female genitalia is not inherently a woman, but becomes one by enacting gender behaviors in response to a social or cultural compulsion to do so, certainly speaks to the notion that humans are subjected to a set of social expectations rather than biological processes, both male and female. Judith Butler (1990) goes even further in her analysis of gender, in response to Beauvoir's (2009) work, when she suggests that not only is gender a social construction but because our bodies have already been "interpreted by cultural meanings," considering sex to be a fact of biology is false. "Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Butler, 1990, p. 8). If the construct of 'sex,' an artifact of immutability, is determined to be an arbitrary distinction based upon perceived differences, then the driving question becomes *what purpose do such distinctions serve?*

Postmodernist, feminist, and queer theorists suggest that the emphasis on difference effectively reifies the Western notion that universal truths are the foundation for what is 'real,' thereby preventing and avoiding social and cultural ambiguity. In an obscure 1965 speech at Johns Hopkins University, French philosopher and postmodernist, Jacques Derrida expressed his anger toward the Western way of thinking and practices of creating difference as opposition, which serves to marginalize or "suffocate alterity," calling instead for a "de-centering of knowledge" (as cited in Wilchins, 2014, p. 49-

50). If, in fact, the concepts of "opposite sexes" and subsequently "opposite" genders are, indeed, social constructs that serve to advantage those who conform and to silence or marginalize those who do not, Wilchins's (2014) assertion that "postmodernism is a philosophy of the dispossessed, perfect for bodies and genders that are unspeakable, marginalized and simply erased" (p. 50) seems quite fitting.

Purpose and Power of the Gender Binary

Simply defined, the concept of the gender binary is a construct that suggests that there are only two genders, and they are relationally defined and embedded with heteronormative assumptions. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) aptly observes that "the extent that gender definition and gender identity are necessarily relational between genders [in any gender system, is the extent to which] female identity or definition is constructed by analogy, supplementarity, or contrast to male" (p. 31). This foundational dichotomy creates a mandate of gender definition or identity that serves to erase any other forms of gender alterity, while also serving to preserve the structural integrity of heteronormativity. Butler (1990) posits means by which the "binary frame of sex" is internally stabilized and secured is to contextualize the 'sex' dichotomy as prediscursive, which "ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*" (p. 7). The concept of "opposite sexes" has been so deeply embedded in Western society as a 'truth' that precedes societal construction, that it has been placed in a prehistorical domain, shielded from critical examination.

One critical component of this conversation of sex and gender is the bias toward heterosexuality and the relational nature of gender. There are prescribed notions of appropriate sexual behaviors for both men and women, specifically that women will have sex with men and vice versa. Nonconformity to this framework is perceived as a threat to the 'sanctity' of the 'natural' relational order that exists between men and women. Sedgwick

(1990) acknowledges that “the ultimate definitional appeal in any gender-based analysis must necessarily be to the diacritical frontier between different genders. This gives heterosocial and heterosexual relations a conceptual privilege of incalculable consequence” (p. 31). While heteronormativity is most assuredly the socially sanctioned framework under which men and women are expected to engage socially and sexually, the question of its significance to societal stability remains. *What purpose does the gender binary serve, and what is threatened when it is problematized?*

As previously indicated, postmodernist, feminist, and queer theorists perceive the construct of gender and its binary framework as means to maintain systems of power, enabling men to dominate women and other men. “The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 23). These systems of power are often characterized as ‘traditional values’ in Western society to place social pressure on both men and women to conform to such concepts, such as the closely guarded construct of the heteronormative nuclear family. Some theorists, such as Foucault (1978), argue that the gender binary and subsequently the traditional nuclear family are economically integral to capitalist society, as the most desirable unit for maximal consumption.

Others characterize the binary system in more sinister terms, as a means to expressly privilege gender conforming men at the expense of anyone who does not align with the traditional Western definition of what it means to be a man. Tolson (2004) suggests that the connotative meanings mapped onto the gender binary are divisive, trapping both women and men in a polarized gender framework, with implications of positive versus negative characteristics, such as “‘assertive’/ ‘submissive’; ‘decisive’/ ‘uncertain’, ‘detached’/ ‘dependent’” (p. 72). Similarly, Jacques Derrida’s criticism of the over-reliance

in Western society on using simplistic binary relationships to create meaning to interpret difference was that most of these binaries are skewed toward covert implications of seriated ‘good/bad’ relational dichotomies, in which one is referent and the other merely derivative (1982). When the implication of ‘good/bad’ is understood as a moral or qualitative measure, the power dynamic is revealed. If one possesses the referent ‘good’ or desirable traits, then all others who do not possess those traits are definitionally ‘bad’ or the lesser. If we were to only consider this regarding men and women, the socially sanctioned opportunity for men to exercise power over women is evident. When we step beyond the framework to consider that there are individuals in society who do not or cannot conform to the binary serves to effectively delegitimize, silence, and erase nonconforming identities and subsequent behaviors.

Traditional Western Masculinity

The gender binary, as constructed in the context of patriarchal Western society has created a ‘traditional’ form of masculinity or manliness that determines the qualifying characteristics for possessing and enacting social power over all others who do not adequately enact this type of traditional masculinity. For this reason, this Western conceptualization of traditional masculinity and its status as the referent category of gender is a dominant focus for this analysis.

Male as the Referent Category of Gender

A great deal of literature regarding masculinity has focused on the concept of Connell’s (1995) hegemonic masculinity because it definitionally encapsulates the relations of power and domination enmeshed within the gender framework. “Hegemonic masculinity [is] a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2004, p. 154). While important to recognize this seminal concept in the masculinity literature, we will move beyond the existence of the

power differential to consider the mechanisms and forces that create, preserve, and protect the power vested in the identity of traditional masculinity in a more specific context. For this, I will rely on Michael Kimmel's (2004) characterization: "Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and often, found wanting" (p. 184). Although his definition is like Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, Kimmel's work has focused on the societal mechanisms which reify as well as compel masculine enactments in a specifically American social context.

The concept of a man's 'manhood' is essential in understanding the relationship between gender and power inequality. Western society has equated manhood or manliness with power, and a man's ability to effectively enact the mandated behaviors of traditional masculinity determines his privileged social status (Kimmel, 2004). "For men [...] their category symbolizes their power; and everything which defines them as 'masculine' is valorizing, even to the extent that men do not generally see themselves as a separate group, but rather as a reference for the species" (Reynaud, 2004, p. 139). While membership in this referent category of gender is essentialized for most men, it is also a relentless quest to accomplish one's masculinity to acquire "those cultural symbols that denote manhood" as well as enjoy greater access to "cultural resources that confer manhood" while limiting or denying access for others (Kimmel, 2004, p. 184-185). Thus, one's manhood is not simply demonstrated by behaving according to inherent characteristics determined by biological sex, rather it is an evaluation of a male's ability to meet the social mandates associated with being a 'real' man.

Central to the concept of manhood is the "othering" of women. As Sharon Bird (1996) astutely asserts, "Being masculine [...] means being not female" (p. 125). The

quintessential measure of one's manhood or masculinity is the unrelenting demand that regardless of other social differences such as age, race, class, or sexual orientation, a man must not be like a woman. This is, of course, referring to socially sanctioned heteronormative behaviors for men and women. In this dynamic, men must be perceived as the universal or referent gender, thus woman then becomes the 'other' or derivative gender, having no meaning outside of the relational framework of man and woman. While this clearly provides social power to men who successfully and convincingly enact traditional masculinity, there are several elements of this framework that must be acknowledged. First, "[Western] masculinity is a relentless test" (Kimmel, 2004, p. 185). This reflects a heightened level of fragility and threat to a man's sense of masculinity, as he is under constant pressure to meet social gender expectations. Additionally, the constant fear of failing to enact traditional masculinity, helps to provide some explanation for the prevalence of sexism and misogyny in society, as femininity and vulnerability have been cast in opposition to manhood (Wilchins, 2014). This, of course, is only one of several criteria that 'real' men are compelled to demonstrate.

Social Mandates of Traditional Masculinity

Beyond defining traditional masculinity as the absence of femininity, there are several salient mandates that frame traditional masculinity. Bourdieu (2001) observes that "manliness, understood as sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and to exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a duty" (p. 51). Themes of violence, force, aggression, dominance, and heterosexuality are pervasive across the masculinity literature. Of interest, is that these definitively masculine behaviors are associated with public and social interactions (Bird, 1996; Bourdieu, 2001; Hoch, 2004; Kimmel, 2004; Kimmel, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). Through homosocial interaction, men enact

and reify traditional masculinity for other men to acquire approval from other men, thereby securing and attempting to preserve their social power. Thus, men live within the constant tension between proving their manhood and avoiding the constant threat of emasculation. This is characterized in Bourdieu's (2001) assertion that masculinity is a process of mutual validation in which "manliness, it can be seen, is an eminently relational notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of fear of the female, firstly in oneself" (p. 53). Kimmel (2004) also captures this constant tension between proving one's manhood and risking gendered failure of being 'womanly' in his observation "we are under the scrutiny of other men, Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval" (p. 186). In the context of homosocial interaction, men preserve the central tenets of Western traditional masculinity, such as emotional detachment, competition, and the objectification of women, while simultaneously discouraging nonconformity of these masculinity norms through threat of social isolation or exclusion (Bird, 1996).

Responding to Fears of Emasculation

This aspect of traditional masculinity, under which men are constantly at risk of having their masculinity denigrated creates an incessant fear and anxiety of emasculation for many men. The fear of such social consequences often leads men to deflect perceived attacks on one's own manhood by attempting to emasculate other men. This tension is exemplified in Bourdieu's (2001) contention that "male privilege is also a trap" as men will go to the absurdist of length to demonstrate his manliness in all contexts for fear of not fulfilling the duties imposed upon him by society. So deeply ingrained is the compulsion to maintain one's status of traditional manhood that any loss of that power is perceived to be a "crisis of gender-identity" (Tolson, 2004, p. 78). To avoid such

crises and run the risk of being revealed as lacking, men often engage in a set of behaviors which embellish or exaggerate their masculine enactments, while calling the masculinity of others into question. "Being unmanly is a fear that propels American men to deny manhood to others, as a way of proving the unprovable – that one is fully manly" (Kimmel, 2004, p. 193). As Pascoe (2007) aptly suggests, "achieving masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity" (p. 5). The most prevalent means of denying other men their masculinity is implications of questionable virility or homosexuality.

As previously discussed, heterosexuality is the only sanctioned sexual practice within the gender binary framework. Central to this conceptualization is that men only engage in intercourse with women; men actively penetrate women, while women are passively penetrated. Any deviation from this model, such as homosexuality, suggests gender nonconformity and is heavily stigmatized. For many, the mere implication of being either passive or penetrated is perceived as the greatest violation of masculinity (Bourdieu, 2001). Playing upon this stigma, men and boys frame one another with the pejorative term of 'fag' to deflect social suspicion from themselves to another, relying upon the social power to taint another with implications of homosexuality. This practice has become so pervasive that "The fear of being tainted with homosexuality – the fear of being emasculated – has morphed into a generic putdown. These days, 'That's so gay' has far less to do with aspersions of homosexuality and far more to do with 'gender policing,' making sure that no one contravenes the rules of masculinity" (Kimmel, 2012, p. 270). If the mere suggestion of being perceived as effeminate is a source of such visceral attempts to protect one's manhood, it should not surprise us that nonconformity to the gender binary, whether through sexuality or gender enactment, represents a dire threat to the foundation of Western traditional masculinity.

Gender Nonconformity Constructed as Transgression or Deviance

It is not difficult to understand why challenges to the gender binary are characterized as violations or transgressions, given the primary status of traditional masculinity in the gender binary and the power and prestige associated with that successful gender enactment. The preservation of the gender binary and subsequently the systems of unequal power is so deeply embedded in Western culture that attempts to problematize this social construct often generate vitriolic responses.

Hierarchy of Masculinity

Even among men who adhere to the mandate of heterosexuality, there is an established hierarchy. “Our definitions of masculinity are not equally valued in our society” (Kimmel, 2004, p. 184). These various definitions of masculinity are framed by their relationship to hegemonic masculinity and the access to power each one enjoys. Connell (1995) refers to these variations as complicit masculinity, subordinated masculinity, and marginalized masculinity. Men who reap the benefits of hegemonic masculinity are ‘complicit,’ while men who are ‘subordinated,’ such as gay men, are oppressed by the definitions of hegemonic masculinity, and men who enjoy power due to gender but not due to class or race are considered ‘marginalized’ (Connell, 1995). These categories as well as Kimmel’s (2004) definition of the dominant form of Western masculinity, previously discussed, clearly articulate the idea that manhood is reserved for a select few and inherently denied to others. Historically speaking, American manhood, a white, middle-class male identity, has been constructed “by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of ‘others’ – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and, above all, women” (Kimmel, 2004, p. 182). In this paradigm, social power is a finite, coveted resource, and limiting access to that resource is heavily contingent upon a stable gender framework. Suggesting that the gender binary is arbitrary and challenging those

categories, as when definitions of traditional masculinity are manipulated, clearly threatens that system of power.

Manipulations of Masculinity – Challenges to the Gender Binary

While there are numerous ways in which the concept of gender, specifically masculinity, may be manipulated, the focus of this paper is not to conduct an exhaustive examination of each of those enactments. For clarity, a brief overview is provided of several prevalent forms of manipulated masculinity that have been subjected to various social discourses, which have worked to characterize these manipulations as gender transgressions.

The first of these is *gay masculinity*, which refers to the range of behaviors associated with homosexual men who seek to enact their manhood. The integral element of heterosexuality that is embedded in traditional masculinity inherently categorizes gay masculinity as what Connell (1995) refers to as an ‘oppressed’ masculinity. Through the lens of traditional masculinity, “homosexuality itself is the most profound transgression of the primary rule of gender” (Wilchins, 2014, p. 20). Clearly, gay men represent a significant perceived threat to the integrity of traditional masculinity. Kimmel (2004) argues “the great secret of American manhood: *We are afraid of other men*. Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more the fear that we might be perceived as gay” (p. 188). While this is a highly provocative assertion, it provides explanation for virulent public rhetoric that characterizes homosexuality as deviance, perversion, and criminal (Carrigan et al., 2004; Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2012). Interestingly, in the last several decades, the stigmatization of effeminate behaviors of homosexual men has had a compelling effect the enactment of gay masculinity. Messner (1997) and Wilchins (2014) posit that to gain social acceptance, many men in the gay community have subscribed to a hyper-masculine form of gender enactment, thereby

serving to reify the gender binary as well as the core markers of traditional masculinity. Consequently, the enactment of gay masculinity in its contemporary form, has made many gay men complicit in stigmatizing individuals who do not conform.

The second manipulation of masculinity discussed here are enactments which take place outside of male bodies, *trans masculinity* and *female masculinity*. For this brief discussion, *trans masculinity* is defined as the form of masculinity enacted by someone who was born with female genitalia but identifies oneself as a member of the male or masculine gender and often seeks to subscribe to masculine gender performance (Wilchins, 2014). When thinking about *female masculinity*, we are discussing an individual who has female genitalia and perceives one's gender to be female, although modified, but enacts varying degrees of masculine gender performance. In both cases, sexuality is not contingent upon the individual's gender identity or performance (Halberstram, 1998). These forms of manipulated masculinity are essential illustrations of the arbitrary nature of gender categorization according to biological genitalia, inherently problematizing the entire conceptual framework of the gender binary. If masculinity does not occur at the culturally sanctioned site of the male body, then theoretical denial of gender as a social construction is wholly nullified. Clearly, this is a provocative consideration, given how deeply ingrained the gender framework is in Western thought. However, it must be acknowledged that despite this realization, traditional masculinity is still the cultural conduit through which to acquire significant social power. Thus, one of the primary goals of enacting these forms of masculinity is to 'pass' as a man, according to the tenets of traditional masculinity (Carrigan et al., 2004; Halberstram, 1998). Regardless of the body enacting the masculinity, the masculinity is constructed to imply the existence of male genitalia and thus imply legitimate right to gender-associated social power. Ironically, despite the fact that

masculinity enacted by female bodies does not conform to the gender binary, the behaviors enacted by these female bodies does subscribe to the standards of traditional masculinity whenever physically possible.

Constructing Transgression through Language and Discourse

Thus far, gender as a social construction, the purpose of a culturally entrenched gender binary, the creation of traditional masculinity as the referent gender category, and manipulated forms of masculinity that further challenge the natural primacy of the gender binary have been examined. We will now turn our attention to consider two social power mechanisms, language and discourse, that consistently leverage themselves against individuals to maintain the social order of the gender binary. As previously discussed, gender nonconformity is the cite of consistently vitriolic public rhetoric. Wilchins (2014) suggests that "it is now acceptable to be gay, but it's still not okay to be a fag. You can be a lesbian, but not a dyke" (p. 24). As the public discourse surrounding sexuality has shifted toward biological mandate, the discourse surrounding gender nonconformity has remained characterized as rebellious challenges to the social order. At this point, it seems pertinent to consider the power of language and discourse in creating the social positioning of those who do not 'authentically' conform to the gender binary.

Language

Derrida (1982) argued that gender is a language, creating symbolic meaning as well as establishing mandates, restrictions, privileges, and consequence for how the meaning and symbols are employed in the context of the interaction between power and sexuality. We rely upon this system for meaning within ourselves, to interpret our bodies, and to engage in the world among and with other bodies. If it is as Derrida suggests, language controls our very existence at the most intimate levels. The exercise of power and domination through our daily linguistic exchanges is aptly

described in Wittig's (1992) observation that "language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping and violently shaping it" (p. 78). She further suggests that through language, society creates the desired reality of our behaviors and interactions, engineering our gender and enforcing our sex through mandates of limiting personal pronouns (Wittig, 1992). Thus, language also serves to repress that which is perceived as socially undesirable or that threatens societal power structures, such as the gender binary.

Although Foucault (1978) focused his attention on sexuality rather than gender, his assertions regarding the societal creation of definitions to repress individuals' desires to challenge or deviate from prescribed heterosexual models is useful in framing the linguistic creation of transgression regarding deviations or nonconformity to the gender binary.

First, society creates what is 'real' through the act of naming, but that which society does not recognize as 'real' goes unnamed and therefore does not exist. According to Derrida (1982), this Western tradition of privileging language has led to the cultural mistake of equating language with reality. Thus, language is at the core of defining that which is *Man* in opposition to that which is *Woman*. Having established the oppositional dichotomy of codes and meaning, language is also utilized to characterize that which society does not sanction or deem legitimate outside of those codes and meanings. Wilchins (2014) posits that gender, under the primary social privileging of linguistic reality, has suffered greatly as most "non-normative experiences of gender are excluded from language, and because what little language we have for gender transcendence is defamatory. Moreover, all of gender that is not named is also assumed not to exist, to be make-believe" (p. 44). In fact, Western language has an abundance of pejorative and negative insults to apply to those who do not fit gender norms, but not one "positive, affirming, complimentary" or even neutral word exists for individuals who do not

conform to gender norms (Wilchins, 2014, p. 43). As further confirmation of the previous discussion of manipulating masculine gender enactments being perceived as one of the worst social transgressions, Wilchins (2014) observes that Western language has more negative words associated with men who enact femininity than for women who enact masculinity. Abandoning masculinity for femininity is viewed as an affront as well as threat to the unequal power systems embedded in the gender binary.

Discourse

The second social mechanism that will be discussed as it relates to the creation of gender nonconformity as social transgression is *discourse*. Gender is an extremely powerful social construct which is foundationally bound to unequal power systems between constructed and socially reproduced men and women. Wittig (1992) also reminds us that "gender, as a concept, is instrumental in the political discourse of the social contract of heterosexuality" (p. 77). For this discussion, Foucault's (1978) concept of *discourse* is useful; it refers to a form of powerful social dialogue or discussion that establishes, utilizes, and enforces rules regarding how a society makes meaning, produces knowledge, and sanctions the desired articulation of those discourses. When considering gender norms and gender nonconformity, discourses are exceptionally instructive about how society constructs nonconformity into transgression. There are three primary discourses that create this gender transgression: legal discourse, medical or psychiatric discourse, and feminists or academic discourse. Each of these discourses are embedded with pronouncements of authority, such as methods of documentation, specialized vocabulary, professional procedures, which all leverage institutional power to expose nonadherence to gender stereotypes (Wilchins, 2014). Returning briefly to Derrida's (1982) idea of language defining reality, Western thought equates 'Reality' with 'Truth,' and consequently, the 'Truth' of gender is presumed to align with the gender

binary. This an important underpinning to understand when interrogating the purpose that these discourses serve.

By subjecting people to these discourses, the documentation, vocabulary, and procedures ‘speak’ in terms of pathology and deviance, presenting those who do not conform as “suspect populations” (Wilchins, 2014, p. 67). These social discussions do not focus on revealing how the system works to silence difference and delegitimize ambiguous identities, but rather the discourses emphasize what is culturally sanctioned as ‘real’ underneath the gender artifice that is presented. “There is an emphasis on *real-ness*, *imitation*, and the ownership of meaning (*male mannerisms*, *women’s clothes*) that re-centers and restores the Truth of binary gender” (Wilchins, 2014, p. 68). In this way, it is not the gender binary that is subjected to examination, but rather the gender transgression. Every aspect of our gendered existence is curated by a complex and pervasive interaction of language and discourses, causing us to engage in what Foucault (1977) referred to as *discipline*. He posited that the same techniques utilized in the modern prison have been covertly employed by contemporary society to foster complicit conformity in people, encouraging individuals to judge, regulate, and police our own behaviors to avoid the social consequence of being policed by others. In this way, both our gender identity and gender performance are simultaneously repressed and produced, as we are policed from within and without.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this analysis clearly provides strong support for the idea that Western societies engage in both covert and overt practices to reify and reproduce the gender binary. The postmodernist, feminist, and queer theoretical perspectives regarding gender as a social construction are extremely valuable in illuminating the power structures that are entrenched within the framing of gender as an oppositional, binary construct. Once the element of historically patriarchy is also acknowledged, the highly complex nature

of traditional masculinity becomes more clearly revealed. There is definitive agreement across the literature on masculinity that meeting the social mandates of traditional masculinity is fraught with constant competition, homosocial policing and regulation, and fears of emasculation. The effect of this intensive pressure is ultimately manifested in attempts to deny other men of their masculinity as well as aggressive and forceful reactions toward those who do not conform to the gender binary, particularly individuals who attempt to manipulate or alter the boundaries of traditional masculinity.

The primary research question for this analysis is *How are acts of gender nonconformity, particularly the manipulation of masculinity, been socially constructed as acts of transgression or deviance using language and discourse?* Derrida (1982), Wittig (1992), Wilchins (2014), and Foucault (1978) offer strong arguments in response to this question. In the case of language, the power structures of gender are maintained by either excluding undesirable or different gender identities or creating pejorative terms to denigrate and de-legitimize. As Derrida (1982) tells us, Western society equates that which is named as that which is ‘real.’ If no language, or only negative language, is used to interpret or assign meaning to nonconforming gender identities then those identities can be silenced, marginalized, and erased. With consideration given to manipulating masculinity, Wilchins (2014) points out that the severity in the transgression can be measured by the higher number of negative words associated with men who alter or abandon their masculinity. When considering discourses, Foucault (1978) provides important critique of how society contextualizes the social discussion of gender nonconformity as problematic or deviant. When the foundational perspective of these discourses is to reveal the ‘real’ in contrast to the ‘imitation,’ then gender nonconformity inherently becomes the transgression away from sanctioned forms of gender enactment. Although the question posed has, at least, been initially answered, that seems hardly

satisfactory given the perpetuation of a social structure that serves to viciously protect and reproduce social inequality in significant and destructive manner, while justifying the inequality through deceptive public discourses regarding sex and gender. The next question to pursue would seem to be: *How might new language and discourses be created to socially de-construct the gender binary, release both men and women from compulsory gender norms, and equalize power structures?* While attempting answer this

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question will likely take more than a lifetime, perhaps the first step is to reveal these constructs as well as how we are all trapped by them, to a greater or lesser extent.

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